

Difficulties in learning English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar

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Abstract

The research entitled “Difficulties in learning English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar.” This comprises two objectives: 1) to study the difficulties in learning English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar, and 2) to find out the solutions to the difficulties English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar. This is qualitative research. The research tools were questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The population 96 included 80 Grade 12 students and five key informants from the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

The findings revealed that students faced significant difficulties in learning English vocabulary, particularly in spelling, pronunciation, retention, and active usage. The most pressing challenges were limited access to English resources, rare use of English outside the classroom, and over-reliance on rote memorization. Teachers identified contextual, pedagogical, and environmental factors as key contributors to these difficulties

The suggestion was that vocabulary instruction should be more contextualized, interactive, and strategy-based, supported by improved access to learning resources, teacher training, and the promotion of a conducive English-learning environment both inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords: English Vocabulary; Vocabulary-Learning Difficulties; Myanmar High School Students; Vocabulary Learning Strategies; EFL Learners

Introduction

Nowadays, English is the most important language for everybody because it is an international language. Most people in many countries speak English to communicate with other people who are foreigners. In learning English, there are language skill components and language roles that have to be mastered. Vocabulary is one of the knowledge areas of language. Vocabulary plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Alqahtani, 2015).

Developing learners' vocabulary is an important part of their language development. Vocabulary knowledge helps people use the language, and in turn, the use of language increases vocabulary knowledge. Carter (2001). If students cannot learn more vocabulary, they will have a hard time understanding the language, especially when learning to speak, listen, and read.

Vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. Without an adequate vocabulary, people cannot express themselves effectively, either orally or in writing. The more vocabulary, the better. Das (2018) The more proficient students become in speaking, writing, reading, and listening, the more problems they will encounter, especially in vocabulary and writing. Yilmaz and Kavanoz (2025). Vocabulary is important in English. Therefore, in university, vocabulary is a compulsory subject in English learning courses. Students cannot speak, write, listen, and read the reading texts when they do not have enough vocabulary to understand them. Therefore, students should master vocabulary (Andriani & Sriwahyuningsih, 2019).

Vocabulary is the total number of words that people know and use in language activities and is a central component of language (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Vocabulary is essential for developing reading, writing, and listening skills (Cameron, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015). Students have a good grasp of vocabulary, but there are also some difficulties in some aspects of grammar and spelling. Students still have many problems or difficulties in vocabulary mastery. Most of the students have difficulties with grammar, understanding the meaning of words, spelling, and translating (Salawazo et al., 2020).

In the Myanmar context, English holds special significance due to historical, educational, and socio-economic reasons. Since Myanmar's independence, English has been used as a medium of instruction at different periods and continues to be a core subject in the national curriculum. Proficiency in English remains a key requirement for university admission, civil service examinations, and professional advancement. However, despite its importance, the English proficiency level of Myanmar students remains relatively low, especially in areas such as Aungmye Township. This is often attributed to limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of resources, and reliance on teacher-centered methodologies (Kyaw, 2008).

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the specific difficulties faced by students in learning English vocabulary at the Government High School in Aungmye Township. By identifying the underlying learner-related, teacher-related, and environment-related factors that contribute to these challenges, the research aims to provide insights for improving vocabulary teaching and learning strategies.

Research Objectives

1. To study the difficulties in learning English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aungmye Township, Myanmar.
 2. To find out the solutions to the difficulties English vocabulary of students at the Government High School in Aungmye Township, Myanmar.
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Research Methodology

Key Informants

1. Students: The population is 96 grade 12 students. The sample is 80 grade 12 students selected by simple random sampling method. They are studying at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar.

2. Teachers: The five key informants of this study were five teachers who were teaching English at the school. All five teachers were female with teaching experience ranging from 8 to 15 years and qualifications including B.A., B.Ed., M.A., and M.Ed. degrees in English-related fields. The selection criteria for students included enrolment in Grade 12 and willingness to participate in the study.

Research Tools

1. Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was developed based on a review of relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of four parts: (1) demographic information of respondents, (2) difficulties in learning English vocabulary (11 items), (3) vocabulary learning strategies used by students (11 items), and (4) open-ended questions for suggestions. Items were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

2. In-depth Interview: A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for English teachers, consisting of five open-ended questions exploring: (1) primary difficulties in teaching English vocabulary, (2) current student strategies and their effectiveness, (3) best teaching methods for vocabulary, (4) role of fun activities in vocabulary learning, and (5) suggestions for improving vocabulary instruction. The protocol was piloted with one teacher to refine question clarity and timing.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted from January 2025 to March 2026. For the quantitative phase, questionnaires were distributed to 80 Grade 12 students during regular class hours with the assistance of English teachers. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately, achieving a 100% response rate. For the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with five English teachers on February 10, 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting at the school to ensure confidentiality and minimize distractions. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The interpretation of mean scores followed these criteria: 4.50-5.00 = Very High, 3.50-4.49 = High, 2.50-3.49 = Moderate, 1.50-2.49 = Low, and 1.00-1.49 = Very Low. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following the systematic procedures of coding, category development, and theme identification. Member checking was employed to verify the accuracy of interpreted responses with participants.

Result

1. Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

The first objective was to examine the difficulties in learning English vocabulary among students at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar. Ten statements were included in the questionnaire. The descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation, are presented in

Table 1 Students' Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level
1	I find it difficult to remember new English words.	4.20	0.80	High
2	I quickly forget the meaning of words I have learned.	4.10	0.80	High
3	I find it hard to pronounce English words correctly.	4.40	0.70	High
4	I find it hard to memorize new English words.	4.30	0.80	High
5	I get confused between words that sound similar (e.g., “walk” and “work”).	3.90	1.00	High
6	English spelling is difficult for me.	4.50	0.70	High
7	I struggle to use new words in speaking or writing.	4.20	0.80	High
8	I have difficulty understanding words in reading texts.	3.80	1.00	High
9	I rarely use English outside the classroom.	4.60	0.60	Very High
10	I do not have access to English books or media.	4.50	0.70	Very High
Overall		4.20	0.80	High

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score for students' reported difficulties in learning English vocabulary was $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.80$), indicating a high level of difficulty. The highest mean score was reported for the statement “I rarely use English outside the classroom” ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.60$), followed by “I do not have access to English books or media” ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.70$). Both items were classified as very high.

The statement concerning English spelling had a mean score of $M = 4.50$ ($SD = 0.70$), followed by difficulty pronouncing English words correctly ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.70$). Difficulty memorizing new English words had a mean score of $M = 4.30$ ($SD = 0.80$). Difficulty remembering new English words and difficulty using new words in speaking or writing each had a mean score of $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.80$). Forgetting the meaning of previously learned words had a mean score of $M = 4.10$ ($SD = 0.80$).

Confusion between similar-sounding English words had a mean score of $M = 3.90$ ($SD = 1.00$), while difficulty understanding words in reading texts had the lowest mean score, at $M = 3.80$ ($SD = 1.00$). Both items were classified as high.

The teacher interviews also identified several difficulties related to students' English vocabulary learning. Teachers reported difficulties involving spelling, pronunciation,



memorization, vocabulary use, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and limited access to English learning resources. Teachers also reported the use of translation and first-language references when students learned new vocabulary.

Overall, the questionnaire results indicated that students experienced a high level of difficulty in learning English vocabulary, with an overall mean of $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.80$).

2. Strategies for Addressing Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

The second objective was to identify strategies used by students to address difficulties in learning English vocabulary at the Government High School in Aunglan Township, Myanmar. Ten statements were included in the questionnaire. The descriptive statistics for each statement are presented in Table

Table 2 Students' Strategies for Learning English Vocabulary

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level
1	I write down new words in a notebook with meanings and example sentences.	3.90	1.10	High
2	I use a dictionary (book or app) to look up new words.	3.40	1.20	Moderate
3	I try to guess meanings from context.	3.10	1.20	Moderate
4	I repeat or write new words several times to remember them.	4.30	0.80	High
5	I watch English movies, YouTube videos, or listen to music.	2.80	1.30	Moderate
6	I try to use new words in conversation or writing.	3.00	1.20	Moderate
7	I connect new English words to words in my language or mental images.	3.70	1.10	High
8	I read English books, magazines, or online news.	2.60	1.30	Moderate
9	I study vocabulary with friends or in groups.	2.90	1.30	Moderate
10	I ask teachers for help when I do not understand a word.	3.80	1.00	High
Overall		3.30	1.10	Moderate

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

As shown in Table 2, the overall mean score for students' reported vocabulary-learning strategies was $M = 3.30$ ($SD = 1.10$), indicating a moderate level of use.

The highest mean score was reported for repeating or writing new words several times to remember them ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.80$), followed by writing new words in a notebook with meanings and example sentences ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.10$). Asking teachers for help when students did not understand a word had a mean score of $M = 3.80$ ($SD = 1.00$), while connecting new English words to words in the students' language or to mental images had a mean score of $M = 3.70$ ($SD = 1.10$). These four strategies were classified as high.

The use of a dictionary, either in book or application form, had a mean score of $M = 3.40$ ($SD = 1.20$). Guessing word meanings from context had a mean score of $M = 3.10$ ($SD = 1.20$), while using new words in conversation or writing had a mean score of $M = 3.00$ ($SD = 1.20$). Studying vocabulary with friends or in groups had a mean score of $M = 2.90$ ($SD = 1.30$). Watching English

movies or YouTube videos and listening to English music had a mean score of $M = 2.80$ ($SD = 1.30$). Reading English books, magazines, or online news had the lowest mean score, at $M = 2.60$ ($SD = 1.30$). These six strategies were classified as moderate.

The teacher interviews further indicated that students experienced difficulties in spelling, pronunciation, memorization, and transferring vocabulary knowledge into speaking and writing. Teachers also reported limited access to English learning resources and limited opportunities for students to use English outside the classroom.

Overall, students reported using vocabulary-learning strategies at a moderate level, with an overall mean of $M = 3.30$ ($SD = 1.10$). The most frequently reported strategy was repeating or writing new words several times to remember them, whereas reading English books, magazines, or online news was the least frequently reported strategy.

Discussion

1. Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

The findings revealed that students experienced a high level of difficulty in learning English vocabulary, with an overall mean of $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.80$). The most highly rated difficulties were related to limited use of English outside the classroom, limited access to English books or media, spelling, pronunciation, memorization, and the use of newly learned vocabulary in speaking and writing. These findings suggest that students experienced difficulties across several aspects of vocabulary knowledge, including the recognition, retention, pronunciation, and productive use of English words.

The finding concerning pronunciation difficulties is consistent with Khamkhien's (2010) study of Thai learners of English. Khamkhien examined learners' pronunciation competence, particularly their ability to assign English word stress, and reported limitations in English pronunciation competence among the participants. Although the participants and focus of the two studies were different, the similarity in the pronunciation finding indicates that English phonological features can present challenges for learners in EFL contexts.

The present finding that students experienced difficulty using newly learned vocabulary in speaking and writing is consistent with Laufer's (1998) investigation of passive, controlled active, and free active vocabulary knowledge. Laufer found that passive vocabulary developed more strongly than controlled active vocabulary, while free active vocabulary showed considerably less development. This distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge provides a possible explanation for the present finding that students may learn or recognize new vocabulary but experience greater difficulty using it productively in communication.

Similarly, Laufer and Paribakht (1998) examined the relationship between passive and active vocabulary knowledge among learners of English in different language-learning contexts. Their findings showed that passive vocabulary was larger than controlled active and free active vocabulary, and that active vocabulary, particularly free active vocabulary, developed more slowly and less predictably than passive vocabulary. The present finding concerning students'



difficulty in using new vocabulary in speaking and writing is therefore consistent with the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary development identified in their study.

The difficulty reported in distinguishing between similar-sounding English words is also consistent with Laufer's (1988) study of "synforms," which examined confusion between lexical forms that are similar in their phonological or orthographic features. Laufer demonstrated that similarity between lexical forms can result in confusion during vocabulary learning. The present finding, in which students reported difficulty distinguishing between words such as "walk" and "work," is consistent with this earlier research on lexical-form confusion.

The finding that students rarely used English outside the classroom and had limited access to English books or media is also relevant to the findings of Laufer and Paribakht (1998). Their study demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge develops differently according to the language-learning context and found differences between learners in foreign-language and second-language contexts. In particular, the study found that the gap between passive and active vocabulary was related to the learning context. The present findings similarly highlight the importance of the learning environment in relation to students' opportunities to encounter and use English vocabulary.

The teacher interview findings were generally consistent with the questionnaire results. Teachers identified difficulties related to spelling, pronunciation, memorization, vocabulary use, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and limited access to English learning resources. The agreement between the questionnaire and interview findings provides converging evidence that students' vocabulary-learning difficulties were associated with both linguistic aspects of vocabulary and opportunities for exposure to and use of English.

2. Strategies for Addressing Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

The findings for the second objective showed that students used vocabulary-learning strategies at a moderate level, with an overall mean of $M = 3.30$ ($SD = 1.10$). The most frequently reported strategy was repeating or writing new words several times to remember them ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.80$). This was followed by writing new words in a notebook with meanings and example sentences ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.10$), asking teachers for help when students did not understand a word ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.00$), and connecting new English words to words in the students' language or to mental images ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.10$).

The frequent use of repetition and note-taking is consistent with the broader literature on deliberate vocabulary learning. Sökmen (1997) emphasized the importance of explicit vocabulary learning and the use of multiple techniques to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. The present finding that repetition and recording new words were among the most frequently reported strategies is consistent with this emphasis on deliberate attention to vocabulary form and meaning.

The use of learners' first language and mental associations was also relatively frequent. This finding is consistent with Cohen's (1998) discussion of language-learning strategies, particularly the use of deliberate strategies to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use

of second-language information. In the present study, students' use of first-language associations and mental images may represent attempts to connect newly encountered English vocabulary with information that was already familiar to them.

However, several strategies were reported at only a moderate level. These included guessing meanings from context ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.20$), using new words in conversation or writing ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.20$), studying vocabulary with friends or in groups ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.30$), watching English movies or YouTube videos or listening to English music ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.30$), and reading English books, magazines, or online news ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.30$).

The relatively moderate use of strategies involving productive vocabulary use is consistent with Laufer's (1998) findings concerning differences between passive and active vocabulary knowledge. Laufer found that passive vocabulary developed more strongly than active vocabulary, particularly free active vocabulary. The present study similarly found that students reported relatively limited use of new vocabulary in speaking and writing. This correspondence suggests that students' ability to recognize or remember vocabulary may not necessarily result in equally frequent productive use.

The moderate use of English media and reading materials is also noteworthy in relation to the finding that students rarely used English outside the classroom. Laufer and Paribakht (1998) demonstrated that language-learning context was associated with differences in vocabulary development. In the present study, the relatively limited engagement with English books, online news, videos, and other English media may indicate that students had fewer opportunities to encounter vocabulary in varied contexts. However, because the present study was primarily descriptive, this relationship should be interpreted as an association between the reported findings rather than as a causal relationship.

Overall, the findings are broadly consistent with previous research showing that vocabulary learning involves multiple dimensions, including lexical form, retention, receptive knowledge, productive knowledge, and learning context. The present study further indicates that students relied most frequently on repetition, note-taking, teacher assistance, and associations with existing knowledge, whereas strategies involving extensive reading, English media, peer learning, and productive use of vocabulary were reported less frequently. These findings highlight the importance of considering both the difficulties students experience and the strategies they currently use when interpreting vocabulary learning in the present educational context.

Suggestions

Suggestions for an Application

1. Integrate Contextualized Vocabulary Instruction: Teach words through sentences, stories, and real-life situations. Do not teach words alone. Use reading and speaking activities to help students learn new words.
 2. Promote Active Usage: Give students speaking and writing tasks. Let them use new words in conversations. Use role-plays, storytelling, and group discussions in class.
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3. Teach Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Show students how to use memory tricks, word maps, and context clues. Teach them to use dictionaries and digital tools. Help them learn in different ways, not just by memorizing.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Conduct Longitudinal Studies: Future researchers should study students for several years. They can see if vocabulary programs help students improve over time.

2. Compare Different Learning Methods: Researchers should study which methods work best. They can compare games, debates, group work, and other activities to find the most effective way to learn vocabulary.

3. Investigate the Usage of Technology: More studies should look at how mobile apps, online classes, and videos can help students learn words. This is important for schools with few resources in rural areas.

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