



**CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING
STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH
VOCABULARY MASTERY: A CASE
STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS IN PEKALONGAN**

Vocabulary



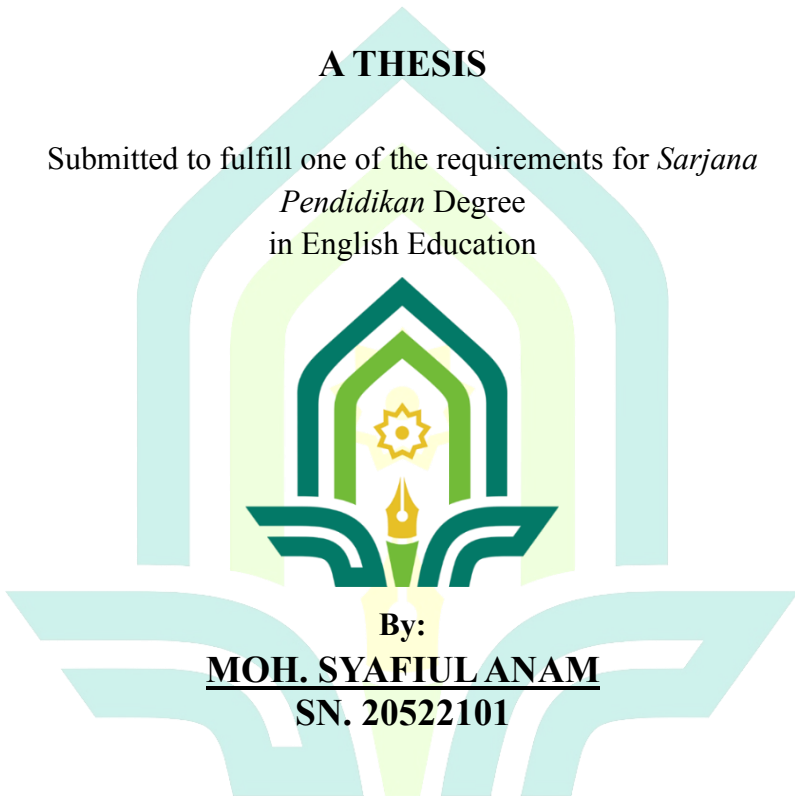
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2026

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A THESIS

Submitted to fulfill one of the requirements for *Sarjana*
Pendidikan Degree
in English Education



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: CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH

idul VOCABULARY MASTERY : A CASE STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR

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ya menilai bahwa naskah skripsi tersebut sudah dapat diajukan kepada Fakultas
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estinya. Atas perhatiannya, disampaikan terimakasih.

assalamu 'alaikum, Wr. Wb

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Pembimbing


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The Dean of Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, approved this undergraduate thesis by:

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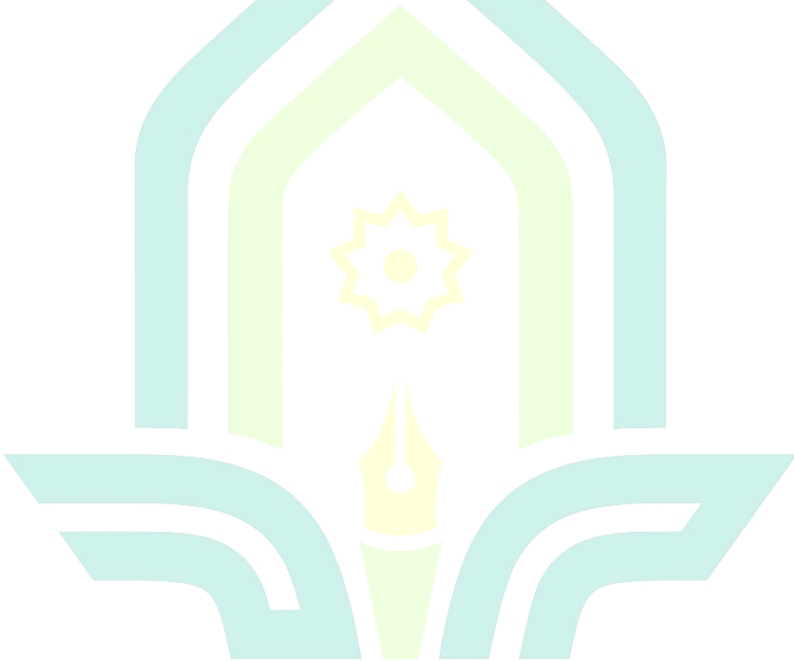
MOTTO

”Teruslah jalan terus berjalan, Sebentar lagi ku akan sampai tujuan”

(Yura Yunita – Jalan Pulang)

”Daur hidup akan selalu berputar, Tugasku hanya bertahan
Terus jalan dan mengalirlah seperti air,
Dari lahir sampai ku jadi debu di akhir”

(Donne Maula – Daur Hidup)



ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi mahasiswa baru dalam menguasai kosakata bahasa Inggris serta strategi yang digunakan untuk mengatasinya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas empat mahasiswa tahun pertama Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Pekalongan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi kelas, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik berdasarkan teori Nation (2001) yang mencakup aspek *form*, *meaning*, dan *use*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan dalam pengucapan, ejaan dan bentuk kata, pemahaman makna, penggunaan kosakata dalam konteks, serta faktor afektif seperti kecemasan dan rendahnya kepercayaan diri. Untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut, mahasiswa menerapkan strategi pembelajaran melalui paparan media berbahasa Inggris, penggunaan daftar kosakata, dan teknik pencatatan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguasaan kosakata mahasiswa tahun pertama masih berada pada tahap transisi dan memerlukan pembelajaran kosakata yang seimbang antara pembelajaran *incidental* dan *eksplisit*.

Kata kunci: Penguasaan kosakata, mahasiswa tahun pertama, pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, studi kasus

ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges faced by first-year students in mastering English vocabulary and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. A qualitative case study approach was employed involving four first-year students of the English Education Study Program in Pekalongan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation, and analyzed thematically based on Nation (2001) framework of vocabulary knowledge, including form, meaning, and use. The findings indicate that students encounter difficulties in pronunciation, spelling and word forms, vocabulary comprehension, contextual usage, and affective factors such as anxiety and low confidence. To address these challenges, students utilized strategies such as English media exposure, word lists, and note-taking techniques. The study concludes that first-year students' vocabulary mastery remains transitional and requires a balanced integration of incidental and explicit vocabulary learning.

Keywords: *Vocabulary mastery, first-year students, English language learning, case study*

PREFACE

Praise and gratitude to the presence of Allah SWT, who has provided His grace and blessings. His grace and blessings upon me, guidance, health, and patience throughout the writing process of my thesis entitled “Challenges and Overcoming Strategies in English Vocabulary Mastery: A Case Study of First-Year University Students in Pekalongan” can finished. This was conveyed to fulfill one of the Bachelor of Education degree requirements in Department of English Education, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. This is proposed because the researcher could be carried out due to the large amount of support from several parties. Because of that, on this occasion, I would like to express my sincere thanks to:

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Pekalongan, 7 Januari 2026



The Researcher

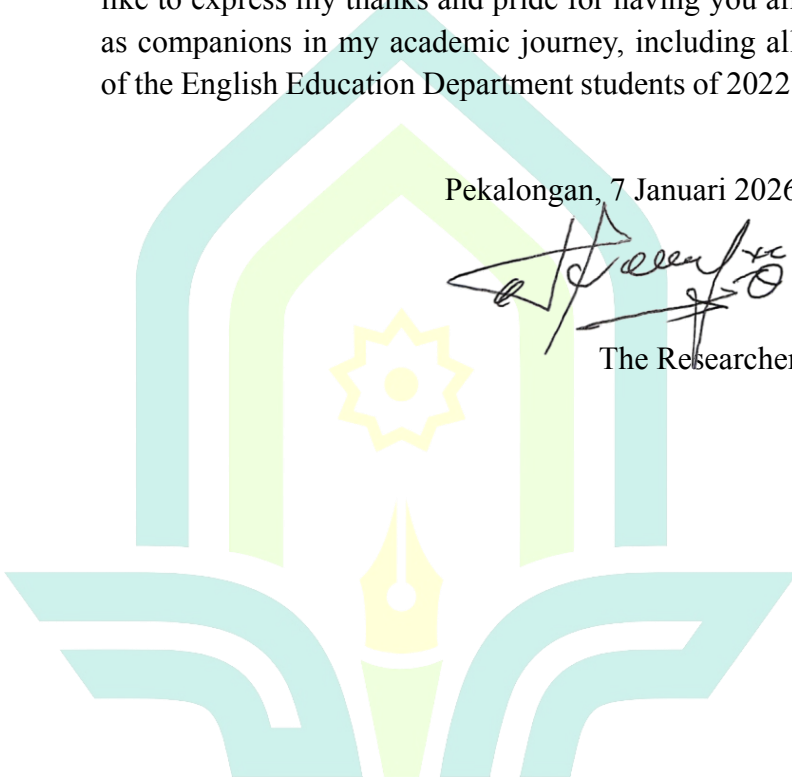
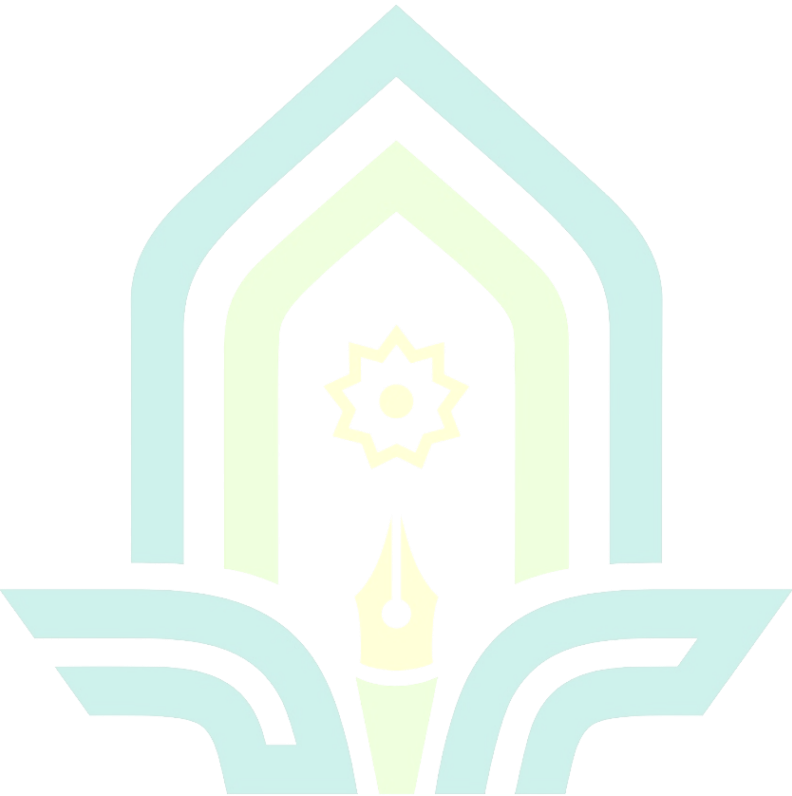


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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Many students especially first-year university students face significant challenges in mastering English vocabulary. One important component in language learning is vocabulary, because without vocabulary, meaningful communication cannot be achieved (Richards & Renandya, 2002). According to Nation (2011) emphasizes that vocabulary is the basis for mastering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, so its development must be a top priority in language learning.

According to Nursyahida (2024) the main difficulties faced include understanding the material, complicated grammar, lack of vocabulary mastery, differences between writing and pronunciation, and lack of confidence when speaking. Some other challenges or factors are also often faced by first-year students when they are in the classroom. According to Nurhaliza (2024) Classroom-related obstacles including lack of teacher creativity, poor facilities, and disruptive peer behavior can hinder impactful English language learning.

According to Sulistyaningsih et al., (2023) vocabulary mastery is very important in English language learning, which is the basis for the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without adequate vocabulary, learners find it difficult to achieve English proficiency, because vocabulary is an essential element for impactful

communication (Fatdha, 2018). Rasuan (2018) emphasizes that although little can be conveyed without grammar, nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary. Furthermore, recent studies reveal that cognitive and affective factors, including input, motivation, and learning strategies, have a significant influence on vocabulary acquisition in the context of EFL (Zeng, 2025).

First-year students in higher education are those who have just started their studies and have to adjust to a more challenging environment than before. In their journey towards higher education, first-year students face many obstacles. According to Siburian et al., (2023) this includes adjusting to new situations, social interactions and academic demands. Students' academic performance, self-efficacy, psychological health, and emotional state can be significantly affected by the adjustment period (Lutfianawati et al., 2023). According to Nasir (2023) reluctance to communicate, difficulty starting conversations and discomfort in unfamiliar environments are common challenges. They experience greater difficulties when starting to take English classes if they have limited vocabulary. Due to these limitations, students may find it difficult to understand the material, take part in conversations, express themselves clearly, and complete written projects. Because of this, first-year university students can feel insecure and inhibited in their language acquisition. Therefore, it is crucial to build and expand their vocabulary during their first year at university to expand their communication skills and succeed academically.

The target of this research is first-year university students majoring in English education in Pekalongan. The purpose of this research is to thoroughly study the difficulties and experiences they have while learning English, especially in terms of mastering a diverse vocabulary. By using a case study approach, this research is expected to provide a better understanding of how limited or rich vocabulary affects students' learning process and academic performance. According to Yin (2018), case studies are used because they are considered reliable in educational research, as they provide an in-depth understanding of learning phenomena in real-life contexts. Although many previous studies have explored the issue of English vocabulary acquisition, most of them focused on specific aspects of teaching and learning methods. According to Sulistiyaningsih et al., (2023) mastery of vocabulary is important in supporting language proficiency. while research by Nursyahida et al., (2024) addresses environmental barriers in English language learning. However, research specifically examining first-year university students' experiences in overcoming vocabulary gaps as a case study in a higher education context is limited. Therefore, this study is designed to fill the gap by exploring the challenges and experiences faced by freshmen in English vocabulary acquisition, as well as its impact on their academic participation and performance.

1.2. Formulation of the Problems

This research provides 2 research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by first-year university students in Pekalongan in mastering English vocabulary during English classes?
2. What are the strategies used by first-year university students in Pekalongan to overcome the vocabulary acquisition?

1.3. Aims of the Study

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by first-year university students in Pekalongan in mastering English vocabulary and the strategies they used to overcome vocabulary challenges during the learning process in the classroom.

1.4. Operational Definitions

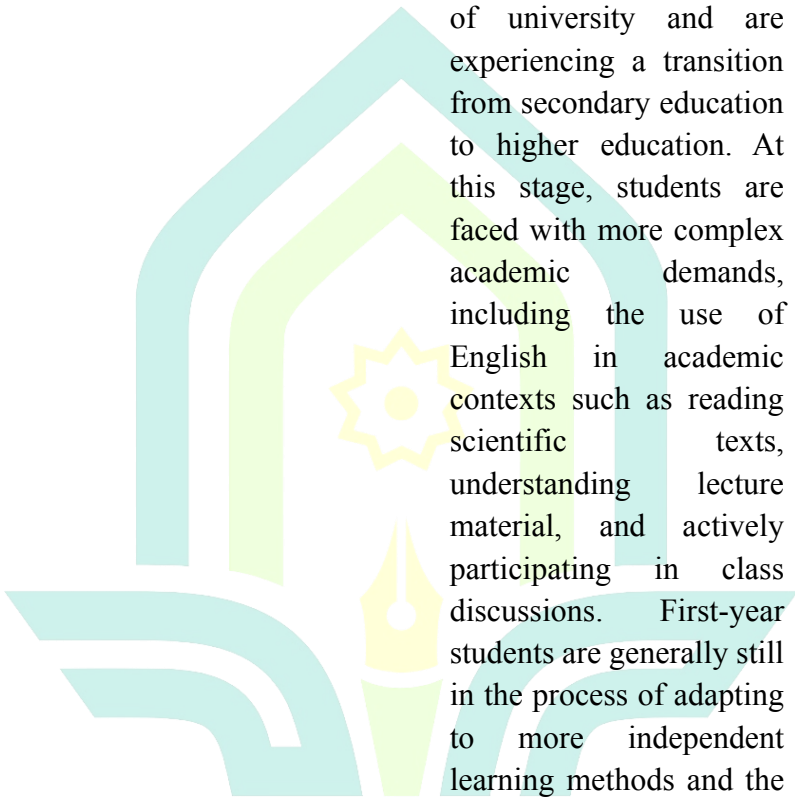
To avoid any misunderstanding about the terms used in this study, the researcher provides some definitions related to the study as follows:

1. Vocabulary Mastery : Vocabulary mastery refers to students' ability to understand, remember, and use English words correctly in speaking and writing. Vocabulary mastery is an important foundation for the development of other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. According to Rahmah et al., (2023), vocabulary mastery is defined as the

knowledge or skill that a person possesses in understanding and mastery words.

2. First-Year University Students

: First-year university students refer to students who are in their first year of university and are experiencing a transition from secondary education to higher education. At this stage, students are faced with more complex academic demands, including the use of English in academic contexts such as reading scientific texts, understanding lecture material, and actively participating in class discussions. First-year students are generally still in the process of adapting to more independent learning methods and the use of a broader academic vocabulary, so they tend to experience linguistic difficulties that can impact their participation and academic



3. Challenges

performance (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

: Challenges refer to various linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties that first-year students may encounter in mastering English vocabulary. These challenges may include a lack of vocabulary, difficulty understanding meaning, and several other challenges encountered when conducting research. According to Ryan (2024), students also experience difficulties in understanding the meaning of words, pronunciation, spelling mistakes, and remembering or memorizing English vocabulary.

4. Strategies

: Strategies refer to various conscious and planned efforts used by first-year university students to overcome difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. These

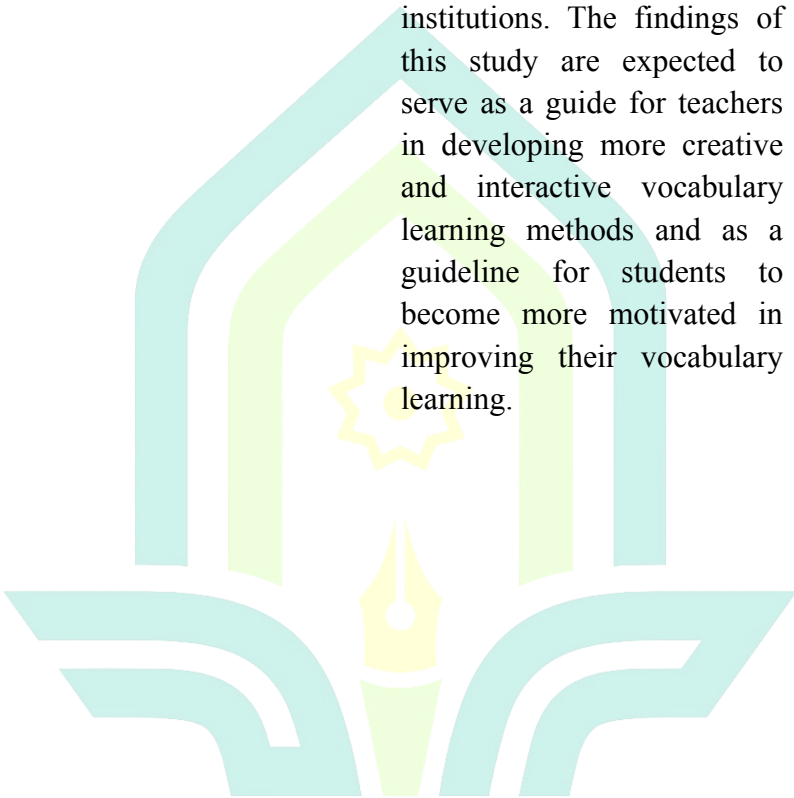
strategies include how students acquire, remember, understand, and use new vocabulary *in meaningful ways* throughout the learning process. According to Nation (2011), vocabulary learning strategies can be classified into incidental vocabulary learning and explicit vocabulary learning.

1.5. Significances of the Study

1. **Theoretical Use :** This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the understanding of vocabulary learning among first-year students. The results of this study reinforce previous studies related to vocabulary mastery and provide additional insights for other researchers interested in studying vocabulary learning experiences in the context of higher education.
2. **Empirical Use :** This study reveals students' direct experiences in facing challenges and finding ways to expand their vocabulary skills. The results of this study

are expected to help explain common problems in vocabulary learning and how students try to deal with them.

- 3. Practical Use :** This study provides practical contributions for teachers, students, and educational institutions. The findings of this study are expected to serve as a guide for teachers in developing more creative and interactive vocabulary learning methods and as a guideline for students to become more motivated in improving their vocabulary learning.



CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary

Based on the research findings, first-year university students face various challenges in mastering English vocabulary during their academic studies, including difficulties in pronunciation, spelling and word forms, vocabulary meaning comprehension, and the appropriate use of vocabulary in context. In addition to linguistic challenges, affective factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence also limit students' willingness to use vocabulary actively. These findings indicate that students' vocabulary mastery has not yet increased in a balanced manner across the aspects of form, meaning, and use, as proposed in Nation (2001). Consequently, students tend to possess vocabulary knowledge receptively rather than productively, suggesting the need for more structured and contextualized vocabulary learning support.

Furthermore, the findings show that first-year students employ various strategies to address their limited vocabulary mastery. The most dominant strategy is learning vocabulary through exposure to English-language media, which functions as meaning-focused input and supports incidental vocabulary learning. In addition, students also apply explicit strategies such as vocabulary listing, note-taking, repetition, and practicing word use to strengthen their understanding of vocabulary form and meaning. Although these strategies contribute to

vocabulary development, their implementation remains unbalanced, particularly in supporting meaning-focused output and fluency development. Therefore, vocabulary learning needs to be directed toward a more integrated approach that combines incidental learning, explicit learning, and contextual vocabulary use practice.

5.2. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, students are encouraged to adopt a more balanced approach to vocabulary learning by combining incidental and explicit learning strategies. Students are also encouraged to engage more actively in using new vocabulary in speaking and writing activities and to gradually build confidence by viewing mistakes as a natural part of the English learning process.

For lecturers and future researchers, it is recommended that vocabulary instruction be designed in a more integrative and communicative manner by providing greater opportunities for students to practice vocabulary use in meaningful contexts and by creating a supportive classroom atmosphere that promotes participation and reduces anxiety. In addition, future research is encouraged to involve a larger number of participants and broader research contexts, as well as to explore other vocabulary learning strategies or instructional media that have the potential to support students' vocabulary development, both receptively and productively.

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