

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental aspect of mastering a foreign language. In English language learning, mastery is not limited to written comprehension alone. English is a language that is not only read and written, but also spoken and listened to in everyday communication. Therefore, learners are required to understanding vocabulary meaning across different language skill, including speaking and listening. When learners are not aware of contextual word meaning, they may misinterpret meanings in spoken or written contexts, which can lead to misunderstanding and communication breakdown. However, learning English vocabulary is not merely about memorizing lists of words and their definitions. It involves understanding how words function in different contexts, how their meanings shift, and how they interact with other words. One of the significant challenges in vocabulary acquisition is lexical ambiguity.

In semantic studies, lexical ambiguity refers to the phenomenon when a lexical form has more than one meaning so that its interpretation is highly dependent on context. Some experts classify lexical ambiguity into several types. Ullmann (1962) and Lyons (1977) stated that the main sources of lexical ambiguity are polysemy, which refers to a condition when a single word has multiple meanings that are related. In addition, Cruse (2000) also discusses sense ambiguity related to differences in meaning within a lexeme, while

Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018) add the category of ambiguity, namely when a single word can function as a different word class. Although theoretically lexical ambiguity includes various forms, this study limits the discussion only to polysemy. This limitation is done because this type of ambiguity are the most dominant forms that appear in everyday language use and most often cause difficulties in understanding meaning for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Therefore, focusing on polysemy is considered relevant and significant to examine the difficulties of interpreting meaning experienced by EFL learners.

Polysemy refers to a word having multiple related meanings. For example, the word “head” can mean the upper part of the human body, a leader of an organization, or the front of a line. These meanings are conceptually connected (Palmer, 1981). While native speakers usually rely on contextual clues to disambiguate meanings, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners often struggle with this process due to limited vocabulary knowledge and exposure to authentic contexts (Nation, 2001).

Difficulty understanding polysemy directly impacts the ability to comprehend texts, write with semantic precision, and communicate effectively. According to Brinton and Traugott (2005), words in a language are interconnected through complex semantic relationships. However, empirical studies (e.g., Liu & Zhong, 2022; Tyler & Evans, 2007) indicate that EFL learners often fail to recognize these relationships, tending instead to interpret words literally in context. This suggests a need to further explore the nature of

these difficulties, their contributing factors, and the cognitive strategies learners employ to address this phenomenon.

In the local educational context, this inability to recognize semantic relationships is clearly manifested in everyday classroom interactions. During teaching practice observations (Praktik Pengalaman Lapangan / PPL) at the school, students consistently demonstrated severe semantic rigidity, where they relied too heavily on a single, primary meaning of a word. When encountering everyday words that shifted from a concrete action to an abstract domain, students struggled to recalibrate their understanding. They tended to force the first-learned, literal definition into the sentence, even when the resulting translation made no logical sense. This challenge is further exacerbated by an insufficient frequency of exposure to diverse text genres, leaving students unfamiliar with how a single word operates across various communicative environments and causing secondary meanings to remain as unfamiliar words.

This empirical phenomenon was further corroborated through structured discussions with the English teacher and the mentor teacher (guru pamong), who highlighted that these difficulties become particularly acute during reading assessments. The teachers observed that students face a notable difficulty in differentiating the subtle semantic nuances embedded within multiple-choice test options. Because students tend to memorize vocabulary as static, one-to-one translations from digital applications, they fail to recognize the fine distinctions required to select the correct contextual meaning during exams. Furthermore, pedagogical reflections revealed that this cognitive barrier

is deeply intertwined with the influence of the students' first language (L1), as the conceptual boundaries of Indonesian do not align with English polysemous networks. Given these multi-faceted challenges ranging from cognitive rigidity to L1 interference—this study aims to investigate the specific difficulties students face in comprehending polysemous words.

Several studies have shown that EFL learners experience difficulties in interpreting words with multiple meanings, particularly when contextual cues are required to determine the intended sense. Amaliah et al. (2025) found that limited awareness of polysemous meanings affects learners' accuracy in language use, especially when dealing with verbs that carry various semantic extensions. Similarly, Dinana (2024) reported that Indonesian EFL students tend to rely on primary meanings and struggle to identify context-appropriate interpretations when encountering polysemous words in translation task.

These findings indicate that interpreting polysemous words remains a challenge for Indonesian EFL learners, as it involves not only vocabulary knowledge but also semantic flexibility and contextual processing. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze EFL learners' difficulties in interpreting polysemous words, as well as to uncover the strategies that ELF di to understands this interpretation process. The results are expected to contribute to the teaching of vocabulary and semantics in foreign language learning contexts.

B. Identification of the Problem

In the process of learning English as a foreign language, vocabulary plays a central role in developing the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, many learners often encounter confusion when dealing with words that have more than one meaning. This confusion is typically caused by lexical ambiguity, particularly in the forms of polysemy. EFL learners frequently fail to recognize whether a word is being used in its literal or figurative sense. This lack of awareness often leads to misinterpretation of texts, incorrect sentence construction, and communication breakdowns. Despite the importance of vocabulary understanding in English language learning, many EFL students still experience difficulties in interpreting words that have multiple meanings, particularly those related to polysemy. These difficulties often arise because learners tend to rely on a single, familiar meaning of a word without considering its contextual use. As a result, students may misinterpret meanings in both written and spoken communication. However, studies that closely explore EFL students' actual learning difficulties and experiences in dealing with polysemous words, especially through a qualitative perspective, remain limited. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how EFL students understand and interpret lexical ambiguity in order to gain deeper insights into their vocabulary learning challenges and to provide pedagogical implications for English language teaching.

C. Scope of the Study

This study is limited to exploring EFL students' vocabulary learning difficulties related to polysemy in English language learning. The focus of this study is on students' understanding and interpretation of English words with multiple meanings in learning contexts. This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected first through a vocabulary test focusing on polysemous words to identify students' levels of understanding and patterns of correct and incorrect responses. Based on the quantitative results, qualitative data were then gathered through interviews to explore students' strategies, perspectives, and experiences in interpreting lexical ambiguity. Rather than examining all aspects of vocabulary learning or generalizing the findings to the wider EFL population, this study aims to provide in-depth insights into the specific difficulties EFL students face in understanding polysemous words and the strategies they use to deal with them.

D. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the background and the identification of the issues, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are students' abilities in comprehending polysemous word based on a contextual vocabulary test?
2. What types of difficulties do students face in answering polysemous word questions?

3. What strategies do the students employ to solve polysemous word questions?

E. Purpose of the Study

1. To investigate students' abilities to comprehend polysemous words based on a contextual vocabulary test
2. To identify the types of difficulties that students face in answering polysemous word questions.
3. To investigate the strategies used by the students in determining the correct answers to polysemous word questions.

F. Significance of Study

1. Theoretically

Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the field of English Language Education by providing deeper insights into EFL students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary related to polysemy. This research enriches existing discussions on lexical ambiguity by highlighting learners' perspectives and experiences in understanding words with multiple meanings. The findings may also support theories of vocabulary learning and meaning interpretation by illustrating how learners process and differentiate polysemous words in EFL contexts.

2. Practically

Practically, this study is expected to provide valuable contributions to English language teaching and learning. For teachers, the findings may offer insights into common difficulties faced by EFL students in

understanding vocabulary with multiple meanings, which can help teachers design more effective teaching strategies and contextualized vocabulary activities. For students, this study may raise awareness of the importance of understanding word meanings in context, thereby supporting better comprehension and reducing misunderstandings in both spoken and written communication. In addition, for future researchers, this study may serve as a useful reference for further investigations related to vocabulary learning difficulties, lexical ambiguity, and the teaching of polysemy and in EFL contexts.

G. Definition of Key Terms

1. Lexical ambiguity

In this study, lexical ambiguity refers to the condition in which a word used in English has more than one possible interpretation, potentially hindering EFL learners' understanding and processing of vocabulary.

2. Polysemy

In this study, polysemy is treated as one type of lexical ambiguity where learners must interpret the appropriate related meaning based on context.

3. Mental Lexicon

In this study, mental lexicon refers to the internal mental storage where EFL learners organize and retrieve word meanings, especially when dealing with ambiguous words like those with polysemy.

4. EFL learner

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners refer to students who study English in a non-English speaking country.

5. Students' Difficulties

In this study, students' difficulties refer to the obstacles, errors, or challenges faced by EFL students when identifying the correct meaning of polysemous words.

6. Students' Strategies

In this research, students' strategies refer to the specific techniques, methods, or cognitive steps employed by the students to deduce and determine the correct meaning of a polysemous word within a sentence