

# Vocabulary-Learning Problems Encountered by B.A. English Specialization Students at the University Level of Education

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## Abstract

Proficiency in the English language very much depends on the knowledge of its vocabulary possessed by the second and foreign language learners and even the native speakers. Though developing the vocabulary is vigorous, it poses several problems, especially, to non-native students of English. Students for those who have a low vocabulary knowledge express weak academic performance in different courses related to language skills, linguistics, literature, and translation at the university level of education. This study was to explore the problems faced by English specialization students in learning the vocabulary in Myanmar. It also put forward some vocabulary-learning strategies to minimize the potential problems. The data consisted of the responses of 130 students (undergraduates) randomly picked up from different levels of 4-Year B.A. English Program. As a

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research instrument, this qualitative study uses an interview survey with teachers and an online questionnaire with students to collect the data. According to interview survey and questionnaire responses, the results expose that English specialization students face several problems in learning the vocabulary such as learning the meaning of technical terms, learning cultural-specific vocabulary, learning homophones, and so on. To its contribution, this study not only accentuates the importance of learning the English vocabulary but also highlights the problems come across by students. Future research may explore teachers' outlooks on instructional methods implemented to teach vocabulary in English language classrooms.

**Keywords:** English specialization, Undergraduate students, Vocabulary-learning problems

## **Introduction**

The problems faced by English specialization undergraduate students in learning vocabulary were examined through this research. In fact, the learners' ability to communicate effectively depends on a good knowledge of vocabulary, which they continue to expand throughout their life span. Rababah (2005) upholds that students generally face difficulty communicating in English due to a lack of vocabulary items, methods of teaching, and incompatible learning environments. Indeed, vocabulary is the basis of acquiring a second language. Additionally, vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental part of the language; it is essential to communicative competence. Low vocabulary knowledge attitudes severe problems to its learners, which consequently delays the learning of the English language (Alqahtani, 2015). Schmitt (2000) argues that vocabulary plays a vital role in teaching and learning the second language as lexical knowledge is fundamental to communicating effectively. The language of human beings depends on the vocabulary used or enlarged. According to Schmitt, 2000, learning the vocabulary has always been agility taught and estimated in other language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

## Literature Review

Particularly, vocabulary learning is thought-provoking for the non-native speakers of English who face problems relating to the meanings of new words, spelling, pronunciation, correct use of words, guessing meaning through the context, and so on. The reasons for such difficulties can be complicated. Most of the teachers in Myanmar follow traditional methods in teaching English. They use their mother tongue more than the target language to deliver lessons, which causes students' low performance. Regardless of some insufficiencies in teaching and learning strategies, the demand for English in Myanmar has melodramatically increased. Accordingly, the learners must get command over vocabulary to prove that they are competent users of English. Similarly, it is a hard task for the teachers to fulfill the students' needs and make them learn vocabulary in an unforgettable way. Thus, it is crucial to highlight vocabulary-learning problems faced by students, propose vocabulary-learning strategies that can improve students' understanding of the target vocabulary, and offer them opportunities to acquire new words.

According to Tozcu and Coady (2004), vocabulary learning helps acquire language, develop the learners' reading proficiency, and is beneficial for reading comprehension. Learning the vocabulary includes four stages: discrimination, understanding meaning, remembering, and consolidation and extension of the meanings. Firstly, the discrimination stage involves distinguishing sounds and letters. Distinguishing sounds help in speaking, listening, reading, and writing because the learners pronounce words correctly and understand them when they read or hear. Secondly, understanding meaning involves understanding the concept of words by relating them to their referents. Thirdly, the remembering stage consists of the ability to retain the meanings. Fourthly, the consolidation and extension stage refers to learning new vocabulary and its integration in the learners' vocabulary system (Grauberg, 1997). As Oxford 1990 argues that generally, no rules are followed in learning the vocabulary as used in learning the grammar.

## Research Objectives

This research was to explore the problems faced by English specialization students in learning the vocabulary and recommends strategies that can minimize students' problems in learning the English vocabulary.

## Methodology

The primary focus of this research was to examine the students' vocabulary-learning problems and suggest strategies to overcome the potential problems. It also emphasizes the importance of learning target vocabulary and highlights the problems encountered by students. It depends on the responses of the participants who are students studying at diverse levels of 4-Year B.A. English program.

### 1. Population and Samples

This study implement is a qualitative approach that explains the phenomena based on numerical data. Its participants included 121 undergraduate students enrolled in 4-year B.A. English Program. They were casually selected from different levels of the program. The data were collected during the academic year 2019-2020.

Table 1

#### *Profile of the Participants*

SN	PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES	NUMBER	AGE GROUP	TOTAL
1.	English Language teachers	Novice	9	25-35	21
		Experienced	12	36-58	
2.	English specialization students	First Year	25	17-20	121
		Second Year	30	18-22	
		Third Year	34	19-23	
		Fourth Year	32	20-24	

### 2. Instrument(s) and Procedures

For creating and administering the online questionnaire, this study uses the Google Docs platform that serves as real-time collaboration and

communication. A questionnaire was created in Google Docs with a 5-point Likert scale options: (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree (3), Undecided (4) Disagree, and (5) Strongly disagree in order to assess the students' vocabulary-learning problems.

This research answers the following questions:

- i. What are the problems faced by English specialization in learning the vocabulary?
- ii. What are the strategies that can minimize students' problems in learning the English vocabulary suggested by the teachers?

### *3. Data Collection*

The students were trained to complete it by rating their problems accordingly. After the successful completion of the questionnaire, a Google Docs summary of all the scaled responses generated the percentage of the vocabulary-learning problems interpreted in the results section. This qualitative research, using interviews for teacher participants and questionnaires for student participants, points out several challenges that hinder vocabulary-learning practices accepted by students.

## **Results**

This study explores the problems such as pronouncing and spelling words, choosing appropriate meanings of words, and an excessive number of words that students need to learn. It also reveals some important factors of difficulty in learning the vocabulary and thoughts of learning difficulties to numerous levels of language. The research also particularises the learners' problems in learning the vocabulary and offers some practical learning and teaching strategies to improve these problems.

Table 2  
*Undergraduate Students' Perceptions on Vocabulary-Learning Problems (n=121)*

SN	Problem Areas	Calculation		Interpretation
		Mean	SD	Scale
1	I faced the problem of learning the meaning of new vocabulary.	3.03	1.29	Sometimes
2	I faced the problem of pronouncing new vocabulary.	3.01	1.27	Sometimes
3	I faced the problem of spelling new vocabulary.	2.88	1.39	Sometimes
4	I faced the problem of memorizing new vocabulary.	2.79	1.39	Sometimes
5	I faced the problem of recognizing new words.	2.65	1.37	Sometimes
6	I faced the problem of learning the meaning of technical terms.	3.40	1.29	Sometimes
7	I faced the problem of giving enough time to study.	2.90	1.38	Sometimes
8	I faced the problem of remembering words without understanding meaning.	3.25	1.34	Sometimes
9	I faced the problem of learning cultural-specific vocabulary.	3.34	1.30	Sometimes
10	I faced the problem of learning homophones.	3.01	1.35	Sometimes
Average		3.03	1.36	Sometimes

*Note.* 1.00-1.80=Never, 1.81-2.60=Rarely, 2.61-3.40=Sometimes, 3.41-4.20=Often, 4.21-5.00= Always.

The results reveal that students sometimes faced a range of problems in learning the vocabulary of the English language (Average Mean=3.03). The analysis also reveals that undergraduates even challenged problems in “Learning Meaning of Technical Terms” because a high mean value (3.40) of the participants accredited facing this problem. Technical words created difficulties due to their specific meanings and rare uses. The participants responded positively (Mean=3.34) concerning the problem of “Learning

Cultural-Specific Vocabulary”. Usually, culture-loaded words are simple words, idioms, or expressions that convey a deep meaning about a specific nation or culture. English specialization students approved their inability to understand and learn the words having the same pronunciation but different spelling and meanings (Mean=3.01) in the responses about “Learning Homophones”. The results correspond with the study that is about difficulties encountered by the learners of English in separating and giving the right spelling of homophones.

In Table 3, teacher participants also point out in their interview survey that learning the English vocabulary is a challenge for the learners of English.

Table 3

*Strategies Minimizing students’ Problems in Learning the English Vocabulary Suggested by the Teachers (n=21)*

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
1	Learning the meaning of new vocabulary	Interviewee 1	Foreign language learners should actively learn the meanings of new words through deliberate vocabulary acquisition strategies and by using contextual clues for a generation of the meanings of new words.
		Interviewee 2	Similarly, the learners may apply activation strategies that involve different tactics such as practicing the new words in different contexts.
		Interviewee 3	Since vocabulary represents the words that the learners need to communicate, they must have enough practice to use it effectively in speaking and writing. The correct use of new vocabulary indicates the product knowledge that “means to be able to use a word correctly in a written work or a speech.

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
2	Pronouncing new vocabulary	Interviewee 4	Some students face difficulties in pronouncing the words with similar forms, for instance, pool, polo, pollen, pole, pall, pill, etc. Such challenges may cause confusion in both spelling and pronunciation.
		Interviewee 5	Some strategies may solve students' pronunciation problems. The teachers should identify pronunciation errors and teach to pronounce words correctly through special pronunciation classes as well as students should be encouraged to consult the dictionary.
		Interviewee 6	The learners should be informed that they should practice important and complex sounds to improve their pronunciation.
3	Spelling new vocabulary	Interviewee 7	A more systematic methodology should be employed to spelling while teaching the students. The learners' spelling problem can be addressed through strategies such as rule-based approach, multiple efforts, resource-based, and brute force. Several other previous works on vocabulary have recommended different strategies to lessen the learners' spelling problems.



Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
		Interviewee 8	Students might also memorize words by listening to words repeatedly, by reading words, and by guessing the meaning from the context that helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words. For more information about memorizing vocabulary and related strategies, see other works.
		Interviewee 9	Students face spelling problems peculiar to the L1 learners of English. One of the most obvious reasons can be that spelling is not taught with a prescribed syllabus in mind.
4	Memorizing new vocabulary	Interviewee 10	Students might also memorize words by listening to words repeatedly, by reading words, and by guessing the meaning from the context that helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words.
		Interviewee 11	Students might also memorize words by listening to words repeatedly, by reading words, and by guessing the meaning from the context that helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words.
		Interviewee 12	The students should be encouraged to increase their consciousness of the multiple-meaning words by highlighting the words that pose confusion, reading sentences, and consulting a dictionary. Large dictionaries that have sub-entries for a unique sense of a word are also accommodating for students facing such problems.

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
5	Recognizing new words	Interviewee 13	One particular strategy with significant benefits for identifying unfamiliar words is a “vocabulary self-collection” strategy. It promotes the words consciousness and independent learning because the learners are actively engaged in knowing news words from their readings and developing vocabulary.
		Interviewee 14	Learners have insufficient basic knowledge; however, they are taught English in their high schools.
		Interviewee 15	Students should maintain vocabulary logs as separate notebooks to record new words that are exchangeable among peers and can be used inside and outside the classrooms for home assignments as well.
6	Learning the meaning of technical terms	Interviewee 16	Several strategies can solve this problem; for instance, students can rely on dictionaries and guessing strategies to learn technical terms.
		Interviewee 17	Students at the university level of education from different streams can exploit different learning strategies to deal with technical vocabulary.
		Interviewee 18	English majors face several problems in learning the vocabulary such as knowing the meanings of new words, pronouncing new words, using new words correctly, memorizing and spelling new vocabulary, and so on. We should highlight the problems encountered by students and raises their awareness of the vocabulary.

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
7	Giving enough time to study	Interviewee 19	The learners may have insufficient basic knowledge; however, they are taught English in their high schools. Time management is one of the effective skills categorized under good study habits. Students should study in their peak study time when they are fully awake, alert, and able to absorb new information. They can also make use of bonus study time that is free or extra time such as unexpected breaks, free hours, and canceled lecturers.
		Interviewee 20	Learning the vocabulary usually causes a heavy burden on the learners. In other words, languages are productive, and they continually create and add new words to their vocabulary stock.
		Interviewee 21	First of all, in my opinion, students cannot learn vocabulary, but can “develop” their vocabulary and this happens over time. This means if they don’t have enough time students cannot efficiently develop it. They might think they are learning words quickly but not giving each particular new word enough attention can result in forgetting it after a few days and this is what they certainly don’t want to happen. Nevertheless, I would suggest students practice from “baron’s 1100 words you should know”. Besides, students should start learning from flashcards. There are plenty available in the market.

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
8	Remembering words without understanding the meaning	Interviewee 22	Hopefully, English teachers and students should work together and find all possible means that can facilitate the students to enrich their vocabulary knowledge.
		Interviewee 23	Some other strategies also include guessing the meanings from the context, looking up dictionaries frequently, remembering words by the meanings when reading again, connecting new words to the students' first language, repeating words, and practicing.
		Interviewee 24	Teachers should also use various strategies to help students understand the meaning through the context, associate new vocabulary with already learned words, and even help them memorize words and meanings. No doubt, the students need a large number of word meanings to communicate effectively.
9	Learning cultural-specific vocabulary	Interviewee 25	Teacher participants suggest that students themselves should also realize the importance of the cultural-loaded vocabulary and make efforts to advance their knowledge of a native and target culture by learning the vocabulary.
		Interviewee 26	Teachers should enhance their own and students' cultural consciousness of English words to facilitate comprehension and interpretation of literary texts.

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Problem Types	Interviewee	Discussion
		Interviewee 27	The teaching practice through the contrastive method yields better results where students can draw a comparison between native culture and target culture.
10	Learning homophones	Interviewee 28	There's no denying that the English language is not the easiest language to learn. One of the most confusing things is homophones. Homophones are words that sound the same when spoken. But they spelled completely different.
		Interviewee 29	Because there are many words in the English language that sound the same but are spelled differently, students may struggle to write the right spelling for certain words. An integral part of a student's vocabulary and spelling development is to learn and understand the meaning of these homophones.
		Interviewee 30	For students who have not had any exposure to homophones, they can be frustrating and confusing. For students who have studied the sound-like word pairs, they can be a source of linguistic challenge and entertainment. Either way, our ESL class will benefit from some experience with these unique word buddies in English!

Table 3 shows the strategies that can minimize students' problems in learning the English vocabulary suggested by the teachers in their interview survey. To facilitate students in learning the words with numerous

meanings, the teachers should offer explicit instructions and improve the students' awareness. Next, according to the responses, the teachers can deliver students with direct instructions and definitions of the words with new meanings and give examples. Moreover, the teachers can introduce a new meaning in a particular context. However, one word with multiple meanings may not be taught at the same time. The words should be repetitively reviewed through different learning points to have preservation. All in all, the findings reflect that English specialization students are accredited facing problems in learning the vocabulary by responding to the questionnaire items. The problems surfaced as difficulties in pronouncing new words, spelling new words, using new words correctly, guessing the meanings from the context, learning technical terms, learning cultural-specific vocabulary, learning homophones, and others. These vocabulary-learning problems cause to decline in the students' reading comprehension, writing power, and communication skills due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Thus, the current study has also deliberated with the teachers on some of the strategies to lessen the problems and enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge. One of the teacher participants argued that students should have opportunities to repetitively see and hear the new words to advance their vocabulary, through different activities, which they are likely to forget otherwise. In order to improve the students' pronunciation, the learners should be informed that they should practice important and complex sounds. Simmons (2007) claims that students in "general have difficulty using the correct spelling strategies" (p. 160). Arguably, spelling is also important as it promotes reading (Reed, 2012). Spelling problems peculiar to the L1 learners of English are faced by most of the Myanmar students. One of the most noticeable reasons is that spelling is not taught with a prescribed syllabus in mind. It is also suggested by a teacher participant that students should maintain vocabulary logs as separate notebooks to record new words that are transferrable among peers and can be used inside and outside the classrooms for home assignments as well. Students might also memorize words by listening to words repeatedly, by reading words, and by guessing the meaning from the context that helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words. Students at the university level of education from different streams can adventure different learning strategies

to deal with technical vocabulary. According to the participants, good study habits pledge success in learning the vocabulary because they have a close relationship with students' academic performance. Based on such endorsements and empirical confirmations, it is confirmed that English specialization students should apply a long time to their studies to improve their academic grades.

## **Discussion**

Gu (2003) verified that several previous studies have observed that vocabulary significantly contributes to the formation of written or spoken texts. The vocabulary knowledge includes an in-depth understanding of the meanings, syntax, sound structure, and pronunciation for students. Some students faced the problem in "Pronouncing New Vocabulary" (Mean=3.01). This is mainly due to the difference in spoken and written English, for instance, pronouncing words like a muscle, listening, and so on. A splendid majority of the undergraduates also agreed that "Spelling New Vocabulary" was problematic for them. The learners must focus on what words look like (spelling) and what they sound (pronunciation) (Mean=2.88). Spelling is a critical literacy skill. The university students also have difficulty memorizing new vocabulary. As the results indicate, the responses to the problem "Memorizing New Vocabulary" were also recorded in a high number (Mean=2.79). Phomtham et al. (2020) also found that the problems and obstacles in using English for communication were lack of vocabulary and grammar comprehension in the study "English communication problems in speaking and listening of hotel staffs in Buriram". A reasonable time is spent on memorizing the words but in a quite traditional manner such as remembering with the assistance of contextualized or non-contextualized fixed wordlists from textbooks during the vocabulary acquisition process. The grammatical difficulties encountered by the EFL learners at the university level of education have been conveyed in response to the problem related to "Recognizing New Words". The students confronted problems in identifying plural forms of nouns, past tenses of verbs. As, Chung and Nation (2003) observe, technical terms in textbooks are a main concern for the language learners. These

words appear in textbooks of various academic disciplines and become challenging for students in understating their meaning. The current analysis also reveals that undergraduates even provoked problems in “Learning Meaning of Technical Terms” (Mean=3.40). Technical words create complications due to their specific meanings and rare uses. Careful time for studies has shown a positive impact on university students’ academic performance. Alsalem et al. (2017) in their research conclude that the university students who exercised the time management skills for completing their home assignments yielded better academic performance. Thus, the practice of not sparing time by students for their studies is a ‘bad study habit’ that may affect their academic performance. Without understanding the meanings essential for text comprehension, students also try to learn English vocabulary. However, the difficult vocabulary is an indicator of a difficult text and the readers’ vocabulary knowledge is an interpreter of their understating of the text. A severe obstacle for many students in Myanmar is their lack of knowledge as a fundamental part of education. Usually, culture-loaded words are simple words, idioms, or expressions that convey a deep meaning about a specific nation or culture. A foreign language learner interested in learning such culture-loaded vocabulary should also know the cultural implications of such words. The results illustrate that English specialization students are mostly unable to follow the culture-loaded vocabulary (Mean=3.34). To solve this problem, the teachers’ instructional method to teach the culture-loaded words should be expanded by employing various resources. As a homophone is a word that is pronounced the same (to a varying extent) as another word but differs in meaning, it may also differ in spelling. The two words may be spelled the same, as in rose (flower) and rose (past tense of rising), or differently, as in rain, reign, and rein. The current research witnesses that the university undergraduates face problems in using homophones and homographs words that they are not able to distinguish in context (Mean=3.01). They face confusion when using the words.



## **Recommendations**

### *1. Implications*

Lin (2014) points out that learning the meanings of multiple words is a challenge for the learners of English. This current study, applying the questionnaire and interview survey, has investigated vocabulary-learning problems challenged by English specialization students in following their 4-year B.A. program at the Department of English. By analyzing the responses of the student and teacher participants, it has been confirmed that the learners face vocabulary-learning problems even at the university level of education. The current research points out the vocabulary areas in which the Myanmar target language learners face difficulties. These areas include learning the meaning of technical terms, cultural-specific vocabulary, and learning homophones. The interview responses clearly mention the strategies that can minimize students' problems in learning the English vocabulary. The teachers argue that the learners have insufficient basic knowledge; however, they are taught English in their high schools. It is also suggested that students themselves should also realize the importance of the cultural-loaded vocabulary and make efforts to advance their knowledge of a native and target culture by learning the vocabulary. They also mention that teachers should enhance their own and students' cultural awareness of English words to facilitate comprehension and interpretation of literary texts. Students should pay attention to the cultural-loaded words and learn these words via various channels, such as "surfing the Internet, chatting with foreign friends and attending online micro-class", on the other hand, to improve their self-study learning abilities and cultural communicative abilities. Similarly, the teachers equipped with the latest linguistic and educational theories can teach vocabulary in a better way. The teaching practice through the contrastive method profits better results where students can draw a comparison between a native culture and target culture. Finally, it is suggested that future research should examine in detail the reasons behind vocabulary-learning problems. Also, future studies may investigate teachers' perspectives on instructional methods they use inside the language classrooms and the problems they face in teaching vocabulary to students.

## *2. Further Studies*

Inclusively, the findings replicate that English specialization students acknowledged facing the problems in learning the vocabulary by responding to the questionnaire items. The problems raised as difficulties in pronouncing new words, spelling new words, using new words correctly, guessing the meanings from the context, learning technical terms, learning cultural-specific vocabulary, learning homophones, and others. These vocabulary-learning problems cause to fail the students' reading comprehension, writing power, and communication skills due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. It also puts forward some strategies, from the teaching-learning perspectives, which can resolve the difficulties connected to learning the vocabulary. Thus, the current study has also discussed with the teachers some of the strategies to minimize the problems and enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge. One of the teacher participants argued that students should have opportunities to repetitively see and hear the new words to advance their vocabulary, through different activities, which they are likely to forget otherwise. The teachers should inform the learners that they should practice important and complex sounds to improve their pronunciation. Simmons (2007) claims that students in "general have difficulty using the correct spelling strategies" (p. 160). Arguably, spelling is also important as it promotes reading (Reed, 2012). Students face spelling problems peculiar to the L1 learners of English. One of the most obvious reasons can be that spelling is not taught with a prescribed syllabus in mind. A teacher participant suggested that students should maintain vocabulary logs as separate notebooks to record new words that are exchangeable among peers and can be used inside and outside the classrooms for home assignments as well. By reading words repeatedly, students might also memorize words, and guessing the meaning from context helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words. Students at the university level of education from different streams can exploit different learning strategies to deal with technical vocabulary. According to the participants, good study habits assure success in learning the vocabulary because they have a close relationship with students' academic performance. Based on such recommendations and experimental confirmations, English

specialization students should dedicate a long time to their studies with the intention of improving their academic grades. Thus, future research may explore teachers' perspectives on students' vocabulary-learning problems and instructional methods implemented to teach vocabulary in English language classrooms.

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