

EXPLORING STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH INSTRUCTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM AT SMP NEGERI 8 PEMATANGSIANTAR

Isabel Selmiola Sabrina* ^(a,1), Selviana Napitupulu^(a,2)

Faculty Of Teacher Training And Education, University OF HKBP Nommensen
Pematangsiantar, Indonesia

*Isabelselmiolasabrina04@gmail.com

Alamat: Jl. Sangnawaluh No.4, Siopat Suhu, Kec. Siantar Tim., Kota Pematang
Siantar, Sumatera Utara

Korespondensi penulis: Isabelselmiolasabrina04@gmail.com

Abstract. *Understanding English instructions is an essential part of classroom communication because it helps students follow learning activities effectively. However, many ninth-grade students still face difficulties in comprehending English instructions given by their teachers. This gap between the teacher's intention and students' understanding often leads to confusion and misbehavior in the classroom. Therefore, this study aims to explore the difficulties faced by ninth-grade students in understanding English instructions in the classroom at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar. This research used a descriptive qualitative method. The participants consisted of 30 ninth-grade students selected purposively. The data were collected through observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The results showed that students experienced several types of difficulties: limited vocabulary, unfamiliar pronunciation, lack of listening focus, and dependence on translation into Bahasa Indonesia. The findings also revealed that both internal and external factors influence students' understanding. It can be concluded that teachers should use simpler language, slower speech, and visual aids to help students comprehend English instructions better.*

Keywords :Students' Difficulties, English Instructions, Classroom Interaction, Ninth Grade, Junior High School.

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most important international languages used in education, communication, and global interaction. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language from elementary to senior high school. It aims to help students develop four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these skills, understanding English instructions in the classroom is a fundamental part of listening comprehension, because it determines students'

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* Isabel Selmiola Sabrina, Isabelselmiolasabrina04@gmail.com

ability to follow the learning process successfully. When students fail to understand the teacher's English instructions, it often causes confusion, lack of participation, and poor academic performance.

In many Indonesian junior high schools, including SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, teachers commonly use English during class activities, such as giving directions, explaining tasks, or managing the classroom. However, not all students can comprehend the instructions accurately. Some students tend to rely on their friends or wait for translation into Bahasa Indonesia. This situation indicates a gap between teachers' use of English instructions and students' comprehension level. Previous studies have mostly focused on students' difficulties in reading, writing, or listening comprehension in general, but few have specifically explored the problem of understanding English instructions during classroom interaction at the junior high school level. Based on the preliminary observation conducted by the researcher at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, several students showed difficulties in understanding English instructions during classroom activities. Approximately 60% of students appeared confused or hesitant when the teacher delivered instructions fully in English, and many of them relied on peers or waited for translation into Bahasa Indonesia. This initial observation indicates that students' difficulties in understanding English instructions remain a significant issue that needs further investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of difficulties faced by ninth-grade students in understanding English instructions and to identify the possible factors that cause these difficulties. The findings are expected to provide useful insights for English teachers to improve their classroom communication strategies and support students in developing better comprehension skills during English learning activities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the students' difficulties in understanding English instructions in the classroom. The descriptive qualitative method was chosen because it enables the researcher to describe and interpret students' experiences, perceptions, and problems in a natural classroom setting. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar during the academic year 2025/2026. The data were collected during one academic term over approximately three months through

classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews to describe students' difficulties in understanding English instructions.

The participants of this study were thirty students of the ninth grade, selected through purposive sampling. This selection was based on their active involvement in English learning activities and their ability to provide relevant information regarding the use of English instructions in the classroom. The researcher also involved one English teacher to support data triangulation and provide additional perspectives.

The instruments used in this study consisted of classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Observation was used to identify how English instructions were delivered by the teacher and how students responded during the learning process. The questionnaire was distributed to gather students' opinions and experiences related to their understanding of English instructions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to obtain deeper insights into the difficulties they encountered and the reasons behind them.

The data collection procedures were carried out in three stages: preparation, implementation, and analysis. In the preparation stage, the researcher designed observation sheets, questionnaires, and interview guides. During implementation, the researcher observed two English classes, administered the questionnaire to the students, and conducted interviews with ten students representing different levels of ability. After data collection, all results from the instruments were compiled, transcribed, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The data were interpreted descriptively to identify recurring patterns and categorize the types of difficulties faced by students. Triangulation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the data by comparing findings from observations, questionnaires, and interviews. The final results describe the major factors affecting students' comprehension of English instructions and provide suggestions for improving classroom communication.

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore students' real experiences and perceptions in understanding English instructions as they naturally occur in the classroom. This design focuses on

describing, analyzing, and interpreting the phenomena based on participants' responses rather than measuring variables numerically.

The descriptive qualitative design was appropriate for this study since it aimed to describe the types of difficulties faced by ninth-grade students and the factors influencing their understanding of English instructions in class. The researcher did not manipulate any variables but rather observed, collected, and analyzed the existing conditions to provide a clear picture of the students' comprehension process.

The variables in this study include one main focus: students' difficulties in understanding English instructions. These difficulties are influenced by several factors, which can be categorized into internal factors (such as vocabulary mastery, listening skill, and motivation) and external factors (such as teacher pronunciation, classroom environment, and the use of teaching media). The interaction between these variables provides insight into how students process English instructions during classroom activities.

2. Research Subject

The subjects of this study were ninth-grade students of SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar in the academic year 2025/2026. The researcher selected one class consisting of thirty students as the primary participants. These students were chosen because they had been learning English for at least two years and were actively involved in classroom activities where English instructions were frequently used by the teacher.

The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling, as the researcher deliberately selected participants who could provide rich and relevant information about the research problem. In addition to the students, one English teacher was also included as a supporting informant to provide triangulation and additional insights regarding students' behavior and comprehension during the learning process.

The parameters for selecting the subjects included students' attendance, engagement in classroom discussions, and willingness to participate in interviews and questionnaires. The inclusion of both students and the teacher helped the researcher obtain a comprehensive understanding of the communication patterns and the factors affecting students' difficulties in understanding English instructions.

3. Instruments

In this study, the researcher used three main instruments for data collection: observation sheets, questionnaires, and interview guides. These instruments were developed based on previous related studies and adapted to suit the classroom context at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar.

The observation sheet was used to record how English instructions were delivered by the teacher and how students responded during classroom activities. The observation focused on the clarity of instructions, students' reactions, and any signs of misunderstanding that occurred during the lesson. The observation was conducted directly by the researcher during two English class meetings.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions designed to gather students' perceptions of their difficulties in understanding English instructions. The items included aspects such as vocabulary, pronunciation, teacher's speech rate, and students' attention or motivation. Before being distributed, the questionnaire was reviewed by an English teaching expert to ensure clarity and content validity.

The interview guide was semi-structured and aimed to obtain deeper information about the causes of students' difficulties. Ten students were selected for the interview to represent different proficiency levels. The interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia to help participants express their ideas clearly.

No pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection. However, the instruments were carefully examined and revised based on expert feedback to ensure their appropriateness and reliability for the current study. All instruments were administered and analyzed directly by the researcher.

4. Data Analysis

The data collected from observations, questionnaires, and interviews were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model of qualitative data analysis. This model consists of three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

In the data reduction stage, the researcher summarized and selected the essential information obtained from all instruments. The observation

notes, questionnaire responses, and interview transcripts were reviewed and organized to identify relevant patterns related to students' difficulties in understanding English instructions. Irrelevant data were excluded to focus on significant findings.

The data display stage involved organizing the reduced data into clear descriptions and tables to make it easier to interpret. The researcher categorized students' difficulties based on recurring themes, such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, teacher's speech rate, and attention problems.

In the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the data to formulate conclusions about the main types and causes of students' difficulties. The findings from different instruments were compared through data triangulation to ensure consistency and validity.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher maintained objectivity and carefully verified all data to ensure accuracy and reliability. The qualitative results were presented descriptively to provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the students' challenges in comprehending English instructions during classroom interaction.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study based on the data collected through observations, questionnaires, and interviews. The findings reveal that ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar experience several difficulties in understanding English instructions during classroom interaction. The data were analyzed to identify the frequency and percentage of each difficulty category as shown in Table 1.

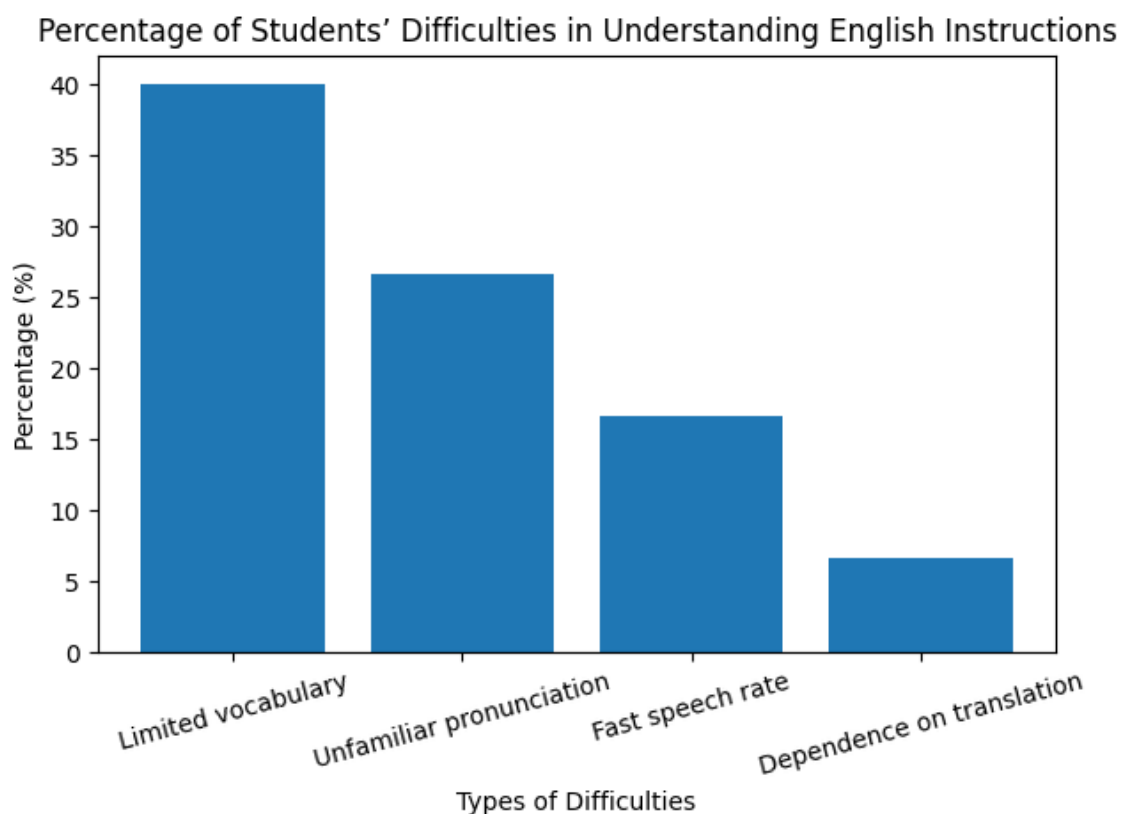


Figure 1. Percentage of Students' Difficulties in Understanding English Instructions

(Source: Field data, 2025)

The findings show that the most dominant difficulty experienced by students is limited vocabulary knowledge (40%), followed by unfamiliar pronunciation (26.67%) and teacher's speech rate (16.67%). The observation data also revealed that students often hesitated or looked confused when the teacher used full English instructions such as "Please submit your worksheet before the bell rings" or "Discuss your answers in pairs." Many students relied on peers or waited for translation before responding.

Interview results supported these findings, showing that most students found English words difficult to understand and admitted that they were more comfortable when the teacher repeated or translated the instructions. Additionally, the teacher confirmed that students often needed extra explanation in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comprehension.

1. Discussion

The findings indicate that the primary source of students' difficulties in understanding English instructions lies in their limited vocabulary and listening comprehension. This supports the statement of Rost (2015), who explains that effective listening requires both linguistic and cognitive skills to decode spoken messages accurately. When students lack sufficient vocabulary, they fail to grasp key information in teacher instructions, leading to misunderstandings or incorrect task completion.

The second major issue concerns teacher pronunciation and speech rate, which often differ from the students' expectations. Similar findings were reported by Nurinda Permatasari (2023) and Nuralimah et al. (2023), who found that many students struggle to comprehend spoken English due to unfamiliar accents and fast delivery. In the present study, students mentioned that they found it easier to follow the lesson when the teacher slowed down or used gestures.

Another finding relates to students' attention and learning habits. Some students admitted they lost focus when English was used continuously without visual or written support. This aligns with Harlina and Yusuf (2020), who stated that students' low motivation and lack of exposure to English outside the classroom contribute to comprehension problems.

The findings also highlight the importance of code-switching as a teaching strategy in EFL classrooms. Using both English and Bahasa Indonesia strategically can enhance students' understanding and reduce anxiety, as suggested by Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to provide clear, simple English instructions, supported by repetition, gestures, and occasional translation.

Overall, the results demonstrate that understanding English instructions is influenced by both linguistic factors (vocabulary, pronunciation, speed) and non-linguistic factors (attention, motivation, and teaching strategies). Addressing these issues can significantly improve students' comprehension and classroom participation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar face several difficulties in understanding English instructions during classroom interaction. The main challenges identified are limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar pronunciation, and the teacher's fast speech rate. These linguistic factors are further influenced by non-linguistic elements such as students' lack of attention, low motivation, and dependence on translation into Bahasa Indonesia.

The study also revealed that the inability to comprehend English instructions affects students' classroom participation and task performance. When students fail to understand the teacher's directions, they tend to hesitate, rely on peers, or become passive during lessons. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to simplify their language, slow down their speech, and use visual or gestural support when giving instructions.

Teachers play a crucial role in helping students overcome comprehension barriers. By combining English with strategic use of Bahasa Indonesia, providing repetition, and creating an engaging learning environment, teachers can significantly enhance students' understanding of English instructions and improve the overall effectiveness of classroom communication.

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