Problems Faced by Bachelor-Level Students in Learning English Vocabulary

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Abstract

English language proficiency depends on the vocabulary that students have access to. One of the most important aspects of language acquisition is mastery of vocabulary. Learners with a limited vocabulary are academically poor in several courses relating to language skills, linguistics, literature, and translation. The purpose of this research is to explore vocabulary learning issues faced by bachelor-level students studying compulsory English. The data consists of the responses of four student participants purposefully selected from two constituent campuses of TU in Rupandehi, Nepal. A phenomenological qualitative research method is employed for the study. It uses semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, as research tools to collect the data from the participants. The study's findings show that pupils struggle with spelling, pronouncing words, using words appropriately, and discovering meaning. This study may contribute to identifying challenges that pupils have and enhance their knowledge of vocabulary acquisition.

Introduction

Vocabulary is the prime concern of any language learner and a powerful carrier of meaning like pronunciation and grammar. Good knowledge of vocabulary is inevitable for understanding a text and better communication. The learners' capacity for efficient communication depends on their level of vocabulary proficiency. Vocabulary, being the basis upon which languages are built, plays an essential role in communication (Hatch & Brown, 1995). Therefore, mastery of vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of learning a language. Vocabulary is the centre of English language instruction since, without enough words, learners cannot communicate their thoughts or those of others (Clouston, 2013). If they do not have a strong vocabulary, they may find it challenging to perform numerous activities that are related to English.

Students face difficulty communicating in English owing to a lack of vocabulary, inefficient teaching strategies, and an inappropriate learning situation (Rababah, 2005). It shows the value of acquiring the target language, focuses students' alertness on it, exposes challenges experienced by learners, and raises their vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is vital for second language learning and teaching since it is required for effective communication (Schmitt, 2002). The most important element of learning English is vocabulary. Language acquisition is impossible without acquiring the language's lexicon, which is always changing due to many contextual factors (Yang & Dai, 2012). Furthermore, vocabulary serves as the building block for all other linguistic abilities. Speaking, reading, and writing are all examples of communication skills. It is impossible to gain any level of language fluency without first acquiring the vocabulary. Vocabulary, along with pronunciation and grammar, is one of the most important aspects of learning a foreign language (Pan & Xu, 2011). The foundation of learning a second language is vocabulary. Without knowing the vocabulary, communication in a second language becomes more difficult (Rohmatillah, 2017). Furthermore, vocabulary is an essential component of effective communication. Low vocabulary knowledge causes serious problems for students, which ultimately hinders their ability to acquire the English language (Alqahtani, 2015). Human language is based on the vocabulary that is learned or utilized.

The word 'vocabulary' has many different connotations because it refers to students' ability to recognize words on sight. Others refer to it as a student's understanding of the words represented by their meaning. It is also known as the student's comprehension of the words they hear and speak. Academic vocabulary demonstrates the understanding of pupils of both spoken and written terms and words related to the subject matter (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2011). According to Neuman and Dwyer (2009), vocabulary is the collection of words that learners require to interact effectively in spoken and listening modes. Hatch and Brown (1995) assert that vocabulary is a set of words that language users employ in a variety of ways. The learners' development is typically indicated by their vocabulary knowledge. Listening, speaking, reading and writing, are the main language skills that include vocabulary instruction and evaluation (Schmitt, 2000).

Vocabulary is the understanding of word meanings that learners should possess. According to Hiebert and Kamil (2005), vocabulary is the knowledge that students should have regarding the meanings of words. They claimed that in addition to the oral and written forms of language, there are also at least two forms of knowledge: receptive and productive. The term "oral vocabulary" refers to a group of terms that learners use when speaking or reading aloud and are familiar with their definitions. The terms in the print vocabulary are ones that the students are familiar with when they write or read aloud. Productive vocabulary refers to a group of terms that students commonly employ when speaking or writing. A receptive vocabulary is a group of less common words that learners add meanings to while reading or listening (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

Active and passive vocabularies are two forms. The words that students can speak or write are referred to as active vocabulary. The words that students can recognize and comprehend in a context are referred to as passive vocabulary. Such passive vocabulary might be found in reading or listening materials (Harmer, 2007). Additionally, Webb (2009) urges students to understand receptive vocabulary when it appears in a reading text but cannot be created by pupils in writing or speaking. Being retrospective to my school days, we used to memorize the meaning of unfamiliar words in English in our mother tongue. The grammar translation method was used to teach us words in isolation. Even though we learned many words, we were unable to employ them in our daily lives. By the time I finished my schooling, I could read the words but I could never speak English. Now, I believe that students' exposure to the target language both inside and outside of the classroom shapes how well they acquire it. I had no idea how to speak English outside the classroom because we rarely heard our instructors speak it.

By expanding their vocabulary, language learners must increase their evolving linguistic repertoire. However, learning new vocabulary can be challenging, especially for non-native English speakers who struggle with spelling and pronunciation, proper usage and inferring meaning from context. The students must demonstrate their command of vocabulary. Similarly, it can be challenging for teachers to meet the demands of their students and ensure that they retain vocabulary. Thus, it is essential to draw attention to the difficulties students have acquiring vocabulary, provide techniques of vocabulary learning that can improve students' comprehension of the target vocabulary, and provide them with chances to learn new terms. This study aims to explore problems faced by bachelor-level students in learning English vocabulary. The research question that the study answers is: What problems do B.Ed. level students face in learning English vocabulary?

Review of Literature

In this section, I have reviewed theoretical literature under four thematic principles of teaching vocabulary, the importance of learning it, problems in learning vocabulary and aspects of vocabulary.

Principles of Teaching Vocabulary

Learning and teaching vocabulary are inextricably linked. Some concepts must be addressed in order to provide learners with adequate vocabulary teaching. According to Renandya (2021), the principles of teaching vocabulary are as follows: identifying vocabulary that learners require; focusing on high-frequency words first; teaching words with collocations and building connections; multiplying meaningful encounters with target words; using a variety of text types to explore vocabulary in different genres; moving your vocabulary laterally with word families; providing multimodal and multi-sensory

engagement in a multimodal and multisensory manner; carrying out explicit instruction alongside implicit teaching; integrating the four language skills; and giving chances for accidental vocabulary development. In short, teaching vocabulary begins with identifying learners' needs.

According to Grauberg (1997), acquiring vocabulary consists of four stages: discrimination, comprehending meaning, remembering, and consolidation and expansion of meanings. The first level of discriminating includes differentiating between sounds and letters. It aids in speaking, listening, reading, and writing because differentiating sounds allows students to pronounce words correctly and comprehend what they read or hear. Second, knowing meaning entails comprehending the notion of words by associating them with their referents. Third, the remembering stage includes the ability to keep meanings. Fourth, the consolidation and extension stage is concerned with the acquisition of new vocabulary and its incorporation into the students' system of vocabulary.

Importance of Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary is crucial to learning a language and for communicating ideas, expressing desires and emotions, and interacting with others in any language since the vast majority of meanings are conveyed lexically. One of the most crucial things to teach while learning a foreign language is vocabulary since learners have difficulties speaking out including vocabulary, phrases and idioms (Ur, 2012). Thus, it is a collection of words and their definitions that are employed in the four language skills. Vocabulary is an essential component of language competency because it serves as the foundation for how learners talk, listen, read, and write (Richards and Renandya, 2002). When we want to converse with others using a language, one of the constituents that help the speakers is their vocabulary. If students do not have an adequate vocabulary, they cannot do language-related activities and cannot develop communication with others. Little can be expressed without grammar and nothing at all without vocabulary. It implies that the key component of communication is vocabulary (Wilkins,1972).

For effective use of a second language, developing a sufficient vocabulary is crucial since, without a wide vocabulary, we are incapable of applying the structures and functions that we may have learnt for intelligible communication (Nunan, 1991). "Communication in a second language just cannot happen in any meaningful way without words to express a wider range of meanings, no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of a second language are mastered" (McCarthy, 1990, pp. viii-viii). Vocabulary knowledge is essential for communicative competence and the learning of a second language (Schmitt, 2000).

Vocabulary is crucial for effective communication and helps learners express themselves fully at different stages of language development. Learners who have broad vocabulary can better understand written texts. Furthermore, acquiring and expanding one's vocabulary is critical since English competency is dependent on the vocabulary knowledge acquired by second and foreign learners, as well as native speakers (Afzal, 2019). Thus, the knowledge of vocabulary helps the learners to understand the texts and communicate with others effectively. Moreover, a robust vocabulary is crucial for academic success and achieving their goal both in and out of the classroom.

Aspects of Learning Vocabulary

The three significant aspects of learning vocabulary teachers must be aware of and concentrate on meaning, usage, and form). Nation (2001) has provided three aspects of learning vocabulary. They are as follows.

'Meaning' comprises the interaction of form and meaning, or the notion and what things are referred to, as well as the connections that spring to mind when individuals think about a given term or expression. The use of words is demonstrated by quickly demonstrating the grammatical pattern the word fits into countable/ uncountable, transitive/ intransitive, etc., providing a few similar collocations, mentioning any restrictions on the use of the word (formal, informal, impolite, only used with children, etc.), and providing a well-known opposite or a well-known word or lexical set it fits into. A word's *form* includes its sound (spoken form), spelling (written form), and any word elements that comprise this specific item. (such as a prefix, root, and suffix). Some of the studies related to this study are presented as follows.

A study by Bhandari (2010) in Nepal shows writing practice for learning, asking their teachers to translate into Nepali, keeping a dictionary with them learning by group work in their class using the glossary section of their books were the most frequently used strategies in learning English vocabulary. Khan (2011) also highlights the lexical categories in which Saudi target language learners struggle. These include learning the meanings of vocabulary words, spelling, and employing synonyms, prefixes, and suffixes.

Students' poor linguistic performance indicates their lack of vocabulary knowledge. According to Altyari (2017), Saudi pupils' poor linguistic performance in English shows a lack of vocabulary knowledge. The researcher cites two persuasive facts that lead to Saudi pupils' low vocabulary intake and lexical inadequacy in public high schools. Thirty-five students from various educational levels participated, as did nine male Saudi instructors of English as a foreign language (EFL) at intermediate and secondary schools. Data was gathered via surveys and high school textbooks. The findings show that individuals utilized inadequate vocabulary techniques such as depending only on a bilingual dictionary, asking

others for definitions, and so on. Similarly, the results show a lack of recycling of vocabulary items and presentation of all components of vocabulary knowledge.

The research clearly shows that pupils struggle with vocabulary development owing to a lack of phonological, morphological semantic, and syntactic systems of language. The study by Rohmatillah (2017) identified many problems that impede students' vocabulary-learning activities. Such as pronouncing and spelling words (written and spoken forms do not always match), selecting acceptable meanings of words (complexity of vocabulary knowledge), inflexions of word forms (inadequate grammar comprehension), and an excessive number of words that pupils must learn. It also exposes several crucial aspects that contribute to difficulty in learning vocabulary and assigns learning problems to different levels of language. Pronunciation issues, for example, are connected to the English sound system, inflexions and word forms to the morphological system, word connections, such as collocations and phrasal verbs to semantics, word categories to syntax, and so on.

The socio-cultural background, insufficient basic knowledge of the learners and the teacher's role affects learning vocabulary. Elttayef and Hussein's study (2017) in Arab showed that the learners lack basic knowledge, and teachers are not paying attention to highlighting the importance of English in classrooms, and the teacher's role in teaching English is doubled because their students rely on them with the expectation that they will make students learn English quickly. According to this study, the socio-cultural context has an impact on teaching English to Arab learners who attend English lessons primarily to complete the courses. This study finds that learners have difficulty practising language skills such as listening and speaking because of a lack of vocabulary.

Learners face problems in learning vocabulary due to a lack of word knowledge, pronunciation and spelling problems, lengthy words, and a lack of reading habits. Another study by Shah et al. (2022) in Pakistan also indicated short-term memorization, a lack of word knowledge, pronunciation and spelling issues, an inability to deal with long words, and a lack of reading habits are all challenges to gaining vocabulary. In Nepal, the study suggests tactics for improving English vocabulary, such as memory techniques, drilling, visuals, cards, reading, and word association. The major problems in learning vocabulary identified by Lutfiyah and Rusiana's (2022) study in Russia were difficulty distinguishing how to spell and pronounce English words correctly, difficulty developing their vocabulary skills, difficulty using vocabulary correctly, and difficulty understanding the connotations. A study by Mukura et al. (2022) in Thailand revealed the following difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Language learning and vocabulary knowledge are inseparably related. Ignoring to study and employing the inappropriate method of learning vocabulary, not being encouraged to study, not having enough opportunity to practice, not committing to improving, lacking desire, linguistic complexity, diverse forms impediments in the learning process, and the environment.

Similarly, Hulu et al. (2022) found that participants struggle to learn English vocabulary. These difficulties include not knowing all of the vocabulary definitions for each topic they are studying, not understanding conversations because they are not familiar with the language, not having enough time to study, not being motivated to learn, not having friends with whom to converse, and not using English outside of the classroom. A recent study by Aji et al. (2023) in Indonesia discovered the main problems of learning vocabulary is a lack of motivation and interest in learning English; laziness in vocabulary learning; ignorance of grammar and the meaning of various English word types; ignorance of how to pronounce English words; and a lack of resources for online English learning (internet connection).

The reviewed literature found difficulties in learning vocabulary encountered by learners in the foreign ELT contexts. However, to my knowledge, there are no recent studies on problems of learning vocabulary in the Nepalese ELT contexts. So, this research attempts to explore problems faced by bachelor-level students in learning English vocabulary.

Methodology

I have employed the phenomenological qualitative research method for this research study, which emphasizes examining and comprehending the significance that people's or groups' lived experiences attach to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2014). Regarding this, Willis (2007) states that phenomenology enables the researcher to concentrate on various and individualized authenticities (cited in Campbell, 2015) to unpack their experiences in learning vocabulary. To gather the necessary data, I purposefully selected four students enrolled in B. Ed. first-year studying compulsory English from two TU constituent campuses in Rupandehi, Nepal considering that they had lived experiences of learning vocabulary problems. The data was gathered via semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions from them. I took the consent of the participants to maintain ethical considerations. Clarifying the aim of the research study, I got permission to record their voice on my mobile phone. Participants were referred by pseudonyms to protect their identities (Mertova & Webster, 2020). They agreed to share their views and lived experiences in problems of learning vocabulary. Finally, the data was transcribed into the English language from Nepali. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, themes were developed and analyzed descriptively.

Results and Discussion

Based on the interview data of the participants, four themes emerged regarding problems faced by B.Ed. level students studying compulsory English in learning vocabulary. The information is analyzed and interpreted under nine themes individually as follows.

Pronunciation and Spelling

Pronunciation is one of the most important sub-skills to be grasped in learning vocabulary. Learners face problems in articulating words due to the distinction between spoken and written English. They also find it difficult to spell English words as they must be able to recognize the silent letters in particular words. One of the things that contributed to English spelling becoming one of the problems in understanding English vocabulary was the mismatch between how pupils now pronounced and spelled words. Words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn. Many English terms' spelling might be difficult for pupils who speak languages with fairly regular spelling systems. Spelling patterns, in particular, can be perplexing when it comes to pronunciation. Mismatches in sounds and spelling are likely to be the source of errors in either pronunciation or spelling and can contribute to the difficulty of a term. When the meanings of two words overlap, students are inclined to mix them up.

A participant named Bipana (pseudonym) stated, *"There is no correlation between spelling and pronunciation in English, e.g. many /menɪ/ rat /ræt/. agree /əgrɪ/ arm /aːm/ was /wɔːz./ all /ɔːl/ private /praɪvet/ pay /peɪ/ air /eə /. Sometimes 'a' is not pronounced in some words e.g. sandal, primal whereas, there is /ə/without having no 'a' in spelling. e.g. prism/prɪzəm/ so, I often make errors in pronouncing English words. Some letters in some words are silent, e.g. 'island', 'walk' and 'knight', and 'pneumonia'."* Bipana claimed that she committed errors in pronunciation due to no correlation between spelling and pronunciation in the above English words. When the students pronounce words with silent letters such as 'island', 'walk' and 'knight', and 'pneumonia', they are likely to commit errors. The lack of sound resemblance between English and the student's original language is frequently the cause of erroneous pronunciation.

Another participant Sapana(pseudonym) stated, *"I'm having trouble learning vocabulary since there's a difference between spelling and pronunciation. Because of the differences in English spelling and pronunciation, I struggled with vocabulary, especially those with more than two syllables and ones they had never heard before, e.g. 'incarcerated' and 'haberdashery'."* The above statement makes it clear she is having trouble learning vocabulary since there's a difference between spelling and pronunciation. She struggled with vocabulary because of the differences in English spelling and pronunciation.

The errors occurred when children failed to recognize a sound spelling mismatch, resulting in word-learning problems. Furthermore, the most prevalent forms of spelling issues are vowel substitution, vowel omission, and consonant substitution. Sometimes the letter does not create any sound; nevertheless, certain letters can make more than one sound, making it difficult for them to comprehend how the words were spelled, particularly

those with more than two syllables and ones they had never heard before, e.g. 'incarcerated' and 'haberdashery.'

Finding the Contextual Meaning of Unfamiliar Words

The researcher found that students hardly discovered the implications of new words. They mentioned that unfamiliar words made them difficult to translate and to understand the meaning of words. It was hard to figure out the meanings because they were unfamiliar words. They have problems understanding the linguistic and non-linguistic meaning of the text as well. The comparative degree could also make it difficult for the students to distinguish the meanings of the adjectives. The pupils relied only on the dictionary to determine the meaning of terms; nevertheless, the true meaning was not always easily established.

Bipana asserted, "*The definition of a word cannot provide the exact meaning until I see the contextual meaning of it, e.g 'discriminatory'- treating people differently.*" She claimed that she could not comprehend a text only by seeing the definition for each word, but she had to know the words in detail according to the context of the text. This issue also caused the pupils to miss the alternate interpretations of the phrases in the context. They also found it tough to choose which words were nouns, adverbs, verbs, or adjectives. I experience difficulties in understanding the meaning. There was frequently a varied interpretation of the words offered in a text. Several works tended to introduce new word meanings. Students were occasionally unaware that words had multiple meanings depending on their context.

The third participant Ashish (pseudonym) mentioned, "*I struggle with vocabulary mastery in terms of synonyms, antonyms, and accurately discerning word meaning. It's difficult for me because some words look similar but have different meanings. e.g., bank- bank, bear- bear, head- head* " He is having trouble mastering synonyms and antonyms. He has difficulties accurately recognizing the meaning of words since some words are identical in structure but differ in meaning.

Words that may be employed in a variety of circumstances are seen to be easier than their equivalents with a restricted range. Thus, putting in a very broad verb, such as impose, place, position, etc., may cause complications. Uncertainty about the implications of some terms may also cause problems. In English, 'propaganda' has a bad meaning, although its counterpart may simply mean 'publicity'. On the other hand, while 'eccentric' has no negative connotations in English, its closest counterpart in other languages may be deviant. Finally, idiomatic words or phrases are more difficult to understand than terms with obvious meanings

The Length of the Words

Longer words are often more difficult than shorter ones since there is more to learn and remember. Long words can include several morphemes. Students had less trouble recalling or comprehending the extensive vocabulary if the order of the long words was familiar. The fourth participant named Apil (pseudonym) asserted, "*If the words are long, I probably won't be able to spell them easily e.g. 'conglomerations', 'kaleidoscopic', 'extravagant', 'ambivalent' and 'imperturbable',"* Apil added, *Long words are not difficult to learn if they appear frequently in the text. When kids read the words frequently, they may acquire the terms more easily than when they are only used infrequently in a book."* His lived experience demonstrates that those terms are known as high-frequency words; conversely, words that are rarely seen in the text or used by pupils are known as low-frequency words. Several pupils noted that the longer the words, the more work it took to master them. According to the interview, the students claimed that the length of the words impacted their ability to remember the spelling and meaning of the terms. They claimed that they needed more time to memorize the terms and that big words were difficult to pronounce.

Furthermore, two students said that learning long words could be more difficult if the words were rarely found in the textbook. Besides, they could not be able to spell the words, and they were also confused about the meaning of the words because the long words have prefixes and suffixes which could cause the students to find it hard to master those vocabularies.

Poor Reading Habits of Students

Most of the students do not read story books, novels and other materials to increase their vocabulary. They even do not read the reading text provided in their textbooks. This may be due to a lack of commitment of students to improving their vocabulary. Students in community campuses especially in Butwal show less interest in reading habits as a result, they face difficulty in learning vocabulary. Apil, mentioned, *"I do not love reading as I do not have time, interesting books and reading-related materials to increase new vocabulary."* His lived experience indicates that he does not love reading because of a lack of interesting books. With the help of the knowledge they receive from reading, they can increase their vocabulary. So, reading to EFL learners is a fundamental skill because it assists their learning, increases educational achievement, and improves language abilities and vocabulary. It also helps students to improve their vocabulary.

Lack of Resources

Many schools in Nepal are under-resourced and do not have access to the latest teaching materials. The lack of supplementary materials creates problems in learning vocabulary. Audio visual aids are not used in English class. Sapana asserted,

> *I have very limited knowledge of the meaning of words. The English teacher does not use any new strategies for teaching vocabulary, audio and visual teaching materials to teach vocabulary. He only provides meaning in Nepali. There are no picture dictionaries and other book-related vocabulary games.*

She claimed that teachers use none of the materials and new strategies for teaching vocabulary, so students are poor at vocabulary. The result is by Sedita (2005) that one of the difficulties in vocabulary teaching is pupils' lack of understanding of word meanings. The students who do not understand the meanings of words will struggle to understand the texts they read.

Rote Learning and Memorization

The main problems of students in learning vocabulary are rote learning and memorization. Students may be taught to memorize a list of words without understanding their meaning. Bipana mentioned, *"Our English teacher teaches us new words in isolation. Most of the time, our English teacher teaches us new words in isolation without using them in sentences in the classroom. He insists us to memorize the vocabulary."* Her lived experiences expose that her teacher teaches them vocabulary without creating situations in isolation. Therefore, they do not understand them for a long time as they memorize in isolation.

Lack of Exposure

Students face difficulty in learning vocabulary due to improper techniques to learn and due to the limited focus on spoken English. Students in Nepal are not exposed to English language resources beyond their textbooks. There is a lack of support in the home and community for the use of English. So, they do not get enough opportunities to practice learned vocabulary inside and outside the class. Vocabulary teaching in Nepal is focused on written English. Bipana claimed,

> *Most of the instructors in my classroom do not offer lectures in English for the benefit of the students' understanding. Texts and new words are translated from L1 to L2 by teachers and students, and pupils learn them.*

The majority of respondents agreed that their teachers utilize L1 when teaching SL or FL and that they should also translate terms and phrases that were difficult to understand in their second/foreign language classes. The more successful the teacher's teaching tactics in the English classroom, the better the learner's language (Putra, 2016).

Sapana stated, "*At my home, there is no English-speaking environment, So, I do not get any exposure from the members of the family.*" Home environment equally plays an important role in developing the vocabulary of students. The students who get high exposure at home can have fewer problems in learning vocabulary.

It is also difficult to know when to use words correctly. Some words and expressions are only appropriate in certain settings. Students must also understand whether the term or phrase has a distinct style, whether official or casual, and they must use caution when using colloquial and slang idioms.

Conclusion and Implications

This study reveals that B.Ed. level students are found to be poor in learning vocabulary. Lack of vocabulary knowledge hinders their reading comprehension, writing ability, and communicative skills. They faced vocabulary-learning problems due to a lack of basic knowledge of vocabulary aspects like spelling, pronunciation and meaning of words. The study also explores that the inability to encounter lengthy words, the lack of supplementary materials, rote learning and memorization, medium of instruction, lack of exposure, and lack of reading habits of students are the problems that they face in learning vocabulary. The results of the study cannot be generalized since it is a small-scale study including only four students of B. Ed. first-year studying compulsory English. Moreover, it can be helpful for English teachers who want to improve in teaching vocabulary to their students by minimizing their problems and guide future research on the learners' vocabulary learning problems. Future researchers can also explore the most effective methods of teaching vocabulary in detail covering a larger population and the area and may explore both students' and teachers' problems in teaching and learning English vocabulary.

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