Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review
www.plhr.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary Faced by College Students of Pakistan

Syed Hyder Raza Shah*[1]   Ishfaque Ahmed Abbasi[2] Abid Ali[3]

1. Ph. D Scholar, Department of English Language and Linguistics at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia
2. Ph. D Scholar, Department of English Language and Linguistics at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia
3. Department of English, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sanghar Campus, Sindh, Pakistan

DOI	http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022(6-II)36

PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
	The aim of this study is to investigate the difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by college students of Pakistan. The research intends to focus on the difficulties in learning words faced by students. A qualitative method was employed according to the aim of the research for collecting data. Interviews were taken from 05 participants in order to understand the kinds of difficulties they experience during learning words. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from selected participants. The data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the most difficult problems which students face such as short term memory, spelling errors, pronunciation, lack of reading practices, length of words, and appropriate usage of words are the major factors in learning English vocabulary. The results also showed that the lack of regular practices and lack of interest in learning vocabulary is another responsible factor. In light of these findings the study suggests effective strategies: determination, memorizing techniques, cognitive, and meta-cognitive.

Introduction

According to Duin and Graves (1984) words create power and make learners able enough to read and write meaningfully. Simpson and Randall (2000) argue that learners must learn a great size of vocabulary for writing research articles and delivering class presentation effectively. Hence, the development of vocabulary focuses on the term meaningful lexemes that are required for better comprehension. Richard (1976) says that lexemes are the major elements of language which make an easier way for learners to successfully encounter reading and writing texts. Furthermore, Jackobson (2007) describes that lexemes and lexicon are considered the same because both are synonymous. Words are the main part of a language which ultimately effect on learners' learning abilities.

According to Nunan (2002) the term vocabulary covers as lexis, phrasal words, idiomatic words and so forth. It is important to have knowledge and sufficient amount of words in any language. Learning grammar is important; however, you cannot simply speak without knowledge of words. Grammar is rather a system of rules that connects these items (words) in meaningful units (Thornbuy 2006). Words are often considered as the building blocks of the house of a language. Language develops and begins from words (Mizumotto 2009). Langer (1967) defines that the great amount of knowledge of words was considered as the sign of intellect more than a century ago. It was necessary at that time to teach vocabulary at school levels.

In the 20th century, the term vocabulary had great attention because certain linguists and psycholinguists showed their tendency by relying on vocabulary measurement. They conducted researches on various experiments such as human learning, memorizing, reading and writing abilities, memory, and emotion. Later, in the middle of the last century, the interest of certain linguists started to be declined in exploring the term vocabulary. Ma (2009) argues that learning vocabulary is not an easier process. It creates certain challenges to be competent in acquiring a second language. According Read (1993) certain international or national language learning programs often express a desire for learning vocabulary instructions. Thus, it is mandatory to acquire L2 vocabulary in the initial steps of learning the English language. The mechanism of acquiring L2 vocabulary instruction is most difficult and puzzling (Schmitt 2009).

The difficulties in learning English vocabulary such as short term memory, ineffective reading skills, lack of practices, and irrelevant strategies may cause certain difficulties to students while learning English vocabulary. These difficulties have ultimately negative effects on students' academic performances when they remain to fail in attempting examination papers or participating in any international or national competitions. Thus, the study intends to focus on the difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by college students.

Literature Review

Subon (2013) describes that a great amount of vocabulary with clear meaning has long been considered as important for effective reading. For developing creative skills of reading; students have to enhance vocabulary. It helps in reading comprehension while expanding a strong background of knowledge. It also helps them to integrate with a great size of knowledge which ultimately makes their writing and reading comprehension better. A sufficient amount of vocabulary is a good sign of meta-linguistics awareness.

For instance, those learners who have large vocabulary tend to outperform than others based on their phonological awareness. The development of phonology facilitates them while decoding skills through an ability to understand smaller units in written text. The knowledge of vocabulary enables the learners to understand the morphological principles that how the morphemes are being combined into words. The meaning of words must be learnt from certain perspectives. If words are learnt from certain aspects (connotatively, semantically, and pragmatically) then there will not be any confusion while reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Remembering Vocabulary

Takac (2008) expresses that the learners of the English language often face problems while knowing the meaning of certain word during memorization. Issues in learning vocabulary can be overcome through drillings, cards, and other valuable tools that contain the key elements of the target words. According to Strauss (2014) certain students use their own approaches to remembering words. The usage of irrelevant strategies creates many obstacles in students' academic performances. Elttayef and Hussain (2017) elaborate that those learners who have an insufficient amount of knowledge about words may cause to meet with certain difficulties while during reading, speaking, and other related skills of learning the English language.

Lexical Items

Zhang (2009) describes that words play an important role in the complex process of human conversation. It is necessary to have the basic knowledge of words to read and write productively. According to Laufer and Nation (2013) vocabulary knowledge is based on certain aspects that make a relationship between forms and meanings in order to recognize appropriate words meaning. Richards (1976) declares that it is necessary to know lexical items through words association and semantic structures. But, at the same time, there could be a difference between the terms receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary (Milton, 2009).

Memory and Words' Position

Walter (2004) narrates that vocabulary is an important part of any language of the world. Words play a crucial role and serve different functions in writing and reading certain texts. Words are very helpful in telling the reader that what the writer has written. Arias (2003) declare that vocabulary needs to be saved in memory which requires establishing a connection in between words. According to Nation (2013) the research on memory defines some principles that include repetition, spacing, pacing, cognitive depth, imagining and retrieval. Due to lack of some principles which ensure that the words take no longer position in one's mind. Thornbury (2006) defines that these principles reflect on the memorial process while associating words in order.

Certain students have to deal with new words through which they enhance their learning language. Indeed, studies suggest that the forgetting process of learned words is common to certain learners. Schmitt (2000) claims that most forgetting words can occur after the learning process therefore, the recycling words are very important for the learners. Read (1993) explains that it is most important that students must be given repeated opportunities to use new words. The words which are used in books and conversation must be used frequently in order to position the words in the long-term memory.

Material and Methods

Research Design

A qualitative research methodology is employed for investigating the difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by college students in Sanghar, Pakistan. The study focuses on the difficulties in learning English vocabulary as the key phenomenon which requires investigation and observation (Creswell 2002). Based on the nature of the study and its target phenomenon, the researcher implies a qualitative method for a detailed explanation. As the qualitative method is used to

collect detailed explanations regarding particular phenomena like participants' opinions, views, challenges, feelings, facing experiences, and processes of thought which could be complicated during comprehending (Neemti 2009).

The random sampling technique is used for collecting data from college students. This type of sampling is used to choose the participants who represent the whole population. The study selected 05 students belonging to different areas of district Sanghar (Pakistan) particularly from college. The random sampling method is very helpful because it helps the researcher to investigate the variety of experiences and difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by participants at the college level. This sampling technique facilitated the researcher with the possible way of collecting and representing data. Before collecting the data participants were informed about the problem (research topic) and their confidentiality that would be kept secret. The students were formally asked about their participation in the study. In fact, the participants' identities were protected throughout the research process. This way proved to be effective while investigating a particular phenomenon.

The semi-structured interviews are conducted from the participants for collecting data. According to Fontana and Frey (2000) semi-structured interview is considered one of the best ways in which the researcher tries to measure his participants' opinions. Face to face interviews were conducted from the selected participants. The interview questions focused on difficulties in learning English vocabulary and its consequences on students' academic performances. Each interview has audio-taped and transcribed into the verbatim process to facilitate the data analysis process.

The researcher has recorded the interviews on his personal mobile. Bloor and Wood (2006) define that the relevancy and an actual collection of data depend on the recorded views of the participants. Thus, it is necessary to improve the validity of data through listening to participants' recordings. It would be considered bias if a researcher uses his own views. The audio-recording process is very helpful because it provides an easier way for researchers to try to avoid carrying heavy notes or files during collecting data. It suggests the researcher focus on that what has been said and be careful about listening recordings. The researcher adopted the way of recording interviews because recording helps to capture the flow of thoughts and experiences. On the other hand, the transcription process is considered as an essential tool for verbal data.

The transcription is a systematic process because it helps to reproduce verbal data into written forms. Even, it is also considered time- taking, problematic, and hard to operate. However, certain machine devices have been introduced in this technological period in order to transcribe the audio-tape recordings. In fact, the self-transcription system is considered the best way of analyzing the data (Bloor and Wood 2006). It provides an opportunity to listen such recordings again and again until unless you are clear about them.

The data has been transcribed and codified into themes. The findings are related students' facing difficulties in learning English vocabulary. The study decided to categorize the findings separately on the basis of emerging themes, such as short term memory, lack of knowledge of words, irrelevant usage of strategies, and so forth. The researcher analyzed the data and developed them into the main themes and

subthemes. The researcher's main focus is on particular themes and creating conceptual maps that reported the findings successfully. For instance, the researcher took all the recording data and properly categorizing them into themes.

Results and Discussion

Short Term Memory while Recalling Words

The study reveals that the short term memorization indicates the students' inability to remember words technically. Often, words do not take a position in their minds because of their lack of practice. Certain participants have their own ways of encountering vocabulary in their academic performances. Most of the participants view that they remember a list of words, and believing that the stored words would be encountered easily. Consequently, they remain to fail to recall words when they need to use them. It surely can be happened because students just memorize words but do not use them through their real-life objects. Remembering lexical items demand to be implemented first in one's real life. If the words are not matching in real objects then they can be associated with certain unseeing objects of life. Unfortunately, the short term memory is the cause of students' inability to frequently practice words in their real-life objects.

Lack of Knowledge of Words

Another difficulty that is faced by participants is the lack of knowledge about certain words. According to the students that a single word has certain meanings and the meanings are changed situationally. They rely on bilingual dictionaries that provide specific meanings. It does not mean that the bilingual dictionaries do not provide exact meanings. But the matter is that the meanings which dictionaries provide; such, words have different meanings in different contexts. Often, students take meanings based on their little knowledge about the words. Certain students shared that they just remember a few meanings of the words. As a result, the lack of knowledge of words negatively effect on their academic reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Indeed, being successful in the context of education, it is necessary that the students must be skillful throughout the four main skills. According to Thornbury (2002) that a learner can convey a message while having little grammar, but without words, nothing can be conveyed.

Spelling Errors and Pronunciation Problems

The spelling error is common to all participants, the study discovered that many students just overlap the words; not breaking the word into parts. They believe that the mere overview is enough for covering the spellings. The learners also claim that many times' pronunciation creates certain difficulties for writing an appropriate word. Mostly, they are unaware of certain words' spellings when they listen as a new word. They try to encounter such words on the basis of alphabetic letters. Most of the time, students are unaware that the alphabetic letters do not provide exact sound but rather a phonetic transcription of the word. Indeed, the spelling errors and incorrect pronunciation of words indicate the students' inability and insufficient vocabulary size in the academic process of learning.

Inability to Encounter Lengthy Words

Academic performances require the students to be very skillful in the core elements of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. But the present study has discovered the disappointing results that still degree college students in Sanghar, Pakistan encounter certain difficulties in learning English vocabulary. The students have to acquire the English language in order to achieve their targets. Mostly, they have to meet with certain lengthy words in learning English vocabulary. Students frequently spend a great time on lengthy words but remain unsuccessful due to inappropriate usage of techniques to encounter such words. In fact, many students leave lengthy words as taken for granted which ultimately causes in securing good marks and appreciation at the college level. Due to such difficulties, they remain to fail in writing essays or delivering class presentations.

Inability to Use Words Correctly

The major factor in students' performances is the lack of ability to use vocabulary items very correctly. Using English words correctly is a problematic option for students because they learn the English language on the basis of their mother tongue. Both languages are different from each other which require a great number of times to be competent over the second language. Students have to learn certain new words, at the same time they require a great time for increasing the knowledge of the words. During the learning process, they do certain mistakes while using words properly. Mostly, it is very hard for students to express their intended meanings in the English language. The irrelevant meanings create ambiguous thoughts over the reader to pass the negative marks regarding the learner's performances.

Lack of Regular Practices of Vocabulary

Indeed, words are considered the important elements of any language of the world. To master the language, it is mandatory to have a sufficient amount of words and their clear meanings. Learning vocabulary demands regular practices and personal motivation to improve second language learning. Unfortunately, many participants view that they just remember words, but do not practice daily. Similarly, if the words are not exercised then the students have to face many difficulties during learning English vocabulary. Many students demotivate themselves through making arguments that a single word of English has certain meanings. The words which have the same spelling and same sound but different meaning often creates challenges to understand the meaning of the words in one context. Holding over the English principles and learning vocabulary is hard for students to improve learning skills.

Lack of Reading

The study also reveals that most of the students do not have an interest in improving their reading skills. Their lack of interest in reading may cause certain difficulties while writing and speaking. Participants claim that due to insufficient vocabulary and lack of knowledge of words often discourage them to read more and more.

Discussion

Schmitt (2002) argues that there are certain factors that hampered during learning English vocabulary faced by college students. The study explored the difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by certain students because of some issues. For instance, mostly participants have a short term memory problem due to which they remain to fail to position words. One word contains many meanings and pragmatics. It is hard for students to conceptualize different meanings of a particular word. It indicates the students' inability and lack of practice to memorize a huge amount of words with conceptual meaning. The spelling error and pronunciation problem is very common to all participants because of lengthy words. Lack of reading has also a negative effect on students' academic performances when they remain to fail in writing essays.

Conclusion

The researcher aimed in this study to investigate the difficulties in learning English vocabulary faced by college students in Sanghar, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from 05 participants. The study investigated difficulties such as: short term memorization, lack of knowledge of words, pronunciation and spelling errors, inability to encounter lengthy words, and lack of reading practices. Due to such difficulties, they become unable to be proficient or competent learners. Hence, considering the problems the study suggests some strategies for improving English vocabulary. Such as: memorizing techniques, drillings, illustrations, cards, reading, and words' association. The difficulties in learning English vocabulary can easily be overcome through the following suggested strategies

Recommendations

Memorizing Techniques

Memorizing vocabulary has become very important for certain new learners. Words can be encountered by following some strategies. Such as (a) find out words' meaning frequently until unless you are clear about them (b) give a position to words in the long term- memory through retaining the words (c) words must be recalled through actions based on your gesture and posture (d) use words in written and oral mood (e) it is necessary to create mental linkages with words during learning. It is important to associate words and their meanings through relating your life experiences because real objects can be proved as a reliable technique to place words in the long term- memory. Make yourself more familiar with words through knowing their meanings from certain aspects. Recall words through making sentences related to your real-life experiences. Words can be memorized by making a list and their effective usage in making sentences.

Cognitive Strategies (CS)

It can be very easy to remember a list of words by following some procedures that help the students to retain new words in a long- term memory. Students can learn vocabulary using pictures that can connect them with their prior knowledge to a new story. A great amount of vocabulary can be learned by using drillings or illustrations. The list of pictures includes: using flashcards, magazine pictures, stick figures, posters, and wall charts. Students should read different articles, books, magazines, novels, etc. Such reading different articles or books can be helpful for them to learn

new words and search for the relevant meanings of them. The knowledge of vocabulary and its amount can be increased daily. Students must practice stored words; if they do not, they would ultimately face certain challenges during recalling and using words. Social techniques can also help the students to increase vocabulary and overcome the emerging issues. Social techniques such as: using bilingual or English to English dictionary, using websites on the internet such as Google or English words meaning app and so forth.

Meta- Cognitive Strategies

Remember words by performing exercises with classmates. Learners should engage themselves in puzzling activities of learning new words. Words must be stored and practice on a daily basis. The sufficient amount of vocabulary can be increased by doing dictations, playing crossword puzzles, and scrabbles. There are certain possible solutions to master the language through the following suggested approaches of improving vocabulary. Indeed, it depends upon the learners' personal motivation that how much they are sincere and active towards improving English vocabulary.

References

Alqahtani, M. (2015). The importance of vocabulary in language learning and how to be taught. *International journal of teaching and education*, *3*(3), 21-34.

Arias, L. D. (2003). Memory? no way!. *Folios*, (18), 115-120.

Bloor, M., & Wood, F. (2006). *Keywords in qualitative methods: A vocabulary of research concepts*. Sage.

Creswell, J. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Duin, A. H., & Graves, M. F. (1987). Intensive vocabulary instruction as a prewriting technique. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 311-330.

Elttayef, A. I., & Hussein, N. O. (2017). Arab Learners' Problems in Learning English Language: A Teacher Perspective. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, *40*, 1-6.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. *Handbook of qualitative research*, *2*(6), 645-672.

Jacobson, J., Lapp, D., & Flood, J. (2007). A Seven-Step Instructional Plan for Teaching English-Language Learners to Comprehend and Use Homonyms, Homophones, and Homographs. *Journal of adolescent & adult literacy*, *51*(2), 98-111.

Laufer, B., & Rozovski-Roitblat, B. (2011). Incidental vocabulary acquisition: The effects of task type, word occurrence and their combination. *Language Teaching Research*, *15*(4), 391-411.

Langer, J. H. (1967). Better Abstract Vocabulary-Higher Intelligence Quotient?. *The Elementary School Journal*, *68*(3), 157-161.

Ma, Q. (2009). *Second language vocabulary acquisition* (Vol. 79). Peter Lang.

Nation, I. S. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language Google eBook*. Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2002). Learner strategy training in the classroom: An action research study. *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*, 133-143.

Nassaji, H. (2003). L2 vocabulary learning from context: Strategies, knowledge sources, and their relationship with success in L2 lexical inferencing. *Tesol Quarterly*, *37*(4), 645-670.

Nemati, A. (2009). Memory vocabulary learning strategies and long-term retention. *International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education*, *1*(2), 014-024.

Read, J. (1993). The development of a new measure of L2 vocabulary knowledge. *Language testing*, *10*(3), 355-371.

Richards, J. C. (1976 Rivers, W. M. (1983). *Communicating naturally in a second language: Theory and practice in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Somsai, S. & Intaraprasert, C. (2011). Strategies for Coping with Face- to-Face Oral Communication Problems Employed by Thai University Students Majoring in English. GEMA Online™ Journal of Language Studies 11(3): 83-96.

Simpson, M. L., & Randall, S. N. (2000). Vocabulary development at the college level. In R.F. Flippo & D.C. Caverly (Eds.), *Handbook of college reading and study strategy research* (pp. 43-73). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Schmitt, N. (2000). Vocabulary in language teaching. New York: Cambridge University Press

Richards, J. C. (1976). The Role of Vocabulary Teaching. TESOL Quarterly, 10(1), 77–89. https://doi.org/10.2307/3585941

Subon, F. (2013). Vocabulary learning strategies employed by form 6 students. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 3(6), 1-32.

Thornbury, S. (2006). *How to teach vocabulary*. Pearson Education India.

Takač, V. (2008). *Vocabulary learning strategies and foreign language acquisition. Clevedon*, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Walters, J. (2004). Teaching the use of context to infer meaning: A longitudinal survey of L1 and L2 vocabulary research. *Language Teaching*, *37*(4), 243.

Webb, S. (2008). Receptive and productive vocabulary sizes of L2 learners. *Studies in Second language acquisition*, 79-95.

Zhang, J. (2009). Necessity of grammar teaching. *International Education Studies*, *2*(2), 184-187.