

ENHANCING STUDENTS' VOCABULARY MASTERY THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF WORD ASSOCIATION TECHNIQUE

Pinmade Vionita Tampubolon^{1*}, Salsa Dillah Tijahra Napitupulu², Wildan Iskandar Lubis³

Universitas Institut Pendidikan Tapanuli Selatan, Padangsidempuan, Indonesia.

*Corresponding email: pinmadev@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to evaluate the implementation of the Word Association Technique in vocabulary instruction, measure students' vocabulary mastery before and after using Word Association Technique, and analyze the technique's effectiveness for ninth-grade students. Employing a pre-experimental method with a one-group pre-test and post-test design, the study involved 31 students selected through random sampling. Data were collected using observation sheets and multiple choices vocabulary test. The findings indicate that the application of the Word Association Technique was highly effective, achieving an 80% success rate. Notably, the students' average vocabulary mastery score significantly improved from the "Very Poor" category (45.19) at the initial stage to the "Good" category (74.00) following the treatment. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test yielded a significance value (2-tailed) of 0.000, which is less than 0.05, leading to the acceptance of the working hypothesis. Consequently, it can be concluded that the Word Association Technique significantly enhances students' vocabulary mastery for the 2025/2026 academic year.

Keywords: Students' Mastery; Vocabulary; Teaching Technique; Technique Implementation; Word Association

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of the English language that students must master. Expanding one's lexicon is a critical element of language acquisition, as a broad and diverse vocabulary enables students to communicate more effectively. To achieve this proficiency, students must demonstrate mastery of words, creativity, and active engagement, while utilizing appropriate learning strategies. Through vocabulary study, students are expected to internalize and recognize general word classifications. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering vocabulary presents a significant challenge for students in Indonesia. Unlike the mother tongue, which is acquired naturally through daily interaction, English vocabulary must be learned consciously and systematically. Many students struggle to retain word meanings, understand contextual usage, and distinguish between parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These limitations directly impact their ability to comprehend texts, construct grammatically correct sentences, and express their thoughts fluently and confidently. According to Hatch and Brown in Hasibuan (2024:305), vocabulary is defined as a collection of words belonging to a specific language or a repertoire of terms used by its native speakers. Meanwhile, Richards and Renandya in Rahmah (2023:36) argue that

vocabulary is central to a person's language learning ability and serves as the primary indicator of their proficiency in speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

Learning English as a foreign language necessitates the acquisition of new vocabulary. Several factors influence this process, including a lack of motivation and difficulties in grasping the meaning and application of words across various contexts. Furthermore, many students find it challenging to memorize and differentiate word types—such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—which are vital components of vocabulary mastery. These obstacles hinder their capacity to interpret texts, structure sentences accurately, and communicate effectively. This study aims to identify the difficulties students encounter during English vocabulary acquisition, given its paramount importance. Additionally, the research seeks to explore solutions to help students overcome these issues. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective language teaching methodologies, particularly regarding the enhancement of vocabulary instruction.

Based on the factors mentioned above, ineffective pedagogical techniques can also lead to unsatisfactory learning outcomes. Consequently, the researcher intends to implement the word association technique, a vocabulary learning method that links one word to another based on meaning, form, or personal experience. Through word association, students can more easily recall and comprehend new terms by connecting them to previously known concepts or words. According to Joffe (2017), word association occurs when an individual generates as many words as possible related to a specific theme or topic. This serves as an excellent strategy to encourage students to analyze various words and their meanings, focusing on the specific characteristics, similarities, and differences of each term. Furthermore, word associations facilitate the process of word retrieval and assist students in categorizing vocabulary in a more structured manner.

Based on the problem identification, while numerous factors affect students' vocabulary skills, this research focuses exclusively on external factors, specifically the lack of diverse teaching media or methods employed by teachers. The researcher posits that the word association technique is the most suitable approach for teaching vocabulary. In examining this technique, the study will focus on its definition, procedural steps, and its respective advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the subject of vocabulary itself, the research will concentrate on its definition, the various types of vocabulary, and the methodologies for teaching it.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Padangsidimpuan, situated in the North Padangsidimpuan District of Padangsidimpuan City. The research population included all ninth-grade students at the institution, encompassing 241 individuals distributed across eight distinct classes. Utilizing a random sampling technique, class IX-1—consisting of 31 students—was selected as the research sample. The primary instrument employed was a multiple-choice test comprising 20 items. Each correct response was assigned a value of 5 points, culminating in a maximum potential score of 100. For data collection purposes, the researcher utilized both observation sheets and standardized testing.

3. RESULT

This chapter analyzes the formulation of the problem, which includes three primary inquiries. First, it examines the extent to which the word association technique is applied in teaching vocabulary mastery to ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Padangsidimpuan.

Second, it investigates the students' vocabulary mastery levels both before and after the implementation of the word association technique at the same institution. Third, it seeks to determine whether there is a significant effect of the word association technique on students' vocabulary mastery in the ninth grade. The research utilized an observation sheet to address the first problem, while tests were employed to resolve the second. Furthermore, inferential statistics were applied to provide a comprehensive answer to the third problem.

Based on the research analysis conducted through observation sheets regarding the use of the word association technique at the ninth grade of SMP Negeri 3 Padangsidimpuan, which encompassed 15 evaluative statements, the researcher identified a mean score of 80%. Consequently, this mean score is classified within the "very good" criterion based on the scoring standards previously discussed in Chapter III. During the classroom sessions, students demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm when engaged with this technique, reporting that they enjoyed the process, which ultimately resulted in a highly conducive.

Before implementing the word association technique, the researcher administered a pretest consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions structured around four key indicators: nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. While the maximum possible score was 100 (excellent category), the lowest recorded score was 25 (very poor category). The statistical results revealed a mean score of 45.19, a median of 45, and a mode of 30, all of which fall into the "very poor" category. Detailed specifications of these calculations are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Score of data Mean, Median and Mode on Students' Vocabulary learning environment. Mastery Before Using Word Association Technique

No	Item	Score	Category
1	Mean	45.19	Very Poor
2	Median	45	Very Poor
3	Mode	30	Very Poor

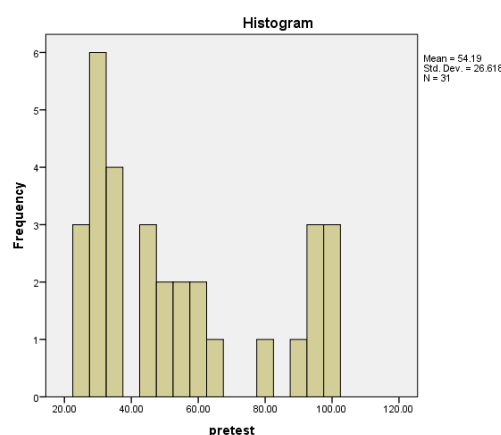


Figure 1. Histogram of Students' Vocabulary Mastery Before Using Word Association Technique

Based on the histogram above, the highest score of students was in the interval of 25–38, namely 13 students with the lowest score of 25 and the highest score of 108. This means that students' vocabulary mastery is still relatively low and needs to be improved through the application of word association technique.

Following the experimental treatment, a posttest was conducted using 20 multiple-choice questions based on the same four indicators. The results showed a significant improvement, with the highest score reaching 100 (excellent category) and the lowest score increasing to 35. The mean score rose to 74, while both the median and mode reached 75, placing the results in the "good" category. These results are summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Score of Mean, Median and Mode After Using Word Association Technique on Students' Vocabulary Mastery

No	Item	Score	Category
1	Mean	74	Good
2	Median	75	Good
3	Mode	75	Good

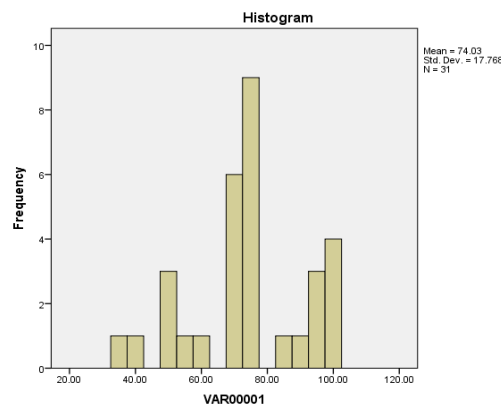


Figure 2. Histogram of Students' Vocabulary Mastery After Using Word Association Technique

The distribution data indicates that the largest group of students achieved scores within the 71–82 interval. This signifies that the application of word association techniques brought students' mastery into a proficient category, demonstrating that most students could effectively understand and retain vocabulary through this method, despite minor variations in individual performance.

a. Test of Normality

The researcher shows the result of normality test on table below:

Table 3. Normality Test

Tests of Normality

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		S	D	S	S	d	S
	tatistic	f	ig.	tatistic	f	ig.	
retest	P	.	3	.	3	.	
	184	1	009	849	1	000	
osttest	P	.	3	.	3	.	
	188	1	007	927	1	035	

The researcher conducted a normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk methods to determine the data distribution. The results indicated that the data was not normally distributed, as the significance value for the pretest was less than 0.05. Consequently, the null hypothesis (Ho) was accepted regarding non-normality, leading the researcher to utilize a non-parametric approach for hypothesis testing, specifically the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test.

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

The calculation of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was conducted through SPSS 23, the calculation results in the table below:

Table 4. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

Ranks				
		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Posttest - Negative	0 ^a	.00	.00
	Pretest Ranks			
	Positive	26	13.5	351.00
	Ranks	^b	0	
	Ties	5 ^c		
	Total	31		

Test Statistics^a

	Posttest – Pretest
Z	-4.468 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on the test results, the Asymptotic Significance (2-tailed) value was 0.000. Since this value is less than 0.05, it confirms a statistically significant effect of the word association technique on students' vocabulary mastery. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (Ha) is accepted, while the null hypothesis (Ho) is rejected.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this study reinforce the findings of Tryana and Mahmud (2023) in their research titled *"Vocabulary Teaching by Words Association."* In their study, the initial assessment (pre-test) revealed significant gaps in student knowledge; only 10% of participants could answer 7 questions correctly, while the vast majority (77%) struggled to answer even 5. However, following the intervention, the post-test results showed a dramatic shift, with 70% of students successfully resolving 8 to 9 items. This comparison confirms that the word association technique exerts a substantial influence on student vocabulary acquisition.

The current research aligns with these prior results, concluding that word association is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing vocabulary mastery. Several key observations support this conclusion. The observation data yielded a score of 80%, categorizing the implementation of the technique as "Very Good." This indicates that the method was applied effectively and systematically in the classroom. There was a marked transition in student performance, moving from the "Very Poor" category (scores 25–38)

during the pre-test to the "Very Good" category (scores 71–82) in the post-test. These findings are consistent with Tryana and Mahmud's (2023) observations of significant growth between pre- and post-intervention stages.

In summary, the application of the word association technique provides a positive and statistically significant impact on students' lexical development. Consequently, it serves as a highly viable and effective learning strategy for English vocabulary instruction.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive data analysis presented in Chapter IV, the following conclusions are drawn. The integration of the word association technique in vocabulary instruction for ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Padangsidempuan reached an efficiency level of 80%, which is classified under the "Very Good" category. There was a substantial shift in students' lexical competence; the initial performance level was situated in the "Very Poor" category with a mean of 45.19, which significantly advanced to a "Good" proficiency level with a mean of 74 following the intervention. The application of the word association technique produced a statistically significant impact on students' mastery. With an N-Gain result of 0.48, the effectiveness falls within the "Medium" category ($0.30 < 0.48 < 0.70$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted.

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