

Original Research Article

A Study of Grade Six Students' Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary in Wangduephodrang District Bhutan

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is the fundamental understanding of a language that determines the quality of a learner's speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Students can readily understand the material presented by the teacher if they have mastered vocabulary. Language skills are built on a foundation of vocabulary. It is difficult to achieve any level of language fluency without understanding the vocabulary. Despite the fact that vocabulary is the foundation for learning a second language, there has been little or no research done in Bhutan. To close this gap, this study assesses the challenges that sixth-grade students in Wangduephodrang district experience in learning English vocabulary and to suggest techniques for reducing students' difficulties in acquiring English vocabulary. This study used a questionnaire to survey problems and obstacles found by the grade six students who studied English. The questionnaire consists of eight questions and the students were instructed to complete it by rating their problems accordingly. The questions assessed the participants' difficulties in the learning vocabulary on a five-point Likert scales. As a result, the questions were tabulated and for the numerical interpretation of data, frequency and percentage were used to indicate their extent of agreement. The research was carried out in Wangduephodrang district of Bhutan for a duration of one year. This quantitative study uses a questionnaire, as an instrument, to collect the data. The participants were 312 students in grades six from a variety of schools in the academic year 2021. Simple random sampling was used to select the participants. The findings show that students in grade six have a variety of difficulties learning vocabulary, including understanding the meanings of new words, pronouncing new words correctly, recalling and writing new vocabulary. The students' difficulties stemmed from the fact that English is still a foreign language in their environments.

Keywords: English, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary-learning problems, vocabulary-learning strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The language learners must enrich their word-repository and develop linguistic repertoire by enhancing vocabulary. However, vocabulary-learning is challenging, particularly, for the non-native speakers of English who face problems relating to the meanings of new words, spelling, pronunciation, correct use of words, guessing meaning through the context and so on. The reasons for such difficulties can be multifaceted. Some studies in Bhutanese schools, for example, have shown problematic methods in English teaching and learning. Rote learning and memorizing are still commonly used, especially in primary schools, according to my observations over the last 14 years. Many teachers continue to utilize outmoded 'chalk-and-talk' teaching methodologies despite widespread reform initiatives in the fields of curriculum and textbook creation, as well as teacher training, including for the teaching-learning of English. The Royal Education Council supports the need for a shift

toward more modern teaching-learning practices. English is required of all students in Bhutan, not just as one of the core topics but also as the medium of teaching for other disciplines (1). Therefore, due to reports that there is widespread concern over a perceived fall in the standard of English and despite some deficiencies in teaching and learning strategies, the demand for English in Bhutan has dramatically increased. Bhutan's aim to be part of an increasingly globalized world is closely tied to its use of English as the medium of instruction in its education system. As noted in (2) English is seen as the most advantageous language to assist Bhutan in the articulation of its identity, the modernization of its outlook and interactions with the international community. English will enhance Bhutan's capacity to participate more effectively and purposefully in the global community.

Individuals must do tasks that require fluency in the English language, as demonstrated by evidence that the English language serves as a tool for employability, international mobility, unlocking growth opportunities, and serving as a neutral language(3). As a result, students must master vocabulary in order to demonstrate that they are proficient English speakers. Similarly, teachers face a difficult task in meeting the demands of their pupils and ensuring that they learn terminology in an engaging manner. As a result, it's critical to identify students' vocabulary-learning issues, propose vocabulary-learning strategies that can improve students' knowledge of the target vocabulary, and provide opportunities for them to learn new terms.

The theory of social constructivism will be used to address the research objectives. Individuals construct knowledge through social interaction, according to social constructivism. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) defined by Vygotsky is central to social constructivism, and it relates to the gap between what one can do individually and what one can comprehend with the support of a more informed or skilled person (4). As a result, this study emphasizes the social and interactive element of learning, claiming that the teacher's scaffolding aids in the acquisition of new vocabulary.

This research investigates the difficulties that students in Wangduephodrang district faced with learning vocabulary. In fact, the learners' capacity to communicate successfully is dependent on their ability to grow their vocabulary throughout their lives. Despite the fact that English is used to teach the majority of subjects in Bhutanese schools, many students find oral fluency in the language to be a difficult aim to accomplish. As a result, students are unable to effectively use English for thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, and social interaction(5). Additionally, Bhutanese students struggle to communicate in English due to a lack of vocabulary, ineffective teaching techniques, and an inappropriate learning environment(5). This quantitative study underlines the necessity of acquiring target vocabulary, attracts students' attention to it, reveals student issues, and enhances their vocabulary awareness.

Vocabulary is the fundamental understanding of a language that determines the quality of a learner's speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Vocabulary is defined as the knowledge of meanings of words (6) and additionally the term of vocabulary refers to a list or set of words for particular language or a list of words that individual speakers of language use (7) and also its the words we need to know to communicate effectively; words in speaking and words in listening (8). Students can readily understand the material presented by the teacher if they have mastered vocabulary. Individuals who lack a sufficient vocabulary are unable to adequately explain and categorize their feelings both verbally and in writing(9). Not only does having a large and wide vocabulary help students understand oral and written discourse, but it also helps them express their feelings and thoughts more clearly in discussions and writing(10). The more language people master, the more they will be able to speak, write, read, and listen as they wish.

In language teaching, vocabulary has received significant attention, particularly in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Because the four language abilities of reading, listening, speaking, and writing all require basic vocabulary knowledge, it can also be considered the most significant component for language learners. Although, learning words is not a spontaneous process, the students have to face several steps as the required processes. Students needed to employ specific strategies to master English skills including vocabularies (11). For second language learners, vocabulary is crucial since they can only successfully express their ideas in both oral and written form if they have a large enough vocabulary. As a result, students should have a strong understanding of how to enhance their vocabulary in order to increase their motivation to learn the language. Despite the fact that vocabulary is the foundation for learning a second language, there has been little or no research done in Bhutan. To close this gap this research report is to provide answers to the following questions.

1. What are the difficulties that Wangduephodrang district grade six students experience in learning English vocabulary?
2. What approaches may be used to reduce students' difficulties learning English vocabulary?

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in Wangduephodrang district of Bhutan. The participants were 312 students in grades six from a variety of schools in the academic year 2021. Simple random sampling was used to select the participants. The participants that were selected formally agreed to take part in the study as respondents and received an informed consent from respective principals. All of the students were also told that their identities would be kept anonymous.

This study used a questionnaire to survey problems and obstacles found by the grade six students who studied English subject and other general subjects in English as a medium of instruction. The questionnaire consists of eight questions and the students were instructed to complete it by rating their problems accordingly. The questions were presented with exactly the same wording and in the same order to all respondents. The questions assessed the participants difficulties in the learning vocabulary on a five-point Likert scales. As a result, the questions were tabulated and for the numerical interpretation of data, frequency and percentage were used to indicate their extent of agreement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's primary objective was to examine at the students' vocabulary-learning challenges and find solutions to help them overcome them.

According to the findings (see Table 1), students in grade six in Wangduephodrang district primary schools had difficulty "Learning Meaning of New Words." This questionnaire item had a good response from 60.5 percent of participants (strongly agree 9.9 percent and agree 50.6 percent). This problem elicited a negative response from 18% of the participants (strongly disagree 2.9 percent and disagree 15.1 percent).

The data clearly shows that students had difficulty learning new terms and remembering their meanings. It's been proven that vocabulary and prior knowledge are inextricably linked (12). As a result, children who have a lot of knowledge or experience in a particular field are more likely to know more terms than those who don't (10). Foreign language learners can also actively learn the meanings of new words by adopting deliberate vocabulary acquisition procedures and contextual hints for the production of new word meanings (13).

Table 1. I have a problem learning meaning of words.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	31	9.9	9.9
Agree	158	50.6	50.6
Undecided	67	21.5	21.5
Disagree	47	15.1	15.1
Strongly disagree	9	2.9	2.9
Total	312	100	100

Most spoken languages, particularly those used in face-to-face conversations, have a fewer and more limited vocabulary than written languages. For students studying English, the disparities between spoken and written English might be problematic. Table 2 shows that Wangduephodrang district grade six students also struggled in "Using New Vocabulary in Speaking or Writing." The problem was reflected in the large number of affirmative replies, with 40.1 percent agreeing and 10.3 percent strongly agreeing. However, 25.9% of those respondents said they didn't agree.

Because vocabulary is made up of the words that learners need to communicate (8) they must practice using it successfully in both speaking and writing. Not only does having a large and wide vocabulary help students understand oral and written discourse, but it also helps them express their feelings and thoughts more clearly in discussions and writing(10). Students should have opportunities to see and hear new words often through various activities in order to improve their vocabulary. Otherwise, they are likely to lose them.

Table 2. I have a problem using new vocabulary in speaking or writing.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	32	10.3	10.3
Agree	125	40.1	40.1
Undecided	74	23.7	23.7

Disagree	75	24	24
Strongly disagree	6	1.9	1.9
Total	312	100	100

According to the findings (Refer Table 3), 62.2 percent of the participants reported to having difficulty "Pronouncing New Vocabulary." Only a small percentage of the participants (22.8 percent) disagreed, while the rest were undecided. It's worth noting that vocabulary development is multifaceted, encompassing not only word meanings but also pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical qualities (14). Our students' aural and oral interactions benefit from providing pronunciation instruction in conjunction with vocabulary-focused learning activities(15). As a result, in order to improve students' abilities in studying vocabulary and pronunciation, teachers should consider a variety of strategies to help them better absorb and pronounce the terminology; otherwise, incorrect pronunciation is unsurprisingly caused by a lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language(9).

Table 3. I have a problem pronouncing new vocabulary.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	38	12.2	12.2
Agree	156	50	50
Undecided	47	15.1	15.1
Disagree	57	18.3	18.3
Strongly disagree	14	4.5	4.5
Total	312	100	100

A majority of the students (56.4%) thought that "Spelling New Vocabulary" was difficult for them (Refer Table 4). On the other hand, 18.9% of those polled were indecisive, and 24.7 percent replied negatively. The students must concentrate on how words appear (spelling) and how they sound (pronunciation). Errors typically occur when students fail to recognize a sound-spelling mismatch, resulting in word-learning difficulties. For children to be able to express themselves, they must be able to spell. Consequently, If a child is able to spell, recognize, and use a word in the proper format written and verbally, then the child has mastered that word(16).

Table 4. I have problem spelling new vocabulary.

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
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Strongly agree	44	14.1	14.1
Agree	132	42.3	42.3
Undecided	59	18.9	18.9
Disagree	68	21.8	21.8
Strongly disagree	9	2.9	2.9
Total	312	100	100

The results indicated that the majority of the participants (62.1 percent) replied positively, 21.8 percent (Refer Table 5) remained indecisive, and a small minority of the participants (16.1 percent) responded negatively in response to the problem of "Recognizing New Words." As children become older, they pick up new words on their own, mostly through print. As a result, some studies recommend that practitioners create rich and engaging language learning environments with plenty of opportunity for novel word exposure in written and oral conversation(10).

Table 5. I have problem recognizing new words.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	46	14.7	14.7
Agree	148	47.4	47.4
Undecided	68	21.8	21.8
Disagree	37	11.9	11.9
Strongly disagree	13	4.2	4.2
Total	312	100	100

The findings also show that 57.7% of the participants believed in "Remembering Words without Understanding Meaning" (Refer Table 6). As a result, students in Wangduephodrang district's grade six students tried to study English vocabulary without grasping the meanings that are necessary for text comprehension. The difficulty of the vocabulary, on the other hand, is a signal of a difficult text, and the readers' vocabulary knowledge predicts their comprehension of the text. According to the survey, young students have a hard time deciphering the information in definitions, particularly when it comes to how the word is applied in a phrase. The beneficial association between numerous types of vocabulary

acquisition methodologies and contextual guessing has been noted by certain researchers(14). As a result, vocabulary is critical in first determining the meaning and then communicating it. The importance of vocabulary teaching and developing is enhanced by the direct and close relationship between word and meaning. Teachers should also attempt to demonstrate how using specific vocabulary learning practices might help with vocabulary acquisition.

Table 6. I memorize the words without understanding meaning.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	44	14.1	14.1
Agree	136	43.6	43.6
Undecided	49	15.7	15.7
Disagree	53	17	17
Strongly disagree	30	9.6	9.6
Total	312	100	100

The English language can be difficult to master since it can be difficult to accurately spell and pronounce a word, as well as incorporate it in a sentence. Table 7 shows that 50.3 percent of grade six children in Wangduephodrang district have difficulty "understanding and memorizing words with the same sound but distinct spelling and meanings." For instance, the words rain, rein, and reign all have quite distinct meanings yet sound the same, which could cause difficulty for someone learning English (16). Direct instruction practice appears to assist students improve their vocabulary and fluency in order to tackle this challenge. According to (16) in a direct instruction, the teacher teaches spelling by having pupils look at each spelling word, cover the word, write the word down depending on how they remembered the spelling, and then compare what they wrote to the real spelling of the word. The process is repeated until the pupil has mastered each word's spelling.

Table 7. I have problem to understand and learn the words having the same pronunciation but different spelling and meanings.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	39	12.5	12.5
Agree	118	37.8	37.8
Undecided	71	22.8	22.8
Disagree	70	22.4	22.4
Strongly disagree	14	4.5	4.5

Total	312	100	100
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As shown in (Table 8), 56.7 percent of grade six students in the Wangduephodrang district guessed the meaning of a word based on context. Although broader word knowledge is acquired through time by frequent encounters in various contexts (10), It is critical to comprehend the meaning of these words. On the other hand, the pronunciation of some words is also largely determined by their context and it was found when dealing with new words, this strategy comes in handy. Teachers should employ a range of methodologies to assist students in comprehending meaning through context, associating new vocabulary with previously taught words, and even aiding in the memorization of words and meanings. Keeping in mind that a student must be able to understand a large percentage of the surrounding words in order to accurately guess the meaning of a word in context (17).

Table 8. I guess the meaning of word through the context.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Strongly disagree	40	12.8	12.8
Disagree	137	43.9	43.9
Undecided	68	21.8	21.8
Agree	54	17.3	17.3
Strongly agree	13	4.2	4.2
Total	312	100	100

4. CONCLUSION

No language learning method or strategy can be labeled as universal or suited for all language learners because language learning is a unique process that is unique to individuals and varies according to learners' preferences. Most students believe that the first step in learning a language is to learn new words so that they can use them to create expressions. To put it another way, production for learners entails learning language. The earliest and most tangible measure of language development is vocabulary acquisition. This means that when learning a new language, people must be familiar with its vocabulary. Vocabulary is an important part of language proficiency since it determines how people speak, listen, read, and write(10).

It has been confirmed by analyzing the responses of the student-participants that learners encounter vocabulary-learning issues even at the grade six levels. Difficulties with pronouncing new words, spelling new words, appropriately using new words, identifying grammatical structure of words, guessing meanings from context, and other issues occurred. As a result, this research claims that grade six students have a restricted 'word reservoir,' a problem that has to be addressed. The students' difficulties stemmed from the fact that English is still a foreign language in their environments. Although additional research is needed to inform strategies for assessing students' vocabulary, current research recommends employing multiple methods for boosting vocabulary by developing activities

and developing content that might help students overcome their obstacles in mastering vocabulary. To be able to include vocabulary-teaching tactics as a major component of their language teaching, English language teachers should establish a favorable predisposition toward the primacy of vocabulary in the process of language teaching and learning. Students must be aware of the benefits of acquiring vocabulary through various tactics in their daily lives in order to become motivated and, as a result, actively participate in using and practicing these strategies as well as taking strategic efforts to enhance their learning (14).

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