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Investigating Vocabulary Difficulties Encountered by EFL Sudanese University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate English vocabulary difficulties experienced by EFL students at Sudanese universities. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method, the researcher collected data by using a diagnostic test for (30) Sudanese university second year students .To analyze the data the researcher has used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The findings of the study revealed that Sudanese university students encounter some English vocabulary difficulties; they face some difficulties with spelling, pronunciation, meaning, context, collocations and parts of speech, in addition, they are unaware about sense relations between words. Moreover, the students lack knowledge about strategies that can be used to enhance their vocabulary skills. In the light of the findings of the study, the researcher recommended that, in teaching vocabulary teachers should get the students to brainstorm, categorize, organize and analyze vocabulary to help them to understand the meaning of the words in relation to other words, teachers should also use some techniques of vocabulary teaching such as demonstration, explanation, discovery, quick questions and presentations, furthermore, to develop students' vocabulary skills there are certain effective strategies that EFL teachers should adopt such as the strategy of possible sentences, knowledge rating, using literature , context strategy ,semantic cues, and semantical analysis .

Key words:

Foreign language learning, English vocabulary, English vocabulary difficulties

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is an important language skill in the process of foreign language learning, Richard (1976:P.89) pointed out that using appropriate vocabulary is vital in language classrooms because it enables learners to make use of language(language output) hence it plays a crucial role in language teaching and learning. Rough (1975:P.10) argued that language learning should start with teaching vocabulary and providing learners with large amounts of vocabulary skills through reading and writing is the best way to teach a second or a foreign language.

According to Shahov (2012:P.87) learning vocabulary provides the right condition for language acquisition and development of other language skills as it helps learners to develop their grammar , reading and writing skills. The same claim was supported by Robert (2013:P.8) who confirmed that vocabulary provides the appropriate situation for the acquisition and expansion of the other language skills, this suggests that learning vocabulary provides the appropriate situation for the acquisition and expansion of the other language skills.

Allen (1983:P.89) argued that vocabulary was neglected in teachers' preparation programs because teachers felt that grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary as it was already given too much attention in language classrooms. In addition, Allen pointed out that specialists in methodology fear that students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words were learned before the basic grammar was mastered. Consequently, teachers were led to believe that it was best not to teach much vocabulary. They also believed that word meaning could be learned only through experience and cannot be adequately taught in a classroom(p.89).

In this paper the researcher investigates vocabulary difficulties amongst EFL Sudanese university students and propose some suitable solutions to overcome them.

2. Statement of the problem

From her observation and experience of teaching EFL for several years ,the researcher has noticed that most EFL Sudanese university students face

numerous serious deficiencies with English vocabulary ; EFL Sudanese university students encounter some difficulties with spelling system , pronunciation, collocations, contexts, , use and meaning of English vocabulary , in addition, they are unaware of sense relations between words , furthermore, lack knowledge about strategies that can be used to enhance their vocabulary skills. So, the researcher finds it important to explore these vocabulary hurdles with the intention of suggesting the appropriate rectifications.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is carried out to achieve the following objectives:

1.To shed light on English vocabulary difficulties that face EFL Sudanese university students.

 2. To suggest some suitable solutions to overcome these English vocabulary problems.

4. Questions of the Study

The following questions formed the basis of the study:

1. To what extent do EFL Sudanese university students have difficulties with English vocabulary?

2. How do EFL Sudanese university students perform when they are asked to do exercises based on vocabulary skills?

5. Hypotheses of the Study

1. Most EFL Sudanese university students face some difficulties with English vocabulary.
2. EFL Sudanese university students perform poorly when they are asked to do exercises based on vocabulary skills.

6. Significance of the Study

 This study is significant as it contributes to the existing literature in the field of teaching and learning vocabulary skills; teachers will have better

understanding of their students vocabulary skills and examine their own teaching techniques and materials, accordingly. In addition, learners can identify their problems and be aware of the factors that contribute to their difficulties and apply the right strategies and techniques for learning vocabulary skills.

7. Limits of the Study

This study is limited to investigate vocabulary difficulties encountered by Sudanese university students who study English as a foreign language and posses approximately the same English abilities during the academic year (2022-2023).

8. Methodology of the Study

As has been mentioned, the purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties that EFL Sudanese university students face in English vocabulary, to achieve this goal, and in an attempt to answer the study questions, the data has been collected through using a diagnostic test which was administered to (30) Sudanese university students .Then the data has been analyzed statistically by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS.

9.Vocabulary

Hornby (1983:P.98) defined vocabulary as all the words in a particular language or "a list or collection of words and phrases usually alphabetically arranged and explained or defined". According to Brown (2010: P.377)vocabulary items are boring lists of words that must be defined and memorized by the students as lexical forms are seen in their central role in contextualized, meaningful language.

Schmitt (1997:P.87) maintained that vocabulary means knowing a word meaning, knowing how often it occurs, the company it keeps, its appropriateness in different situations, its syntactic behavior, its underlying forms and derivations, its word associations, and its semantic features.

Nation (2001) described vocabulary as a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words that individual speakers of language might use.

For Hiebert and Kamil (2005)   the term vocabulary means the knowledge that the learners should have about the meanings of words. They argued that words come into two types, oral and print and the knowledge, too, comes in at least two types: receptive (to be understood or recognized) and productive (written or spoken). The oral vocabulary belongs to a set of words for which the learners know the meanings while speaking or reading orally ,whereas the print vocabulary consists of words for which the learners know the meanings when they write or read silently.

Richard and Renandya (2002:P.76) argued that since vocabulary is the basis of how well learners speak, write, listen and read, it is one of the important elements of language proficiency; without vocabulary mastery, students may be discouraged to use the language they are learning in daily activities. Therefore, vocabulary acquisition is very central in developing students' ability to communicate using the language.

Vocabulary is essential in EFL acquisition for as McCarthy (1990) stated that without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in the foreign language just cannot happen in any meaningful way. According to Schmitt(1997) vocabulary knowledge usually indicates the learners' progress as learning the vocabulary has always been a skill taught and evaluated in other language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking(p.23).

10.Features of Vocabulary

Shahov (2012) stated that there are certain features of vocabulary that EFL learners need to be aware of, they are:

1. Form: pronunciation and spelling

A learner has to know what word sounds or its pronunciation and what it looks or its spelling. These are obvious characteristics and one or the other will be perceived by the learner when encountering the item for the first time. In teaching vocabulary, teachers need to make sure that both of these aspects are accurately presented and learned. Wu (2005) argued that when teaching vocabulary forms teachers should consider part of speech, spelling, family of words, pronunciation and collocation.

2 . Grammar:

The grammar of a new item will be necessary to be taught if this not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An item may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts and may have some idiosyncratic with other words in sentences; it is important to provide learners with this information at the same time the teacher teach the base form. When teaching a new verb, for example, teachers must give also its past form, if it is irregular (think, thought) .Similarly, when teaching a new noun, teachers must present its plural form , if it is irregular e.g mouse-mice or draw attention to the noun having no plural at all (advise, information).

3.Collocation:

Collocation is a term used to describe a group of words that occur repeatedly in a language. McCarthy (1990) stated "the relationship of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary; it is a marriage contract between words, and some words are more firmly married to each other than others" (p.12). Knowledge of collocation means knowledge of which words are most likely to occur together. For instance, "beige" collocates with "car" but not with "hair", just as "blond" collocates with "hair" but not with "car." Knowledge of collocational appropriateness is part of vocabulary competence and fluency.

4. Aspects of meaning: denotation, connotation, appropriateness:

The meaning of a word is divided into two aspects, denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the dictionary definition. For example, denotative meaning of the word snake is any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes a venomous reptile having a long, tapering, cylindrical body and found in most tropical and temperate regions. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word or the emotional suggestions related to that word, in addition, EFL learners should be aware about when it is appropriate to use a particular lexical item . Thus when teaching English vocabulary, teachers should take aspects of meanings into consideration.

5.Aspect of meaning: meaning relationship:

Milton (2009) stated that when teaching meanings, the teacher should answer the following questions:

1. Does the word have more than one meaning?

2. What is the connotation of the item?

3. Could the vocabulary item have different meanings in different contexts?

Ling (2005) stated that how the meaning of one item relates to the meaning of another can also be useful in teaching. There are various meaning relationships. For examples:

1) Synonyms: items that mean the same or nearly the same, for example: bright, clever, and smart may serve as synonyms of intelligent.

2) Antonyms: items that mean the opposite, for example: rich is an antonym of poor.

3) Hyponyms: items that serve as specific examples of a general concept, for example: dog, lion, and mouse are hyponyms of animal.

4) Co-hyponyms or co-ordinated: other items that are the same kind of things, for examples: red, blue, green, and brown are co-ordinates.
5) Superordinates: general concepts that cover specific items, for example: animal is superordinate of dog, lion, and mouse.

6) Translation: words or expressions in more or less equivalent in meaning to the item being taught.

7) Word formation: Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-words, can often be broken down into their components. Nation (2001: 40) remarked that EFL learners need to be aware of word formation mechanisms such as back-formation: blending, agglutination, acronym, clipping, neologism, conversion and claque.

11. Main Difficulties that EFL Learners Encounter in Learning English Vocabulary

Milton (2009)stated that there are several internal factors that affect EFL students learning difficulties like intelligence ,aptitude and motivation ,in addition, EFL learning is affected by external factors such as family factors, school and environment factors.

Thornbury (2002) suggested the following factors that make some words more difficult than others, they are :

a. Pronunciation

It has been usually noticed that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn.

b. Spelling

Sounds-spelling mismatches are likely to be the cause of errors, either pronunciation or spelling, and can contribute to most English spelling is fairly law-abiding, there are also some glaring irregularities (Thornbury ,2002). In addition, words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic such as honest, cupboard, muscle, etc.

c. Lenght and complexity

Long words seem to be more difficult to learn than short ones. But, as a rule of thumb, high frequency words tend to be short in English, and therefore, the learner is likely to meet them more often.

d. Grammar

Grammar that is associated with the word can be problematic, especially if this differs from that of its L1 equivalent. Remembering whether a verb like enjoy, love, or hope is followed by an infinitive (to swim) or an ing form (swimming) can add to its difficulty.

e. Meaning

 When two words overlap in meaning, learners are likely to confuse them. For example: make and do , it is possible to say make breakfast and make an appointment, but do the housework and do a questionnaire are often used.

f. Range, connotation and idiomaticity

Milton (2009: P.45) argued that words that can be used in a wide range of contexts will generally be perceived as easier than their synonyms with a narrower range. For example, thin is a safer bet than skinny, slim, slender. Uncertainty as to the connotations of some words may cause problems too. For instance, propaganda has negative connotations in English, but its equivalent may simply mean publicity. On the other hand, eccentric does not have negative connotations in English, but its nearest equivalent in other

languages may be deviant. Finally, words or expression that are idiomatic (like make up your mind, keep an eye on....) will generally be more difficult than words whose meaning is transparent (decide, watch).

Wu (2005:76) stated that what makes a vocabulary item is easy or difficult is how easy or difficult a vocabulary item is : P.45 depends on a number of factors:

Similarity to L1

The difficulty of a vocabulary item is often depends on how similar the items are in the form and meaning to the students first language. Words which are similar in the first language and English may be misleading rather than helpful(Herrel ,2000).

Similarity to English

Once students have known some English words then a word which is related to an English word they are already familiar to becomes easier . For example, if students have already met the word friendly they should be able to guess the meaning of unfriendly.

Connotation

Another difficult aspect that learners have to get grips with is the connotation of the word. For example, does the word have positive or negative connotation to a native speaker? For example, either skinny and slim could be used to describe someone who is thin , but these words are very different in their connotation and by choosing one rather than the other the speaker conveys a particular attitude.

Spelling and pronunciation

Nation (2001: P.49) stated that the spelling of many English words can cause problems for students who speak languages with very regular spelling system. Particular spelling patterns can also cause confusion where the pronunciation is concerned. For example, it is easy to understand why many students confuse the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of these words: through, though, thought, tough, thorough.

Multi-word items

A lexical item may consist of more than one word, as in a compound noun such as tennis shoes or sports car, or a phrasal verb such as to put someone up. Phrasal verb are notoriously difficult for learners of English because they are made up of simple words (often prepositions or adverbs).

Collocation

How a lexical item collocate with another may cause some difficulties to EFL learners. For example, people are injured or wounded but things are damaged, and we can say a strong wind and strong coffee but it is a light wind not a weak wind and weak coffee not light coffee.

Appropriate use

Zimmerman(2007) stated that when to use vocabulary appropriately is also problematical. Some words and expressions are restricted to use in particular context .For example, we can use pushing to mean almost in he is pushing fifty. But pushing is only used in this way with older people ,we do not say (he is pushing there!). Also it is important that students know whether the word or phrase has a marked style informal or formal.

According to Sudijono (2014) there are some factors that cause EFL students' difficulties in learning vocabulary:

1. The written form is different from the spoken form in English.
2. The number of words that the student need to learn is exceedingly large.
3. The limitation of the sources of information about word.
4. The complexity of the word knowledge .
5. Lack of understanding of the grammatical forms of the words.
6. The incorrect pronunciation is often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language.

Herrel (2000)argued that students experience difficulties in learning English vocabulary due to uncommon differences between their mother tongue language and the target language, those are:

1.Negative transfer.

It refers to transferring the target language using the students' first language which cannot be understood as every language has it is own structure.

2. Cultural differences

As it is known English has become first language in many countries and blended in its community for example, English America, British, Australia and Canada. Therefore, students who learn English must be aware of the English culture because cultural awareness is needed to adjust English vocabulary in daily use.

3. Accent

English accents are varied depending on its communities. Students may have problems in understanding the native speakers.

4. Arbitrary

Arbitrary language causes some difficulties for foreign language learners, as they face the problem of understanding English words as how they are written are sometimes different with their pronunciation.

5. Grammar and vocabulary

English has many grammar rules which are confusing for non- English background. Students experience difficulties when they do not know the correct structure to use. It is because different structures has different meanings.

6.Pronunciation

To be understood, students need to pronounce the words correctly. However, pronouncing a new language for new students is difficult as the way people talk will be influenced by their first language.

According to Nation (2001, pp. 3-4) EFL learners experience the following difficulties in learning English vocabulary, those are:

1. Problems with academic language skills due to limited knowledge towards the target language.

2. Ineffective learning habits which can be a source of unsuccessful learning.

3. Native language intervention during the study.

4. Problems with teaching methods conducted by teacher which are not suitable to learners' preference.

5. Stress or trauma that has been experienced by a learner resulting difficulties in concentration.

12. Effective Ways of Developing EFL Learners' Vocabulary

1. Possible sentences

Raugh (1975) stated that teachers may use a method called possible sentences, which help the students to independently identify the meaning and relationships of unfamiliar words in content reading.

2.Knowledge Rating

Knowledge rating is used to establish word learning. Herrel (2000)stated that students should learn to self- assess their level of word knowledge so they are better prepared to comprehend a text (p.116).

3.Literature

Teaching vocabulary in the context of literature is very helpful in classroom activities to improve students' comprehension, without teacher attention and instruction to terminology, students' comprehension will necessarily suffer. For this reason, considerable attention to vocabulary development is basic to effective instruction in the content areas (Raugh ,1975).

4. Context Strategy

Herrel (2000) described context strategy as where students use context clues in applying word meaning to unknown words . According to him context strategy encourages students to integrate information across sentences and at the same time incorporates the definition of the target word .

5.Semantic Cues

Brown (2010) stated that there are several important features such as homographs, homophones, synonyms, antonyms, figurative language, multiple meanings, connotation, and denotation that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary.

13. Previous Related Studies

Rohmatillah (2017) conducted "A Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary" .The researcher collected data by using interviews and questionnaires, the study examined several challenges that hinder vocabulary-learning practices adopted by students such as pronouncing and spelling words (written and spoken forms do not match most of the time), choosing appropriate meanings of words (complexity of vocabulary knowledge) inflections of word forms, (inadequate understanding of grammar), and an excessive number of words that students need to learn. It also revealed some important factors of difficulties in learning vocabulary and attributed learning difficulties to various levels of language.

The researcher suggested that teachers should provide students with direct instructions and definitions of the words with new meanings and give examples, teachers should also introduce new meanings in a particular contexts ,in addition, students should be encouraged to increase their consciousness of the multiple meaning words by highlighting the words that pose confusion, furthermore, teachers should encourage students to practice reading sentences, and consulting dictionaries.

Salawazo, et.al.(2017) investigated "Analysis of Students' Vocabulary In Leaning English'' the purpose of this study was to analyze students' vocabulary in learning English of Ninth grade at SMP Swasta Yayasan Pangeran Antasari, Medan in the academic year of (2018/2019). The researchers used descriptive qualitative method and collected data by using a questionnaire and a vocabulary comprehension test . In analyzing the data, the researchers identified the difficulties the students encounter in vocabulary and the causes of these difficulties . The results of the study showed that students face difficulties in pronouncing the words, grammatical forms ,in addition, the students do not pay attention to study English words and forget words easily.

Sriwahyuningsih (2019) probed "Students' Problems in Vocabulary Mastery at English Department of UPTK PADANG''. The purpose of this study was to find out the students' problems in vocabulary mastery. The researcher collected the data by using a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire proved that students have different opinions about their ability in vocabulary mastery.

Elttayef and Hussein (2017) studied "The Difficulties that Teachers Face in Teaching English Vocabulary to the Arab Learners". The study argued that EFL learners have insufficient basic knowledge of vocabulary, in addition, it pointed out lack of attention on the part of the teachers in highlighting the significance of English in classrooms. It also asserted that the teachers' role in teaching English should be doubled because their students depend on them with the expectations that they would make students learn English soon. This study claimed that the socio-cultural background also affects teaching English to the Arab learners who attend English classes mostly to pass the courses. The researchers argued that with this weak background, students find difficulties later at college and universities when they engage themselves in specialized courses. This study concluded that EFL learners encountered difficulties in practicing other language skills such as listening, speaking, and highlighted problems related to teachers and curricular.

14. Data Analysis and Discussion

In this study a diagnostic vocabulary test was given to (30) Sudanese university second year students to collect the data, the main purpose of this test was to investigate vocabulary difficulties that the students encounter .

Hypotheses of the study:

1.Most EFL Sudanese university students face some difficulties with English vocabulary.

2.EFL Sudanese university students perform poorly when they are asked to do exercises based on vocabulary skills.

Table No. (1) The frequency distribution for the respondents' answers of overall diagnostic vocabulary test.

Answers	Frequencies	Percentage
Pass	9	30%
Fail	21	70%
Total	30	100%
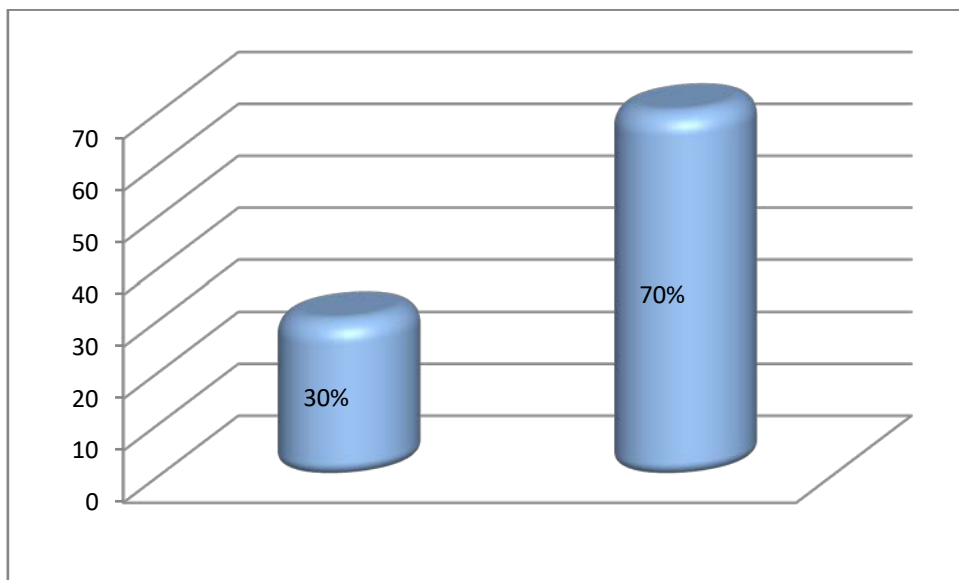
The above table shows the summary of the results of the study of the overall vocabulary test, it's clear that the percentage of students who failed the test is far greater than the percentage of students who passed the test (30%) and (70%) respectively.

Table (2) one sample T-TEST for the overall vocabulary test:

Sections	No.	SD	t-value	DF	P-value
1	30	7.2	11	29	0.00
2	30	9.81	17	29	0.00
For all	30	8.03	15	29	0.00

The calculated value of T -TEST for the significance of the differences for the respondents' answers in the overall test was (15) which is greater than the tabulated value of T -TEST at the degree of freedom (29) and the significant value level (0.05%) which was (6.54). This indicates that, there are statistically significant differences at the level (0.05 %) among the

answers of the respondents. On the basis of these findings we can conclude that the hypotheses of this study are verified.

15. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study revealed that the highest percentage of the students faces the following serious vocabulary problems:

- EFL Sudanese university students face some difficulties with the form, spelling system and pronunciation of English vocabulary, in addition, they are unaware of sense relations between words ,students do not know how to use English vocabulary ,furthermore, some students face some difficulties in understanding the meanings of words , contexts in which words are used ,and part of speech of the words. Therefore, they would not be able to use vocabulary properly.

-Moreover , the students do not know how English words collocate with each others to form compound words and they do not know how to write the compound words.

-They were unable to infer meanings of unfamiliar words and make predictions using their personal knowledge and experience.

-They lack knowledge of contextual and cultural aspects of English and face problems when they are asked to brain storm vocabulary.

-   They have poor awareness of the importance of   English vocabulary.

- They face the problem of lack of concentration.

 Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following points:

- Students should be exposed to English words repeatedly in multiple contexts in order to learn new vocabulary items.

- Teachers should understand the importance of vocabulary if they want their students to achieve academic success in the language learning process.

- The grammar of a new item should be taught as it is important to provide learners with grammatical restriction of words.

- Knowledge of collocational appropriateness is part of vocabulary competence and fluency that students need to be aware of.

- Classifying and categorizing exercises are useful ways to reinforce students understanding of English vocabulary.

- Teaching vocabulary in contexts is more helpful to learners, and putting the new English words within a text makes the learners manipulate the meaning of the new words.

- In teaching vocabulary the teacher should use some techniques of vocabulary teaching such as demonstration, explanation, discovery, quick questions and presentations.

- While dealing with vocabulary the teacher should take into account three important aspects of words -their form, their meaning and their distribution; he/she should consider various kinds of classes of words in the function of the language as the forms , meaning distribution and classification of words differences lead to vocabulary problem teaching.

-It is also important to help students make associations between the vocabulary words they are learning and their prior knowledge as it is essential to relate new words to experiences that students may have had.

- Vocabulary instructions must be formalized, structured, and related in a meaningful way to the content that students are learning.

- Having students brainstorm, categorize, organize, and analyze words help them in understanding the meaning of the words in relation to other words.

-To develop students' vocabulary skills there are certain effective ways that EFL teachers should adopt such as the strategy of possible sentences, knowledge rating, using literature , context strategy ,semantic cues, and semantical analysis .

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