Investigating Vocabulary Learning Challenges Faced by Libyan Students in the English Department at Derna University Al-Qubbah Branch

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Abstract

Vocabulary is one of the basic components of language learning, as it is necessary for achieving fluency in language skills. However, many students struggle with vocabulary learning challenges, which negatively impact their academic performance. The proposed study aims to identify the difficulties faced by English language students in learning vocabulary and to suggest strategies for improvement. This research is based on quantitative research methods using a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using SPSS. Participants were thirty English students at the English Department of Derna University- Al-Qubbah branch- (fifteen from the first year and fifteen from the third year). The questionnaire asked students what strategies they used to learn new English vocabulary. The results indicated that key difficulties reported include short-term memory issues, difficulty with long words, incorrect usage, and lack of practice. The study recommends incorporating visual aids, definitions, drawing, feedback, and group role-play.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Difficulty, English Language Students, Learn Vocabulary.

Introduction

This paper investigates the challenges faced by English majors (undergraduates) in learning vocabulary. 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) maintains that Arab students generally face difficulty in communicating in English due to lack of vocabulary items, methods of teaching, and an unfavorable learning environment. This quantitative study emphasizes the importance of learning target vocabulary, problems encountered by students, and raises

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

their awareness of vocabulary. It also suggests strategies that would enrich students' vocabulary knowledge and minimize their difficulties.

In learning a native language or any foreign language, vocabulary is the most significant component. Language acquisition cannot take place without learning its lexis with unlimited shifts in meaning caused by various contextual variables (Yang & Dai, 2012). Vocabulary is one of the most essential parts, along with phonetics/pronunciation and grammar, required to learn a foreign language (Pan & Xu, 2011). In addition, vocabulary is the basis for language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without learning the vocabulary, it is difficult to attain any language proficiency. Vocabulary is the basis of acquiring a second language. Rohmatillah (2017) asserts that vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language; it is central to communicative competence. Furthermore, limited vocabulary poses severe problems for learners, which consequently impedes the learning of the English language (Alqahtani, 2015). Schmitt (2002) argues that vocabulary plays a vital role in teaching and learning a second language as lexical knowledge is fundamental to communicating effectively.

Human communication depends on the vocabulary that individuals possess and can effectively use. Therefore, without adequate vocabulary knowledge, learners may become demotivated to use the language (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

Background of the Study

Vocabulary is one of the basic components in language learning. It is one of the aspects Necessary for fluency in the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Vocabulary is commonly defined as "all the words known and used by a particular person." Without sufficient vocabulary, all language skills cannot be used effectively in daily life. Vocabulary refers to the set of meaningful linguistic units that a speaker knows, understands, and can use appropriately in different communicative contexts. Another definition is that vocabulary refers to the set of lexical items used by, understood by, or available to a particular person or group for effective

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

IJESA

Vol. (5), No. (1)

January 2026

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

communication. It means vocabulary is all words of a particular language which are understood and used by the speaker of the language. However, to master English vocabulary is challenging for the students. Many students face difficulty in learning vocabulary. This problem simultaneously affects the students' education Novianti (2016).

Statement of the Problem

There are many difficulties faced among Libyan Students in the English Department at Al-Qubbah branch of Derna University. First, students do not frequently use English vocabulary, which results in confusion when using words. Second, students often encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, which prevents them from using these words accurately in sentence construction. Language learning and teaching often lack interactive and engaging vocabulary activities, which negatively affects learners' vocabulary development.

Significance of the Study

The aim of this research is to investigate the difficulties of learning vocabulary among Libyan students, and to find some strategies of teaching activities that help students to increase their English vocabulary, so it allows the students to use more appropriate vocabulary for effective communication. Understanding the meanings of new words helps students to use their English vocabulary more accurately in speaking and writing.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the problems faced by Libyan students learning vocabulary.
2. To find some effective teaching strategies that help students to improve their English vocabulary.

Research Questions

1. What are the problems faced by Libyan students in the English Department at Derna University learning vocabulary?
2. What strategies can help students improve their English vocabulary?

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

Hypotheses

1. Vocabulary knowledge has a positive influence on students' ability to learn English.
2. Students who are taught new vocabulary show significantly higher motivation levels toward learning English than those who are not.

Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to vocabulary learning challenges faced by Libyan students in the English Department at Derna University. Data collection procedures for 30 students were chosen randomly in the First and Third Grades English Department of the University of Derna for 2023-2024. As a result, the outcomes cannot be applied to students from different faculties, universities, or educational levels. Moreover, the research is limited to vocabulary-related difficulties and does not examine other aspects of English language learning such as grammar, pronunciation, or writing skills.

Literature Review

Definition of Vocabulary:

It's impossible to learn a language and not learn its vocabulary. Vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, and without it, learners are simply not able to communicate. Richards and Renandya (2002) not only hold this view but also consider vocabulary a constitutive and central element of language proficiency and skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Hatch and Brown (1995) identify vocabulary as a list or collection of words used by speakers of a particular language. Similarly, Ur (1994) characterizes vocabulary as the specific words that a learner knows and employs in a foreign language. Vocabulary is not composed merely of letters; it is rather the set of significant linguistic units that signified meaning in contexts.

Moreover, Schmitt (1997) concludes that knowing a word means to know its meaning, form, pronunciation, grammatical behavior collocations, frequency, and appropriate use in different contexts. Thus, vocabulary knowledge is a slow process, and it is only

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

through learners encountering words in different situations that the growth takes place (Snow et al., 2005).

Kinds of Vocabulary:

Vocabulary is generally divided into receptive and productive vocabulary.

Receptive Vocabulary:

Receptive vocabulary are words that people can remember and define when they encounter them in reading or listening, but they cannot employ them in communication and writing. According to Webb and Kagimoto (2009), receptive vocabulary includes words that learners understand in context but do not yet produce.

Productive Vocabulary:

Productive vocabulary includes words that people have familiarity with, can articulate correctly, and employ in communication and writing. This type of vocabulary is more in-depth as it looks at the word and its form, meaning, and application. Productive vocabulary is considered an active process because learners use it to express ideas and communicate with others (Webb & Kagimoto, 2009).

The Importance of Vocabulary:

Vocabulary is central to language learning and communication. Zimmerman (as cited in Coady & Huckin, 1998) says that vocabulary is a major factor in language learning since it allows the learners to express the meaning in an effective way. Learners with poor vocabulary knowledge find themselves in a troublesome position concerning communication, no matter how well they know the grammar rules. Knowledge of vocabulary is a prerequisite for fluency in a foreign language. Limited vocabulary learners encounter difficulties in all aspects of communication—reading, listening, speaking, and writing. As Alqahtani (2015) argues, low vocabulary knowledge negatively affects learners' academic performance, particularly in language-related courses.

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

Vocabulary Learning Difficulties:

The process of learning vocabulary in a foreign language proves to be quite difficult for most of the learners. Many students face difficulty in learning vocabulary due to factors like little or no exposure to foreign language, no regular practice, pronunciation issues, and the challenge of remembering new words. According to Farjami and Aidinlou (2013), the case of forgetting the newly acquired words is one of the major issues in vocabulary learning. Students often struggle to store new vocabulary in long-term memory and retrieve it when needed. These difficulties may lead to frustration and reduced motivation among learners.

Review of Previous Studies

This section reviews previous studies related to vocabulary learning difficulties and strategies used by EFL learners.

Rahmawati (2012) conducted a study entitled Problems in English Vocabulary Learning Encountered by the Eighth Grade Students of SMP Negeri 1 Borobudur. The research was aimed at spotting the obstacles in eighth-grade students. The study used a descriptive quantitative method, and the data was collected by means of a vocabulary test consisting of 40 questions with multiple choices. The outcome showed that students had trouble mastering vocabulary as their mean score was 15.59 which indicated that the learners had little vocabulary knowledge.

Similar research conducted by Saengpakdeejit (2014) investigated strategies used by Thai university students to deal with vocabulary learning problems. Qualitative research methodology was adopted, and 63 undergraduate students underwent semi-structured interviews. The study revealed that students used various strategies to discover the meanings of unknown words and retain them in long-term memory, including cognitive, memory, social, and metacognitive strategies.

Impediments to English vocabulary learning and teaching were the focus of research carried out by Farjami and Aidinlou (2013). In their study, it was pointed out that the learners often struggle to keep the new vocabulary in memory, and thus, it was emphasized that teaching strategies play an important role in vocabulary acquisition.

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

IJESA

Vol. (5), No. (1)

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

Chou (2014) did research on the power of games, songs, and stories in bringing up the vocabulary learning of EFL students in Taiwan. The study concluded that these activities not only positively affected the vocabulary mastery but also the quality of motivation of the learners.

Methodology

Research Design:

This research employed a quantitative research method to explore the issues experienced by EFL learners in the process of learning English vocabulary and to identify the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. The quantitative method was chosen as it allows the gathering of numerical data which can be analyzed statistically to disclose the relationships and developments related to vocabulary learning problems. The research design was influenced by the research questions, which aim at revealing shared vocabulary learning problems and efficient learning strategies among students.

Study Sample:

The study sample consisted of first- and third-year students of the English Department, at the University of Derna, Al-Qubbah Branch. The total population included 29 students in one first-year class and 19 students in one third-year class. A random sample of 30 students, consisting of 15 students from each year, was drawn from this population.

The gender composition of the participants was 9 males and 21 females. The participants' ages were between 19 and above 25 years. Most of the participants (20 students) were in the age group of 19-22 years, 9 students were between 22 and 24 years, and only one student was 25 years old or older.

Instruments:

For this study, two instruments were used for collecting data.

The first one was a demographic questionnaire which aimed at gathering the background details like age, sex and duration of studying English as a second language.

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

IJESA

Vol. (5), No. (1)

January 2026

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

The second one was the questionnaire for vocabulary learning strategies, which was adapted from Sukpinit (2018) and named A Survey of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Thai Graduate EFL Learners. The instrument encompassed 35 items. Two response formats were applied in this study:

- Yes / No
- Agree / Disagree

The questionnaire was modified to match the context of EFL learners in Libya, while the original source was credited and referred to all through the study, as it was stipulated.

Data Collection Procedures:

Data was gathered during the academic semester by passing out the questionnaires to the chosen participants. The questionnaires were filled out personally. Students were informed about the reason for the study and gave the assurance that their answers would be secret and only for academic purposes. The questionnaires were collected after filling them up and were sent for analysis.

Data Analysis:

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the gathered data. Frequencies and percentages, among other descriptive statistics, were utilized to dissect students' reactions. The findings were displayed in tables and figures to make the interpretation easier and clearer.

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of the demographic questionnaire:

Before highlighting the findings, a description of the respondents who participated in the study is necessary to be analyzed. The details of the participants' demographics are presented in this section.

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

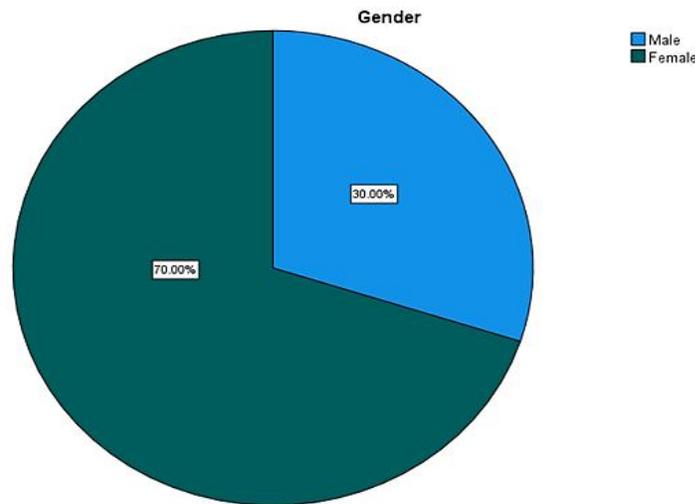## Participants gender distribution:

Figure 1.

Number of female students is higher than male students. The percentage of female students is 70% while male students are 30%.

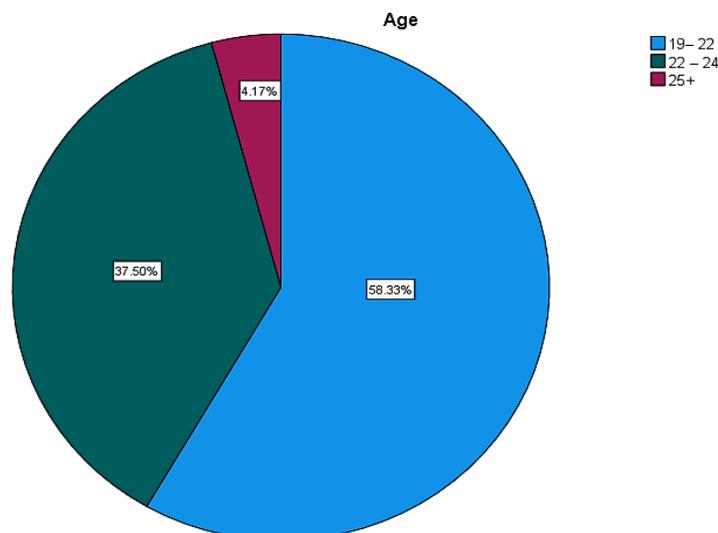## Distribution of participants according to age:

Figure 2

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

The participants' ages ranged from 19 to over 25 years. The majority of students (66.7%) were between 19 and 22 years, 30% were aged between 22 and 24 years, and 3.3% were aged 25 years or older.

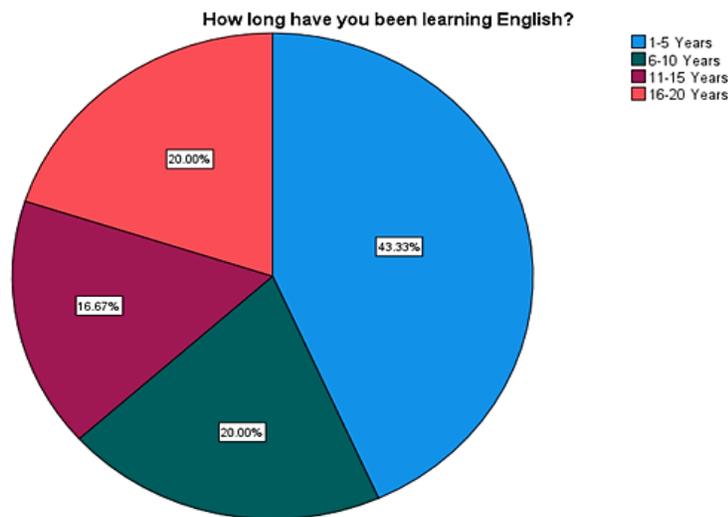**Distribution of participants according to the duration of learning English:**

Figure3

Vocabulary Learning Problems:

Number	Find out whether students face problems in learning vocabulary	Yes	No
1	Do you feel you have a limited vocabulary?	66.7%	33.3%
2	Do you make spelling errors?	53.3%	46.7%
3	Do you lack regular vocabulary practice?	50%	50%
4	Do you have the inability to use words correctly?	30%	70%
5	Do you find it difficult to deal with long words?	56.7%	43.3%
6	Do you have difficulty reading?	43.3%	56.7%
7	Do you struggle with short-term memory when reading vocabulary?	73.3%	26.7%
8	Do you find it difficult to understand the meaning of Words or vocabulary?	63.3%	36.7%
9	Do you have a pronunciation problem?	70%	30%
10	Do you find it difficult to learn vocabulary?	46.7%	53.3%

The researchers found that the students lack knowledge of words. They also found that 66.7% of them suffer from a lack of vocabulary, 53.3% of them have spelling errors and pronunciation problems, 50% lack regular vocabulary practices, and 30% do not have the ability to use words correctly. 56 7% have an inability to read long words, 43.3% have difficulty reading, 73.3% have short-term memory while reading words or vocabulary, 63.3% have difficulty understanding the meaning of words or vocabulary, and 70% have a problem with pronunciation. And 46.7% find it difficult to learn vocabulary.

It has been found that students suffer from a lack of vocabulary, and researchers have noticed it clear this is due to not teaching properly or not using correct strategies to teach vocabulary. This conclusion is drawn from the high percentage of students reporting difficulties (e.g., 70% with pronunciation problems, 73.3% with short-term memory issues), which suggests a systemic issue in the learning process. It was found that the most common problem faced by students in learning vocabulary is its pronunciation. This is, according to Ely (1989) and Pennell, Rothlin, and Hurley (1996), and this is the problem.

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

Vocabulary Learning Strategies:

Number	Strategy that helps students improve their vocabulary	Agree	Disagree
1	I use bilingual dictionary?	60%	40%
2	I ask the teacher for L1 translation?	53.3%	46.7%
3	I connect word to its synonyms and antonyms?	76.7%	23.3%
4	I use the new word in sentences?	83.3%	16.7%
5	I group words together to study them ask the teacher for a synonym of a new word?	66.7%	33.3%
6	I ask the teacher for a sentence including the new word?	63.3%	36.7%
7	I say the new word aloud when studying?	66.7%	33.3%
8	I remember the part of speech?	60%	40%
9	I ask classmates for meaning?	60%	40%
10	I use physical action when learning a word?	60%	40%
11	I use verbal repetition?	66.7%	33.3%
12	I use written repetition?	70%	30%
13	I study word lists?	70%	30%
14	I use flashcards?	53.3%	46.7%
15	I keep a vocabulary notebook?	70%	30%
16	I listen to English songs?	76.7%	23.3%
17	I watch and listen to English news?	70%	30%
18	I read English newspapers?	80%	20
19	I watch English movies and TV programs?	70%	30%
20	I browse through English language websites?	63.3%	36.7%
21	I chat using English on the Internet?	56.7%	43.3%
22	I study the spelling of a word?	70%	30%
23	I put words that sound similar together in order to remember them?	70%	30%
24	I make vocabulary cards and take them with	60%	40%

The researchers found that some strategies can help students improve and increase their vocabulary in the English language. 60% chose to use a bilingual dictionary, 53.3% chose to ask the teacher to translate L1, and 76.7% chose to associate a word with its vocabulary and its antonyms.83.3% chose to use new words in sentences, 66.7% chose to combine words together so that I could learn them, 63.3% chose to ask the teacher to teach new words,66.7% chose to pronounce new words out loud when you studied them, 60% chose to remember parts of speech, and 60% chose to ask classmates about the meanings.60% chose the physical verb when learning a new word, 66.7% chose to

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (5), No. (1)

IJESA

January 2026

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

use verbal repetition, and some of them chose to use written repetition at a rate of 70%. And 70% chose to study word lists. 53.3% chose to use flashcards, 70% chose to keep a vocabulary notebook, 67.7% chose to listen to English songs, and some of them, at a rate of 70%, chose to listen to news in English.80% chose to read English newspapers, 70% chose to watch movies and television programs in English, 63.3% chose to browse the website in English, and 56.7% chose to chat in English on the Internet. 70% chose to spell the words, 70% chose to put similar words together so that they could be remembered, and 60% chose to make vocabulary cards and take them with me wherever I go.

I suggested some strategies to improve their vocabulary, and some students preferred to read newspapers or magazines in English by 80%. Vidal (2003) also found that acquiring new vocabulary in the English language by listening to foreign songs and listening to news in English in this way can be considered a source of vocabulary acquisition. In short, using recorders. 66.7% of the students agreed that they had the opportunity to pronounce new words correctly. While 33.3% of students did not agree to this. Pronunciation of the new word out loud is very useful. According to Al Rashdi and Mehta (2023) When learners read words, it makes them recognize them.

The word also improves learners' pronunciation. For example, one of A teacher at Shuhada Abu Rwaya Secondary School asks one of her students to do this Reading the word, if the student makes a mistake in pronouncing the word The teacher corrects it immediately and asks the students to repeat it after her. 66.7% of students agree that synonyms or new words are used in sentences. While 33.3% of students do not agree to use Synonyms in sentences, while it is a very good way to learn new vocabulary. Like Pavičić Takač (2003) claimed that synonyms can be used in sentences to help the student acquire them. In addition, Laufer (2002) mentions that learning words or vocabulary is of great importance. Also, teachers should use synonyms in sentences if the student does not understand the meaning of the new vocabulary, and using sentences simplifies the process of learning new vocabulary.

Discussion

The main goal of the study was to determine the difficulties experienced by students of English language at Al-Qubbah Branch regarding vocabulary and to point out the techniques that the students use to tackle these problems. The results obtained from this study were in line with the earlier research works, such as Afzal (2019), which also employed the quantitative method to investigate the issues related to learning vocabulary.

It has been revealed by the researchers that numerous strategies are available to students which facilitate their language learning process. This study, to a certain extent, relied on the quantitative methods for its confirmation. This study is consistent with a study conducted by Afzal (2019) which dealt with the vocabulary learning problems of students at the Bachelor of English Language (University Education Level PSAU) in Saudi Arabia. The quantitative procedure was adopted for this study. The purposive study sample consisted of 40 participants understanding the types of difficulties they face while learning words. The data of this research was quantitatively analyzed by a questionnaire.

The findings indicated that the predominant difficulties encountered by the students are limited vocabulary, spelling errors and incorrect pronunciation, irregularity in vocab. practices which result in inability to use words appropriately, inability to split long words, poor reading comprehension, and thus short memory while reading words or vocab. The difficulties that they face in understanding the meaning of words or vocab. and in pronunciation were also highlighted in the results. Furthermore, it was observed that the lack of regularity and interest in vocab. learning was another factor contributing to these findings. The study recommends effective strategies for learning vocab. through being informed.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the difficulties faced by students in learning vocabulary were different. Most students have short-term memory difficulties while reading words, difficulty facing long words, inability to use words correctly, and lack of regular

International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

IJESA

Vol. (5), No. (1)

January 2026

الإصدار (5)، العدد (1)

practice. Therefore, students should be encouraged to look for ways to find the most useful to extend and maintain their vocabulary by using pictures, giving definitions, drawing, and giving feedback. In addition, learning in pairs or in groups as a role-playing activity was created to teach vocabulary effectively, Students should use these strategies to facilitate the vocabulary learning process.

Suggestions for further study

The data of this research was quantitatively analyzed by a questionnaire. The following study may use additional data analysis methods. Hopefully, this study will raise awareness in students, highlight the importance of learning vocabulary, and motivate the students to overcome their problems by following the proposed strategies. This study also recommends that English teachers and students should work together and find all possible means that can facilitate the students to enrich their vocabulary knowledge.

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