

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

In the modern age of globalization and rapid digital development, English has cemented its position as the dominant language of international communication. It functions as the primary medium in academia, science, diplomacy, and global business. Therefore, the ability to use English proficiently is now considered a fundamental skill, essential for navigating various domains of modern life. In developing nations like Indonesia, English language education has been prioritized, yet proficiency levels remain a significant concern across educational stages.

Despite various national efforts to strengthen English instruction, Indonesia still lags behind many countries in English language proficiency. The EF English Proficiency Index (2023) places Indonesia at 81st out of 113 countries, placing the nation in the “low proficiency” category. This ranking indicates that existing teaching methodologies might be insufficient in addressing learners’ real needs particularly in the development of vocabulary, which underpins all other language skills.

Vocabulary is regarded as one of the most fundamental components in second language acquisition. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to comprehend spoken or written texts and are unable to express themselves effectively in English. McCarthy, as cited in Mariana & Laut Hasibuan (2021),

emphasizes that “Vocabulary is the biggest component of any language development,” highlighting its central role in language. A strong vocabulary base allows learners to build competence in grammar, syntax, reading, speaking, and writing.

Teaching vocabulary, especially to early-stage learners such as seventh-grade students, is particularly challenging. Students in this age group are developing cognitively and socially, and they require engaging, age-appropriate strategies to maintain focus and interest. Traditional approaches such as rote memorization, translation exercises, and isolated word list often lead to disinterest, poor retention, and lack of contextual understanding. Consequently, many students fail to acquire vocabulary in a meaningful and lasting way.

Afidah and Machfudi (2022) observed that vocabulary learning difficulties are largely due to monotonous and decontextualized teaching methods. These approaches make vocabulary appear abstract and irrelevant to students’ daily lives. When learners are not exposed to contextual usage or visual reinforcement, they are less likely to retain and use new words effectively. This problem is amplified in early secondary education, where learners need more scaffolding and support in building foundational language skills.

MTsN 2 Padang Pariaman, like many Indonesian junior high schools, faces challenges in delivering vocabulary instruction that is both effective and engaging. Preliminary observations at the school revealed that many seventh-

grade students struggle with basic English vocabulary and sentence construction. This suggests a gap between the curriculum's objectives and students' actual learning outcomes. An innovative teaching method is needed to bridge this gap and promote more meaningful vocabulary acquisition.

One promising approach to address this issue is the use of visual aids in vocabulary instruction. Visual elements help make abstract words concrete, memorable, and emotionally engaging. In particular, the use of emojis small digital icons used to express ideas, emotions, and actions has gained attention as a potential learning medium in language instruction. Emojis are highly relevant to students' digital lives and have been shown to enhance attention, comprehension, and retention in learning.

Emojis provide visual and contextual clues that can support learners in associating words with meanings and real-life scenarios. Anavy N. Perucho & Merlyn L. Estoque, (2023) found that using emoji-based cloze tests led to significantly higher vocabulary test scores compared to traditional methods. Their study concluded that emojis enhance learners' recall, engagement, and understanding of vocabulary through symbolic and visual reinforcement. These findings indicate that emojis may support students' vocabulary learning and classroom engagement.

Similarly, Chen & Hsu, (2022) discovered that emoji-based feedback improved motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in online environments. Their research suggests that even simple visual feedback can positively impact students'

emotional engagement with learning tasks. When learners feel supported and interested, they are more likely to persist in learning and achieve better outcomes particularly in vocabulary development.

In another study, Mudure-Iacob, (2022) explored how emojis facilitated vocabulary acquisition and collaboration in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning environments. While conducted with university students, the findings highlight the universal value of emojis as visual and cognitive supports for language learners. Her study demonstrated that integrating emojis into tasks promoted learner autonomy and vocabulary retention, even in complex academic contexts.

Despite these promising results, most prior research has focused on older learners or digital learning environments, with limited studies conducted at the junior high school level in face-to-face classrooms. Specifically, there is a lack of research investigating the use of emojis as contextual teaching tools in traditional vocabulary instruction for seventh-grade students. This represents a significant research gap, especially in the Indonesian educational context.

Seventh-grade students are in a developmental phase where visual and contextual learning strategies are especially beneficial. At this stage, learners are transitioning from concrete to abstract thinking and often require external cues such as images or symbols to support language learning. Emojis, which students already encounter in their daily digital communication, can serve as powerful visual aids when integrated purposefully into classroom instruction.

The concept of emoji contextual support involves embedding emojis into meaningful sentences that help students infer word meanings through visual and linguistic context. Rather than memorizing isolated words, students are exposed to new vocabulary within authentic sentence structures accompanied by relevant emojis. This method not only enhances comprehension but also improves the learner's ability to use words in appropriate contexts.

Contextual learning is widely recognized as a best practice in vocabulary instruction. Nation and Cameron, (2001) emphasize that students retain words better when they are learned in context supported by images, gestures, or relevant examples. When emojis are embedded into full sentences, they function as both semantic cues and memory aids, which may help students understand and remember vocabulary more easily and application of new vocabulary.

However, effective implementation of emoji contextual support requires careful emoji selection. Not all emojis are universally understood, and their interpretations may vary depending on age, culture, and prior exposure. Teachers must ensure that emojis used in instruction are appropriate for the learners' developmental stage and cultural background. Poorly chosen emojis may confuse rather than support learning, thereby defeating their pedagogical purpose.

Moreover, emojis should not be treated as mere decorations in instructional materials. Instead, they should serve as pedagogically aligned tools that support learning objectives. When used purposefully, emojis can

serve as scaffolds that help learners construct meaning, engage emotionally with the content, and apply vocabulary in more confident and creative ways.

The emotional dimension of emoji use is another key benefit. Seventh-grade students are often motivated by fun, familiarity, and interactivity. When vocabulary lessons incorporate emojis, they may feel more personal and engaging, thus increasing motivation and classroom participation. As shown in prior studies, such emotional engagement is closely related to students' motivation and classroom participation.

The theoretical basis for this study draws from multimodal learning theory, which posits that learners process and retain information more effectively when exposed to both verbal and visual stimuli. By combining text and emoji, this instructional strategy appeals to diverse learning styles and enhances the cognitive processes involved in vocabulary acquisition. It also aligns with constructivist approaches that emphasize learner interaction and meaning-making.

In the context of Indonesia's "Merdeka Belajar" curriculum reform, which encourages creativity and student-centered instruction, emoji contextual support represents a timely and relevant innovation. It addresses current pedagogical needs by making English vocabulary lessons more relatable, dynamic, and reflective of learners' everyday communication habits. Thus, this method has both theoretical and practical significance.

Based on the explanations above, the researcher is interested in exploring students' perceptions toward the use of emoji contextual support in learning

vocabulary among seventh-grade students at MTsN 2 Padang Pariaman. Emoji contextual support is considered a familiar and engaging visual medium that may help students understand and remember English vocabulary more easily. This study focuses on students' experiences, responses, and opinions after learning vocabulary through emoji contextual support during classroom activities. To obtain rich information, the participants were selected based on their vocabulary achievement scores to represent students with high, medium, and low vocabulary achievement levels. The researcher then conducted semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding the use of emoji contextual support in learning vocabulary. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to more engaging and meaningful vocabulary teaching strategies for junior high school students.

B. Focus of the Study

This research focuses on students' perceptions toward the use of Emoji Contextual Support in learning English vocabulary among seventh-grade students at MTsN 2 Padang Pariaman. It specifically explores how Emoji Contextual Support aids in teaching vocabulary associated with public places, a topic covered by seventh-grade students. The emojis chosen for this research were meticulously selected to visually reflect the vocabulary items related to places and their meanings. Consequently, this research does not propose that all emojis or every type of vocabulary can be effectively taught using Emoji Contextual Support. Rather, it emphasizes the application of suitable and

pertinent emojis to enhance students' comprehension and retention of vocabulary concerning public places.

C. Research Questions

The research question of this study is formulated as follows: What are students' perceptions on the use of emoji contextual support in learning vocabulary: A case study of seventh-grade students at MTsN 2 Padang Pariaman?

D. Purpose of the Study

This research aims to explore students' perceptions toward the use of emoji contextual support in learning English vocabulary among seventh-grade students at MTsN 2 Padang Pariaman. In addition, this research aims to describe the students' experiences, responses, and difficulties during vocabulary learning activities using emoji.

E. Significance of the Study

This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical significance.

1. Theoretical Significance

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of knowledge in English language teaching, especially in vocabulary learning using visual and contextual learning media. In addition, this research is expected to enrich references related to students' perceptions toward the use of emoji contextual support in vocabulary learning.

2. Practical Significance

a. For Teachers

This research is expected to provide useful information and alternative learning strategies for English teachers in creating more engaging and interactive vocabulary learning activities through the use of emoji contextual support.

b. For Students

This research is expected to help students feel more interested, motivated, and comfortable in learning English vocabulary through visual and contextual learning activities.

c. For Future Researchers

This research is expected to become a useful reference for future researchers who are interested in conducting similar studies related to vocabulary learning, students' perceptions, and the use of visual learning media in English language teaching.

F. Definition of the Key Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this research, the following key terms are defined:

1. Teaching Vocabulary

Teaching vocabulary refers to the process of introducing and helping students understand, learn, and use English words during classroom learning activities. In this research, teaching vocabulary involves presenting word meanings and their usage in context to seventh-grade students.

2. Emoji

Emojis are small digital images or icons commonly used in digital communication to represent emotions, objects, actions, or ideas. In this research, emojis are not used for communication but serve an educational purpose. They are integrated into instructional materials to support the presentation of vocabulary and enhance student understanding through visual cues.

3. Emoji Contextual Support

Emoji contextual support refers to the use of emojis as visual aids integrated into contextual sentences to support vocabulary learning. In this study, emojis are used to represent the meanings of vocabulary words and provide additional visual clues that help students understand the target words more easily. By combining words with relevant images, emoji contextual support can make vocabulary learning more interesting, meaningful, and easier to remember.