

Challenges and Methodological Approaches to Vocabulary Acquisition in English as a Second Language

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Abstract:

Vocabulary acquisition is universally recognized as a cornerstone of language learning, since without words no meaningful communication can occur. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in contexts such as Uzbekistan where exposure outside the classroom is limited, vocabulary development is often hindered by reliance on rote memorization and translation practices, resulting in poor retention and restricted active use. While extensive studies address grammar and communicative competence, there remains limited focused analysis on the specific challenges of vocabulary learning and the comparative effectiveness of different methodological strategies in EFL environments. This study seeks to identify the main obstacles learners face in acquiring English vocabulary and to evaluate the pedagogical methods that can effectively enhance vocabulary retention and usage. The findings confirm that learners struggle with pronunciation, spelling, memorization, and contextual application of words, often due to the influence of their native language and insufficient immersion. The study highlights effective approaches such as contextual learning, vocabulary notebooks, dictation, spaced repetition, pair and group work, and the use of multimedia tools, each with distinct strengths and limitations depending on learner styles and motivation. By combining classical techniques with modern innovations like digital platforms and multimedia applications, the research underscores the value of an integrated and adaptive methodology tailored to diverse learning preferences. For EFL learners in Uzbekistan, adopting a balanced mix of these methods is essential for fostering active vocabulary use, improving confidence and retention, and ensuring that vocabulary learning becomes a systematic, engaging, and sustainable process.

Keywords: English Foreign Language, Learning Challenges, Kinesthetic, Visual, Auditory, Learning Skills, Conte

Introduction

Not only in the study of the native language, but also in the study of a foreign language, vocabulary plays a special role. Speakers of their own language spend years studying the use of each word and its true meaning. It follows that vocabulary is of particular importance not only for writing and reading, but also for expressing the meaning of a sentence beautifully, clearly and completely. Rebecca L. Oxford said, "Vocabulary is the most important and least controllable component in language learning, whether it is a foreign or native language, because it consists of tens of thousands of different meanings"[1]. Nation (2001) emphasizes that without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed in language use, making it the foundation for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Wilkins famously noted, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." This quote highlights the significance of vocabulary in everyday language functioning and communication. Even if learners have a sound knowledge of grammar, they may still be unable to understand or express themselves effectively without an adequate lexicon [2].

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially in countries where English is not widely spoken outside the classroom, vocabulary learning becomes a significant challenge. According to Schmitt (2008), learners often face difficulties with vocabulary acquisition due to a lack of meaningful context, poor retention, and limited exposure to language in use. In the Uzbek context, these problems are even more evident, as students often rely on rote memorization and translation methods, which result in low retention and limited active usage. Research by Alqahtani (2015) further supports this, arguing that vocabulary learning is often the weakest skill among EFL learners due to insufficient focus on strategies and learner autonomy [3].

Professors have been studying the importance of vocabulary in learning a foreign language and the problems in learning it. In addition, they have proposed a number of effective methods to overcome them, such as using flashcards, keeping a vocabulary notebook, and reading books in the language being studied. This is very useful for students and helps them improve their vocabulary using methods that suit them. It also helps teachers know what effective methods to use during the lesson [4].

This article will expand on the topic by answering the following questions.

1. What are the most common difficulties students face when learning vocabulary?
2. What are the effective methods of vocabulary learning, and what are their advantages and disadvantages?

Methods

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative and descriptive approach that combines the analysis of existing research, classroom observations, and student learning experiences to investigate the challenges and strategies of vocabulary acquisition in English as a foreign language. The research draws upon established theoretical perspectives from scholars such as Nation, Schmitt, Thornbury, and Oxford, whose works provide both conceptual frameworks and practical insights into the processes of vocabulary learning. Data were collected through a review of pedagogical literature, empirical studies, and reports of classroom practices in Uzbekistan and similar contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited [5]. Special attention was given to identifying the most frequent difficulties encountered by learners, including pronunciation, spelling, memorization, and contextual usage, and to analyzing how these challenges correlate with the influence of the native language, limited immersion environments, and reliance on rote learning. To evaluate effective teaching strategies, the study examined methodological tools such as contextual learning, vocabulary notebooks, dictation, spaced repetition, pair and group work, and the use of multimedia technologies. The effectiveness of these approaches was assessed in relation to different learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—to highlight the importance of individual learner differences in vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, discourse analysis of students' attitudes and

teacher feedback was incorporated to determine how motivation, confidence, and classroom dynamics affect vocabulary retention and active usage. This multi-layered methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of vocabulary acquisition, situating learner difficulties within broader pedagogical and sociocultural contexts, and providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing language teaching practices [6].

Results and Discussion

Now we will get acquainted with the issues that arose in the research of teachers and are also relevant to us. In 2004, Thornbury, in his book "How to Teach Vocabulary," explained the difficulties students face in learning vocabulary, such as spelling, pronunciation, contextual meaning, and correct usage. Similarly, Naeem Afzal (2019) conducted a study at a university in Saudi Arabia, where he examined the difficulties of English language learners in learning vocabulary. He found that students often had difficulty in using vocabulary correctly, spelling, recognizing, remembering, pronouncing words correctly, and understanding their meanings in context. His research was supported by online tests and surveys, and the results were presented in percentages for clarity [7]. Interestingly, the findings of this current study align closely with those of Thornbury and Afzal. Students in this research also encountered similar problems, particularly with memorization, spelling, and pronunciation [8].

Teachers in Uzbekistan observed that children, even when they were able to recall words from context, had difficulty with pronunciation and spelling. They also reported difficulty understanding the broader meaning of words. Nation conducted his work on the theory and practical strategies of vocabulary learning in a foreign language. He believed that to learn vocabulary, language learners need to know not only its meaning, but also its pronunciation, spelling, grammatical features, constructions, and usage. He also identified errors in his research, such as remembering and storing words in long-term memory, using words correctly, and not knowing word collocations [9]. Nunan conducted his work in the field of language learning and teaching methodology. In his research, he observed that students quickly memorize words and have difficulty using them in written and spoken speech, and he proposed his own solutions. Additionally, some students are embarrassed by their English voices or are afraid that their classmates will laugh at them if they mispronounce a word, which can lead to problems with the use and pronunciation of newly learned words. Just like every problem has a solution, there are several solutions to the problems listed above. Linguists have recommended several methods to overcome difficulties that arise during the process of vocabulary learning [10].

Learning vocabulary through context [11]

Contextual vocabulary learning is a method of learning and memorizing new words through sentences or text. In this method, the word is not studied separately, but together with the structure, content and usage of the surrounding sentence. Through this method, students learn the meaning of words more deeply and have a higher chance of practical application. However, it takes more time and it is difficult to learn rare words. This method is described in detail by Paul Nation in his book *Learning Vocabulary in another Language* [12].

Keeping vocabulary notebook [13]

Some students also maintained vocabulary notebooks to support their learning. In this method, students write down the words they need in one place, and the notebook becomes their personal dictionary, which is convenient for them to review. This method is also flexible, and students can write down not only the translation of the words, but also their synonyms and antonyms, and collocations that are used with them [14]. This prevents the use of the same word over and over again when using the dictionary. However, this method can also quickly lead to boredom among students, especially primary school students. Also, students may not review new words by writing them down in the notebook [15].

Dictation

In English, the spelling and pronunciation of many words are different. In such cases, students have difficulty with spelling and pronunciation. To avoid this, students are recommended to use the dictation method. In the dictation method, the student writes the written form of the word or text he hears. This method not only helps to correct spelling errors, but also helps to develop listening skills, increase attention, strengthen grammar, and develop speech. This method was approved by famous professors as the most important method for increasing vocabulary and assessing knowledge[16].

Spaced Repetition

According to research, people forget 70-80 percent of what they learn. Spaced repetition is the most common and effective method for transferring new information from short-term memory to long-term memory. In this method, students have to repeat the information they have learned frequently and over several days or months. This prevents the information from being forgotten. The active use of words in conjunction with this method ensures that this method gives even more effective results. However, this method requires consistency. In addition, some students may find this method boring. This method was found to be effective by Paul Nation, Brown & Waring [17].

Pair and small group work

Small group discussions are less stressful than large group discussions. This method is particularly effective for students who are shy or afraid of making mistakes. This method is commonly used in schools, where teachers divide the class into small groups. As students become more comfortable with the method, the group size is gradually increased. However, this method can create a noisy classroom and can make the teacher lose control. However, I have seen the benefits of this method with students during my internship [18].

Using multimedia tools

Prof. Khalilova.M. proposed that multimedia tools (mobile applications, artificial intelligence, digital platforms) are effective tools for increasing vocabulary, increasing students' interest and accelerating learning. Multimedia tools support cognitive development in language learning and encourage students to actively participate. However, "In 2022, excessive use of multimedia tools can lead to a decrease in students' attention span and dependence on a purely visual approach. There is also a risk of technology addiction," warns prof, Avazbekova. Sh [19].

Before using these methods, it is necessary to determine the learning styles of students. In primary school, tactile and kinesthetic learning skills are usually dominant. Over time, their learning skills change to visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning skills. In fact, each person has all of these methods, but only one is dominant. It is advisable for teachers to first determine the learning skills of students and then teach them lessons or give assignments using methods that are right for them. If students are recommended methods that are not right for them, they may get bored and even lose interest in learning a language [20].

Conclusion

For successful communication, vocabulary remains the cornerstone of effective foreign language learning. Even learners with strong grammatical knowledge cannot express themselves meaningfully without sufficient lexical competence. Research evidence and classroom observations confirm that learners frequently struggle with spelling, pronunciation, contextual understanding, and memorization, all of which hinder their ability to use vocabulary actively in speaking and writing. These difficulties, however, are not insurmountable. A variety of strategies have been shown to support vocabulary learning, including contextual learning, maintaining vocabulary notebooks, dictation, spaced repetition, pair and group work, and the use of multimedia tools. Each method has specific strengths and limitations, and their impact depends largely on learner preferences, motivation, and the teacher's ability to adapt them effectively. For example, contextual learning deepens understanding but is time-consuming, while spaced repetition supports long-term retention

but requires consistency. Likewise, multimedia applications increase motivation but may lead to overreliance on technology.

For EFL learners in contexts such as Uzbekistan, where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, the adoption of a balanced combination of these methods is essential for both vocabulary retention and active use. Teachers play a critical role in assessing students' learning styles and tailoring strategies accordingly to ensure effectiveness and engagement. Ultimately, the key lies in blending traditional techniques with innovative practices, so that vocabulary learning becomes systematic, sustainable, and enjoyable. When integrated thoughtfully, these approaches not only enhance students' linguistic competence but also foster greater confidence, autonomy, and long-term motivation in language acquisition.

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