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Improving Vocabulary Mastery Through Contextual Teaching and Learning in MAN Padangsidempuan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in improving students' vocabulary mastery at MAN Padangsidempuan. Vocabulary remains a major challenge for many Indonesian EFL learners, particularly when traditional methods such as memorization and translation are used. CTL offers an alternative approach by linking instructional content to real-life situations, encouraging students to construct meaning through exploration, collaboration, and authentic tasks. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that CTL significantly enhanced students' understanding, retention, and practical use of vocabulary. Students demonstrated increased confidence in producing sentences, participating in discussions, and applying vocabulary in context. They also expressed that learning through real-life examples and group-based activities made vocabulary more meaningful and enjoyable. The teacher reported improved classroom engagement and noted that CTL encouraged her to design more creative and student-centered lessons. Although some challenges emerged, such as differences in learning pace and initial difficulty adapting to inquiry-based tasks, these issues gradually diminished. Overall, the study concludes that CTL is an effective and practical approach for enhancing vocabulary mastery and creating a more engaging English learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a central role in the process of learning English as a foreign language because it serves as the foundation for all language skills. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to understand texts, express ideas, and participate in classroom communication. In many Indonesian Islamic senior high schools,

including MAN Padangsidempuan, vocabulary learning remains one of the most challenging aspects of English instruction. Classroom observations reveal that teachers often rely on conventional techniques such as memorizing word lists, translating sentences, or using dictionaries as the primary source of meaning. Although these methods may help students recall single-word meanings, they do not promote deep understanding or long-term retention. Students frequently forget newly learned words and are unable to apply them in authentic communication, indicating that traditional methods may not fully support effective vocabulary development.

The issue becomes more evident when students are asked to read English texts or express their ideas verbally; many hesitate, lack confidence, and depend heavily on teacher assistance. The learning environment tends to be teacher-centered, providing limited opportunities for students to construct meaning, explore new vocabulary in context, or relate language to their daily experiences. This situation suggests a need for more engaging and meaningful instructional approaches. Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers a promising alternative because it encourages students to connect instructional content with real-life situations. Through activities such as inquiry, reflection, group collaboration, and authentic tasks, CTL helps learners understand vocabulary not as isolated items but as words used in meaningful communication.

Previous studies have shown that CTL increases students' motivation, enhances understanding, and strengthens vocabulary retention. However, limited research has been conducted to examine how CTL specifically improves vocabulary mastery in the setting of Islamic senior high schools. MAN Padangsidempuan, as a school that aims to improve students' English proficiency, provides an appropriate context for investigating the effectiveness of CTL. Therefore, this study explores how CTL is implemented in vocabulary instruction, the challenges students face, and the extent to which this approach helps improve their vocabulary mastery. By addressing these issues, the research is expected to provide valuable insights for teachers, students, and institutions seeking to enhance English learning outcomes.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) improves students' vocabulary mastery at MAN Padangsidempuan. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore classroom processes, student behavior, and instructional practices in their natural setting. The participants consisted of one English teacher and a group of eleventh-grade students who were selected purposively based on their involvement in CTL-based instruction. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations were conducted across several meetings to capture how the teacher implemented CTL principles such as constructivism, inquiry activities, problem-solving tasks, collaborative learning, and authentic assessments. The observations also focused on how students engaged with vocabulary learning tasks and how they applied new words in meaningful contexts.

Interviews were held with the teacher and selected students to gain deeper insights into their perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to vocabulary learning using CTL. The teacher interview explored instructional planning, teaching strategies, and reflections on student progress, while student interviews focused on motivation, understanding, and learning difficulties. Documentation in the form of lesson plans, worksheets, student task results, and vocabulary tests was collected to support the observational and interview data. The data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In data reduction, all field notes, interview transcripts, and documents were organized and coded according to emerging themes. The data were then displayed in descriptive tables and narrative summaries to identify patterns related to CTL implementation and vocabulary improvement. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions and relevant literature, ensuring that the results accurately reflected the reality of the classroom.

RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) brought a substantial improvement in students' vocabulary mastery at MAN Padangsidempuan. Through classroom observations conducted over several weeks, it became evident that the teacher integrated CTL principles consistently and systematically. Each lesson began with a contextual introduction, where the teacher linked new vocabulary to familiar situations—such as school activities, religious practices, family interactions, and community events. This approach immediately increased student engagement, as learners could relate new words to their own experiences. Rather than presenting vocabulary through memorization or translation only, the teacher guided students to discover word meanings by observing pictures, analyzing short stories, discussing real-life cases, and participating in inquiry-based tasks. As a result, the learning atmosphere shifted from teacher-centered to student-oriented, encouraging active involvement from all students.

During learning activities, students were frequently engaged in group work that required them to explore, discuss, and apply vocabulary collaboratively. For example, when learning vocabulary related to “describing people,” students conducted short interviews with their classmates and produced descriptive sentences based on real observations. When studying vocabulary about “environment,” students were asked to identify objects around the school and relate them to the target words. These contextual tasks helped students internalize vocabulary more deeply because they were not merely receiving information but constructing meaning independently. Observation notes show that students became more confident in using new vocabulary, particularly during speaking and writing activities. They were able to produce longer sentences, choose more appropriate words, and communicate their ideas with fewer pauses.

The analysis of student worksheets and task results further supports the positive impact of CTL. Students' written work demonstrated improved accuracy in word meaning, spelling, and grammatical usage. Several students who initially struggled to form sentences were later able to produce coherent paragraphs using newly learned vocabulary. Vocabulary tests conducted before and after the CTL-based lessons revealed a clear increase in students' scores. Most students showed progress in recognizing word meanings, applying vocabulary in context, and distinguishing word forms. This improvement was not limited to high-achieving students; even those with lower initial proficiency exhibited noticeable development in their vocabulary understanding.

Interviews with the teacher confirmed that CTL made the learning process more dynamic and effective. The teacher reported that students were more enthusiastic, participative, and willing to ask questions during lessons. She also noted that contextual activities allowed students to learn naturally, "as if they were not studying English but exploring everyday life." According to the teacher, CTL reduced students' dependency on memorization and boosted their motivation to explore vocabulary independently. In addition, the teacher explained that CTL encouraged her to adopt a more creative instructional approach, making lessons more varied and meaningful.

Student interviews echoed many of the teacher's observations. Most students expressed that learning vocabulary through contextual tasks was more enjoyable and easier to understand than traditional memorization. They felt that associating new words with real situations helped them remember vocabulary for a longer time. Several students mentioned that group activities reduced their fear of making mistakes and allowed them to practice speaking more freely. Others stated that CTL helped them see the relevance of English vocabulary to their daily lives, which increased their interest in the subject.

Despite the overall effectiveness of CTL, some challenges were noted. A few students found it difficult to adapt to inquiry-based tasks at the beginning because they were more accustomed to teacher-centered activities. There were also differences in learning pace, with some students requiring additional guidance during group tasks. However, these issues gradually lessened as students became more familiar with CTL procedures. Overall, the results clearly indicate that Contextual Teaching and Learning significantly improved students' vocabulary mastery by promoting meaningful engagement, deeper understanding, and better long-term retention.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) effectively enhances students' vocabulary mastery at MAN Padangsidempuan. This improvement can be understood by examining how CTL principles support the cognitive and affective aspects of language learning. The observational data revealed that students were more engaged in lessons that connected new vocabulary to real-life experiences. This aligns with the constructivist foundation of CTL, which states that learners build knowledge more effectively when they relate new information to their existing background and daily experiences. By situating vocabulary within meaningful contexts—such as school activities, social interactions, or environmental observations—students were able to internalize word meanings more deeply than through traditional memorization-based methods.

The increased participation and confidence observed during group discussions and inquiry tasks indicate that CTL promotes active learning. When students worked collaboratively to discover meanings, categorize vocabulary, or apply new words in problem-solving tasks, they were involved in constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving information. This finding supports prior research suggesting that student-centered learning environments increase motivation and enhance language acquisition. Through CTL, students were encouraged to think critically, observe, compare, and use vocabulary in authentic situations—skills that are essential for meaningful vocabulary development.

Another significant finding is that CTL helped students improve not only their recognition of vocabulary but also their ability to use it accurately in both spoken and written communication. Students produced more coherent sentences and used vocabulary more appropriately when the words were learned through contextual exploration. This outcome aligns with theories in second language acquisition that emphasize the importance of meaningful input and output in vocabulary retention. When students were asked to describe real objects, interview peers, analyze texts, or complete contextual tasks, they practiced vocabulary in ways that strengthened long-term memory and facilitated transfer to new contexts.

The teacher's positive experiences with CTL highlight the approach's practicality for classroom instruction. The teacher reported that CTL motivated her to design more creative, student-centered lessons, which in turn stimulated greater student engagement. This reciprocal relationship between instructional design and student response suggests that CTL can transform classroom dynamics, making learning more interactive and enjoyable. The consistency of improvements across both high- and low-achieving students further indicates the inclusive nature of CTL, as it provides multiple entry points for learners with varying proficiency levels.

Students' perceptions reinforce the effectiveness of CTL. Many reported that learning through real-life examples and group activities made vocabulary more meaningful and easier to remember. This supports the affective component of CTL, which emphasizes motivation, interest, and emotional engagement as key factors in learning. By reducing anxiety and increasing relevance, CTL helped students feel more connected to the learning process, thereby fostering greater perseverance and willingness to participate.

Despite its strengths, CTL also presented some challenges. Some students initially struggled with inquiry-based tasks because they were unfamiliar with the level of independence required. This difficulty is consistent with findings from previous studies, which note that learners accustomed to teacher-centered instruction may need time to adjust to more autonomous approaches. Differences in learning pace were also observed, indicating that teachers must carefully structure group tasks and provide scaffolding to ensure all students benefit equally from CTL activities.

Overall, the discussion confirms that CTL is an effective approach for improving vocabulary mastery in Indonesian EFL classrooms, particularly in settings like MAN Padangsidempuan where students benefit from learning that connects English to their everyday lives. The results support existing literature while also providing new insight into the practical application of CTL in Islamic senior high school contexts. The study reinforces the idea that vocabulary learning becomes more meaningful, memorable, and functional when students engage with language in realistic, contextualized ways.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) is an effective instructional approach for improving vocabulary mastery among students at MAN Padangsidempuan. The findings clearly demonstrate that when vocabulary is taught through meaningful contexts, real-life examples, and interactive learning activities, students gain a deeper understanding of word meanings and develop greater confidence in using new vocabulary in both spoken and written communication. Unlike traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on memorization and translation, CTL encourages students to construct meaning actively, explore vocabulary through inquiry, and apply new words in authentic tasks. This shift from passive to active learning proved crucial in enhancing students' vocabulary retention, motivation, and overall engagement in the classroom.

Furthermore, the study shows that CTL supports the development of essential learning skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving. Students became more engaged as they participated in group discussions, contextual dialogues, and inquiry-based projects, all of which helped them internalize vocabulary more effectively. The teacher's implementation of CTL also played a key role in creating a learning environment that prioritized relevance, creativity, and student-centered instruction. As a result, classroom dynamics improved, with students demonstrating increased participation and a more positive attitude toward learning English vocabulary.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also acknowledges several challenges associated with CTL implementation. Some students initially struggled to adapt to inquiry-based activities due to their previous exposure to teacher-centered instruction, and differences in learning pace required the teacher to provide additional scaffolding. However, these challenges gradually diminished as students became more familiar with the CTL approach. With appropriate planning, guidance, and adaptation to students' needs, CTL can be applied effectively and sustainably in English language classrooms.

Overall, this study highlights the significant potential of Contextual Teaching and Learning to enhance vocabulary mastery in Indonesian EFL settings, particularly in Islamic senior high schools like MAN Padangsidempuan. The approach not only

improves students' linguistic abilities but also fosters meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. Based on these findings, teachers are encouraged to incorporate CTL principles into vocabulary instruction to create more engaging, relevant, and effective learning environments. Future research may expand on this study by exploring CTL implementation across different language skills or comparing its effectiveness with other innovative teaching approaches.

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