Challenges of Learning English Vocabulary

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Abstract

This study explored the challenges and strategies of learning vocabulary in the context of English language education. It employed a phenomenological research design. To collect primary data, the researcher used 10 open-ended questionnaires to investigate the learners' and teachers' challenges towards vocabulary learning and teaching. It involved 16 students and 3 English teachers from a Nepali educational institution i.e. Janajyoti Campus Bhimad, Tanahun. The findings highlighted various experiences among students, with some finding vocabulary acquisition challenging, while others effectively utilized multiple resources and techniques for learning new vocabulary. Pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and memorization emerged as prominent challenges, alongside the importance of peer and teacher support. The study highlighted the significance of employing multiple learning strategies to improve vocabulary skills and overall language proficiency and recommended promoting collaborative learning environments and developing intrinsic motivation among learners. Overall, the research emphasized the importance of systematic instructional approaches for learners' diverse needs and preferences in English language education. Ultimately, the study offered comprehensive insights into the dynamic nature of vocabulary acquisition and stressed the necessity of structured instructional approaches tailored to English language learners' multifaceted needs and preferences.

Keywords: *Challenges of learning English vocabulary, grammar, strategies, spelling, pronunciation*

Introduction

Vocabulary is a list or collection of words and phrases usually alphabetically arranged and explained, also called a lexicon. Vocabulary is the set of words for which meanings are understood. It refers to the set of words that an individual knows and uses in a particular language. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, vocabulary is a list of words with their meaning, especially in a book for learning a foreign language. According to Vygotsky (as cited in Thornbury, 2006) a word is a microcosm of human consciousness.

Bai (2018) has opined that vocabulary is generally known as all the words in a language. The term 'vocabulary' is used in different senses. English is one of the world's highly developed languages. Naturally, English vocabulary is one of the largest vocabulary words in all the languages in the world. Vocabulary learning doesn't only refer to acquiring a certain number of words or phrases but also the capability to use vocabulary correctly. Vocabulary plays a significant role in language learning.

Likewise, Yawiloeng (2020) has supported the notion that vocabulary is a fundamental and indispensable skill for acquiring a second language. Highlighting the importance of vocabulary, he has stated that nobody can learn a language without acquiring vocabulary. It is globally recognized that one can't efficiently learn a language without originally acquiring a considerable vocabulary base. Wangdi (2022) termed vocabulary as the capacity to successfully listen, speak, read, and write in a particular language is significantly affected by the basic knowledge of that language. Afzal (2019) focuses that vocabulary achievement and mastery are significant as English competency depends on the vocabulary knowledge developed by second and foreign students and native speakers.

Siddiqua (2016) has suggested that there should be a combination of essential components such as students, teachers, materials, teaching methods and techniques as well as assessment for language teaching and learning. The study has presented the attitudes of learners and teachers towards the communicative Language Teaching and Grammar Translation Method. It has been investigated that most of the respondents had affirmative views toward learning new words in context and isolation. The study revealed the use of the mother tongue according to the need and situation of the learning. Elmahdi and Hezam (2020) have attempted to introduce certain relevant areas of teaching-learning vocabulary. The study has included definitions, types, importance, and general principles of teaching-learning vocabulary in English. It

has highlighted contextual challenges, techniques, and the need for teaching vocabulary. The researchers have concluded by classifying challenging as students related challenging, teachers challenging and methods/techniques/strategies related challenging. Rosyada and Apoka (2023) found a large number of learners faced difficulties in learning vocabulary. These challenges are revealed in areas such as correct pronunciation and spelling of new words, proper usage, and memorization of vocabulary. The study is focused on applying ICT-based media resources, games, and consulting dictionaries to overcome the difficulties while learning vocabulary.

Alqahtani (2015) has highlighted the importance of vocabulary learning as an inevitable aspect of foreign language learning although it was neglected for many decades. Vocabulary knowledge is vital for communicative competence and acquiring a second language. He has also attempted to review the trends in teaching vocabulary through various teaching techniques of EFL teachers. The study has noticed the type of vocabulary, students' level as well as characteristics and value of techniques before presenting the meaning of vocabulary items. So teachers need to be aware while applying teaching techniques and providing students' vocabulary learning strategies with opportunities. Thus, it has been summarized the importance of vocabulary by explaining many techniques used by English teachers when teaching English. Afzal (2019) focuses on the significance of learning English vocabulary points out the challenges faced by students and encourages the students' consciousness of the vocabulary. It has been investigated vocabulary learning problems tackled by the students. It has been completed the learners who face vocabulary learning problems at any level of education. The problems are in the areas of pronouncing new words, spelling new words, using new words correctly, identifying the grammatical structure of words, and guessing contextual meanings. These vocabulary learning problems weaken the students' reading comprehension, writing power, and communication skills. Kamil and Hiebert (2005) define the term vocabulary as the knowledge about the meaning of words. They stated that words come in two types : oral and print. Oral vocabulary belongs to a set of words in which the learners know the meanings while speaking or reading orally. The print vocabulary consists of words for which the learners know the meaning they write or read silently. Kamil and Hiebert also categorize vocabulary as productive words that are well-known and used frequently and receptive words that are less frequent and used.

Farjami and Aidinlou (2013) elaborated on the learners' problems in vocabulary learning and offered some guidelines to improve the problems. They have introduced language

vocabulary learning strategies that make learning easy and interesting for the learners. They have also highlighted useful techniques and activities for presentation. Baniabdelrahman Al-shumai Meri (2014) pointed out some strategies that the students use together for the betterment of results for guessing the meaning of new words. It is recommended to train students on how to combine strategies for knowing unfamiliar words. They also suggested students be trained while using different vocabulary learning it motivates teachers to be aware of their students' weaknesses so that they can assist in improving their proficiency in vocabulary learning. Most EFL teachers of English language are native speakers therefore it is essential to familiarize students with the background and the teaching strategies. AlRashidi, (2024) investigated the result of insufficient teacher training on learners' vocabulary improvement using secondary data. It is shown that because of untrained teachers, more attention is extended to teaching grammar than vocabulary which impacts lexical development among the high school students negatively. Farjami and Aidinlou (2013) elaborated on learners' problems in vocabulary and presented some guidelines to improve or even eradicate them. The study introduced some language learning strategies for making vocabulary learning easy and interesting for learners by familiarizing with useful techniques and activities. They aimed to present practical vocabulary learning strategies offering important learning techniques and activities for teachers.

Celik and Toptas (2010) emphasized the need for vocabulary learning strategy instruction effectively. The study indicated that the participants' general use of vocabulary learning strategies was not sufficient. The study also suggested that language learning programs should be revised to promote the use of vocabulary learning strategies across all levels of language. For improving vocabulary learning the researchers also suggested designing related strategies, appropriate materials, and activities for lexical competency. Janggo and Yumelking (2024) revealed that students have a diversity of challenges while learning vocabulary. The major factors are grammar, pronunciation, and meaning. Furthermore, there are external and internal factors that influence how well students learn vocabulary. The usage of learning media, academic institutional facilities, family, and different teaching methods are regarded as external factors whereas development, IQ, experience, and memory power are internal factors. It is suggested to read a lot of English vocabulary, practice through exercises, and create curiosity and motivation for learning vocabulary. Komalasari (2022) highlighted the challenges that students have when learning vocabulary, including their inability to pronounce words clearly and accurately, their incompetence to tell apart words with similar spellings and pronunciations, their difficulty understanding grammar, and their inability to comprehend

English context. The most frequent challenge faced by students is their incomplete hold of the context of English phrases in terms of pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and syntax.

Lutfiyan et al. (2022) showed that there were several obstacles in learning vocabulary such as how to spell and pronounce words correctly, developing their vocabulary skills, using vocabulary correctly, and understanding the connotations. They also pointed out some strategies such as dictionary strategy, memorization, peer practice, listening to English music videos, sharing with friends, and extra individual class. Yulyana (2024) investigated English teacher strategies in teaching vocabulary and the problems faced by English teachers in this context. The findings reveal several effective strategies employed by English teachers for vocabulary instruction. These strategies include vocabulary corners, contextual Vocabulary Learning, and Introduction via literacy materials, mapping exercises, quiz vocabulary, and games. These strategies enhance vocabulary comprehension and retention, engage students actively in the learning process, and foster independent learning. Raw and Ismail (2021) investigated the usefulness of online tools in improving vocabulary learning in the language classroom under five major notions namely vocabulary knowledge and retention, motivation in learning, active participation, immediate feedback, and self-regulated learning. This study further discovered that instructors and learners are facing numerous challenges in using online tools in the classroom. Zhe Saadon (2024) explored an essential area designed to raise the English vocabulary skills of Malaysian university students. By integrating gamification principles into a quiz game, the application intended to inspire and engage students, transforming learning into a charming experience. Moreover, the app's inclusivity is praiseworthy, providing English content in Chinese and Malay languages to provide to a various student population. Addressing these important elements, this research significantly attempted to improve English language learning outcomes among the students.This study emphasizes how crucial it is to look at how teacher preparation, technology integration, and successful teaching methods relate to improving vocabulary learning. Although there is a growing body of research on vocabulary acquisition, there aren't many thorough studies examining the ways in which these variables interact in diverse educational settings. To improve vocabulary outcomes, it is essential to comprehend how well-prepared instructors may use technology and new teaching strategies. Closing this gap could result in more effective teacher preparation programs that are in line with modern pedagogical trends and resources, as well as improved assistance for students from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework
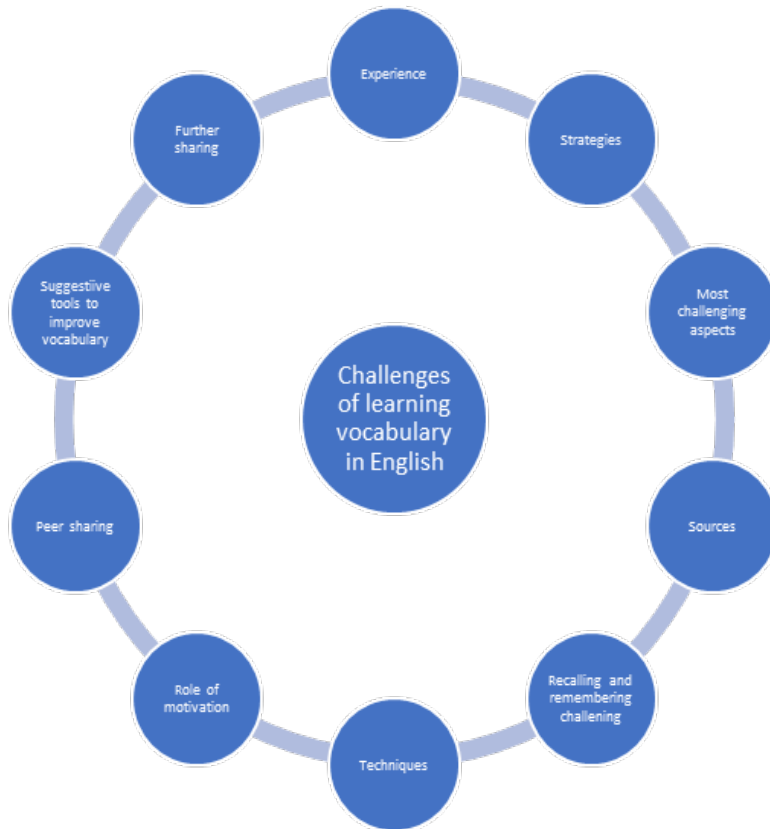
Method of Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed phenomenological research. There were 250 students and fourteen teachers at Janajyoti Campus Bhimad Tanahun in 2024. Out of them, sixteen students were selected, eight students from education and eight students from management from the purposive sampling method who were studying English as a compulsory subject and, three English teachers were selected. All the participants were Nepali Native speakers studying English as a compulsory subject. The primary data was collected through a questionnaire survey and the study analyzed the data using a descriptive method. The study used a questionnaire to investigate the learners' and teachers' challenges towards vocabulary learning and teaching. The questionnaire on challenges of learning vocabulary involved 10 open-ended question items. The question items incorporate the areas of experience, strategies, challenging aspects

of learning vocabulary, sources of learning vocabulary, challenges of retaining vocabulary, techniques of teaching vocabulary, the role of motivation and peer sharing in learning vocabulary, and further suggestions to improve learning vocabulary.

Results and Discussions

The researcher formulated ten open-ended questions to investigate the students' attitudes toward the challenges of vocabulary learning in English. Each question response is discussed herewith. During the research work, the researcher intended to understand the students' experience with learning English vocabulary. Depending on their experience, a question was asked to 16 students "How would you describe your general experience with learning vocabulary in English? "The responses were interesting and diverse. Six students share their struggles during the learning process. They found learning vocabulary tough and sometimes embarrassing. They hesitated to use new words, fearing they might make mistakes. Another six students had different attitudes. They consulted different materials such as books, apps, dictionaries, and glossaries. They believed that these resources assisted them in improving their vocabulary. Three students found learning English vocabulary enjoyable and exciting. They found it easy to grasp new words and interesting as well as comfortable to learn new meanings. Two students responded that they were able to improve their vocabulary through exposure, practice, word training, and repetition. They believed that using English in their daily lives facilitated them to develop their vocabulary skills.

Similarly, the researcher asked three English teachers the same question about their learning and teaching vocabulary experiences. Two teachers responded to a difficult area of language learning and instructed them to consult the dictionaries and one teacher responded learning vocabulary as a "what" factor of any language.

In response to the question "What strategies do you currently use to learn new vocabulary? "It was found that the majority of the respondents which is five out of the total respondents, favored reading different genres such as stories, poems, novels, and dramas to improve their vocabulary. This strategy not only helps them to learn new vocabulary but also provides them with context to understand the meaning and usage of those words. Similarly, five students responded that they use different resources such as movies, YouTube, Google search, and technology to learn and improve their vocabulary. They consider that watching movies, and online videos, and using technology-based resources are effective ways to learn new in a fun and attractive way. Three students said that they consult media such as magazines, newspapers,

books, radio, articles, and television to expand their vocabulary. By applying this, they get to learn new words as well as they informed about recent happening and news. Moreover, three students stated that they develop their vocabulary skills by engaging in various activities such as listening, speaking, contextual reading, engaging in conversation, playing word games, and using apps. These strategies not only help them to learn new words but also improve their overall communication and language skills.

Regarding teachers' responses to this question, three of them opined to consult dictionaries, books, movies, and reference sources.

In response to the question "What are the most challenging aspects of learning new vocabulary in English?" It was responded that almost the majority of the respondents, 13 out of the total respondents stated that they have challenges with pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and memorization. They also viewed that they have challenges in understanding meaning, confusing spelling collocation, and encountering frustrating words with correct meaning. These language hurdles can be quiet as they can hinder learners from conveying their thoughts and ideas efficiently. Additionally, three respondents expressed their challenges as a lack of motivation, peer pressure, and inadequate cooperation among their teachers and fellow students. Regarding teachers' responses to this question one opined accessibility to the use of social media and reference sources as a challenging aspect, and two of them opined spelling, pronunciation, and contextual meanings as the most challenging aspects of learning vocabulary.

In response to the question "What sources (e.g. textbook, dictionary, online resources, and media) do you typically use to learn new vocabulary?" it was responded that twelve students typically used textbooks as the main source of new vocabulary learning. Accompanying textbooks, they consulted dictionaries, word-translating apps, and online and offline sources. The rest of the students that is four respondents viewed that they consulted language vocabulary apps—websites, videos, articles media and social media movies, TV shows, etc

In the area of teachers' responses, regarding sources two of them instantly used a dictionary and online resources. In contrast, one teacher argued the use of textbooks, and mobile phones—newspapers as well as dictionaries as the main sources of learning vocabulary.

In response to the question "What challenges do you face in remembering and recalling vocabulary?" Six students mentioned difficulties related to spelling and pronunciation. This suggests that they struggle with correctly spelling words or pronouncing them, which can affect their ability to recall vocabulary accurately. Another six participants noted struggles

with tough word structures, confusion between similar words, and difficulty selecting the appropriate words in different contexts. This indicates they have issues with understanding or using words correctly due to their complexity or similarity to other words. Four respondents highlighted issues with lack of practice, insufficient exposure to vocabulary, and difficulties in understanding words in context. This implies that these participants feel they need more exposure to words and contexts to remember and use vocabulary effectively.

Regarding the question of remembering and recalling vocabulary, teachers bear various challenges. One teacher pointed out that depending on the first language can be a hindrance, while another highlighted the difficulty of piloting excessive resources. Moreover, one teacher noted the challenge of not being able to hear or use contextual spelling and word class. These perceptions highlight the complex nature of vocabulary retention in educational areas.

In response to the question" What techniques have you found to be most effective for retaining new vocabulary?" it was found that four students consulted a dictionary, word practice, and games. Six students used the techniques of writing, quiz, conversation, repetition, and motivational speaking practice. Five students preferred to apply the techniques of visual images, flashcards, realia, and gestures. Additionally, one student responded to prefer for applying for the vocabulary test, group, and pair work sharing for the meaning of new words.

In the responses from the side of teachers to this question, two teachers opined to instant use of a dictionary, pictures, and authentic online resources whereas one teacher responded with regular practice of pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and use of words.

In response to the question "How does motivation affect your ability to learn vocabulary," it was found that five students responded that motivation inspires readiness for language acquisition, paying attention, and developing and influencing good attitudes toward learning vocabulary. six students stated that motivation develops positive attitudes, and increases ability, skills, and succession for learning vocabulary in language acquisition. Five students argued that motivation affects vocabulary memorization, excitement for learning vocabulary, and the development of a willingness to learn new vocabulary.

The selected teachers opined diverse on this question. Two of them regarded motivation as a key master to learning new vocabulary whereas one teacher opined motivation that can enhance our memory and retention.

In response to the question" In what ways do your peers or teachers support you in learning vocabulary?" It was found that six students responded that their peers supported them in learning vocabulary by speaking, reading, writing, conducting conversation, and dialogue.

Five students viewed that they took support by sharing and practicing among the students. Likewise, three respondents argued that they share their support by consulting materials, and doing communicative activities such as tests and quizzes. Additionally, two students take support among them correcting mistakes and collaborating. All the students are facilitated by teachers with guidance, feedback, and appropriate suggestions for learning vocabulary.

From the side of the teachers on this question, two of them responded that peers and teachers played a vital role in sharing, repeating, and collaborating whereas one teacher highlighted contextual word collocation, spelling, and pronunciation.

In response to the question "What strategies or tools would you suggest to improve the process of learning vocabulary in English? It was found that six students recommended using various materials such as flashcards, vocabulary apps, games, various books, magazines, newspapers, and dictionaries. Five students suggested consulting different sources such as movies, videos, different speaking and reading sources, and online sources. Three students stated to be exposed to new, complex, and root words to improve new vocabulary. Additionally, two respondents stated that applying to translate English into the first language and involving the learners in reading and writing practice.

Regarding this question, the selected teachers suggested diversity. One teacher suggested improving vocabulary with the implication of correct pronunciation. Another one suggested the contextual use of a dictionary, realia, pictures, mimes, and gestures, and additionally, one teacher suggested consulting authentic resources for word practice.

In response to the question "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience learning vocabulary in English?" Different respondents argued diverse opinions. Nine students opined that more English word practice promotes learners' communicative understanding, power, and competency. Two students regarded learning new words as a great achievement and they also suggested to consult dictionaries, books, and newspapers. Two students recommended developing confidence in overcoming the challenges of learning vocabulary and sharing with peers and teachers. They also stated that learning new vocabulary assists in connecting people and cultures. Selected three teachers suggested that effective use of daily communication in language learning is significant. They also advised students to practice vocabulary as part of their daily learning routine.

The study found that learners make use of various genres such as stories, poems, novels, and dramas, as well as media sources like YouTube, Google search, and technology, including movies, online videos, magazines, newspapers, books, radio, articles, and television to expand

their vocabulary. This helps them learn new words and stay informed about recent happenings and news. Learners also improve their skills by engaging in listening, speaking, contextual reading, conversations, playing word games, and using apps. These strategies help them learn new words and enhance their overall communication and language skills. The study identified challenges in learning new vocabulary including pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and memorization. Learners reported difficulties understanding meanings, confusing spelling collocations, and encountering words with multiple meanings. These language hurdles can be frustrating and hinder learners from expressing their thoughts and ideas effectively. The study revealed that students typically use textbooks as their main source of new vocabulary learning. In addition to textbooks, students also consult dictionaries, word-translating apps, and online and offline sources as well as social media, movies, and TV shows. To effectively retain new vocabulary, students employ techniques such as word practice, visual images, flashcards, realia, gestures, speaking, writing, repetition, as well as group and pair work. The study suggested a variety of challenges that participants face when it comes to remembering and recalling vocabulary, ranging from specific issues with spelling and pronunciation to broader challenges related to word complexity, confusion, and contextual understanding. Addressing these challenges may involve targeted strategies such as practicing pronunciation, expanding vocabulary exposure, and improving contextual comprehension through varied usage and examples the study explored the positive impact of motivation on learning new vocabulary. Peers' and teachers' support, collaboration, consultation, and feedback play a crucial role in learning new vocabulary. Exposure to new, complex, and root words is also important for improving vocabulary. Additionally, there is a need to involve learners in reading and writing practices, as well as promote more English word practice to enhance learners' communicative understanding, power, and competency. Developing confidence is also recommended to overcome the challenges of learning vocabulary. The finding of study is consistency with Celik and Toptas (2010); Farjami and Aidinlou (2013); Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumai Meri (2014); Siddiqua(2016); Afzal (2019); Raw,and Ismail, (2021); Komalasari(2022); Lutfiyan et al. (2022); Rosyada and Apoka(2023); Janggo and Yumelking (2024).

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive analysis of students' perceptions and strategies for learning vocabulary, numerous important perceptions developed. Overall, the research emphasized the importance of systematic instructional approaches for learners' diverse needs and

preferences in English language education. Students had various experiences, with some finding vocabulary acquisition challenging and others effectively using different resources. Challenges recognized comprise pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and memorization, along with motivational factors and support from peers and teachers. The study emphasized the importance of various learning strategies such as reading, using technology, and engaging in language activities to improve vocabulary skills and overall language proficiency. Ultimately, the study offered comprehensive insights into the dynamic nature of vocabulary acquisition and stressed the necessity of structured instructional approaches tailored to English language learners' multifaceted needs and preferences.

Additionally, the findings supported the existing literature on vocabulary learning strategies, encouraging the relevance of several sources and interactive approaches. Implications included increasing exposure to diverse word contexts, promoting collaborative learning environments, and promoting intrinsic motivation among learners. These understandings contribute to deeper thoughts of effective pedagogical practices for improving vocabulary acquisition in English language education. In conclusion, the study highlights the dynamic nature of vocabulary learning and emphasizes the importance of systematic instructional approaches that provide to the diverse needs and preferences of learners.

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