Challenges Faced by Second and Third-Year English Major Students at University of Phan Thiet in Developing English Vocabulary Skills

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ABSTRACT: *Vocabulary mastery is one of the difficult skills to conquer in learning English, thus making it necessary to investigate challenges encountered by students when dealing with it. The purpose of this research was to find out challenges in acquiring the English vocabulary of the second and third-year students majoring in English at Phan Thiet University. In this study, descriptive qualitative method was employed to conduct a case study research. Data collection techniques were used through survey questionnaires and interviews used on the research subjects who were second and third-year students in English majors of Phan Thiet University. From the data collected through surveys and interviews, the findings indicated that students had difficulty in acquiring vocabulary even the most proficient students. The types of difficulties students faced in learning vocabulary were varied ranging from pronunciation, writing and spelling, translation, to differentiation word classification.*

Keywords: *English major students, vocabulary learning difficulties, vocabulary learning strategies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

English, recognized as a global language, holds significant importance worldwide, serving as a common medium for communication and information exchange among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. With the ongoing process of globalization, the acquisition of foreign languages has become imperative, leading to their incorporation into educational curricula, notably English. Proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English, is deemed essential not only for students majoring in English but also for those pursuing various academic disciplines, as English is a mandatory component of educational programs across colleges and universities.

According to Wilkins in Thornbury (2004, p.13) states that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". That means vocabulary is at the heart of learning a language. Even a person with good grammar is useless if they do not have the vocabulary to express their ideas in writing or speaking. Therefore, focusing on enhancing vocabulary development is very important for English learners in the language learning process. "Adequate vocabulary will help students in mastering four skills in English" (Asyiah, 2017).

However, while learning vocabulary may seem like one of the simpler aspects of mastering a foreign language, it paradoxically presents one of the most formidable challenges. Many learners find vocabulary acquisition tedious, as it involves the rote memorization of unfamiliar words and their spellings (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003), often through repetitive exercises that primarily focus on vocabulary. Moreover, the process of learning vocabulary extends beyond mere comprehension of word meanings. In addition to memorizing definitions, students are required to grasp various other facets of words such as usage, pronunciation, and grammatical nuances. This multifaceted approach to vocabulary acquisition frequently complicates the mastery of vocabulary

for students. In the context of learning English vocabulary, disparities between English and Vietnamese pose further hurdles, encompassing differences in pronunciation, spelling, meanings, and word usage.

Mackey suggests that college students typically comprehend anywhere between 60,000 to 100,000 words. Conversely, Vietnamese individuals learning English as a compulsory foreign language in schools often possess a comparatively limited vocabulary, including English major students at Phan Thiet University. Consequently, this vocabulary deficit becomes a hindrance to their confidence levels, potentially resulting in subpar learning outcomes.

Given the significance of addressing students' vocabulary-related challenges, it is imperative to study and analyze these difficulties. In light of the aforementioned observations, the researcher has opted to investigate the topic titled: "Challenges Encountered by Second and Third-Year English Major Students at Phan Thiet University in Enhancing Their English Vocabulary Proficiency."

Research questions

Based on the background above, the researcher formulated the research difficulties as follow:

1.   What are the difficulties faced by second and third-year English major students in the academic year 2021-2022 in vocabulary mastery?
2.   What are the factors causing students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery for second and third-year English major students in the academic year 2021-2022?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of vocabulary

Vocabulary encompasses a repository of words utilized by individuals or specific users, as well as compiled lists within languages, literary works, authors, and scientific fields, arranged alphabetically and defined. Hatch and Brown (1995, p.1) provide a similar perspective, defining vocabulary as a compilation of words specific to a language or individual speakers. They emphasize that vocabulary constitutes the sole system organized alphabetically.

Richards and Renandya (2002, p.255) offer another viewpoint, asserting that vocabulary serves as a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, shaping how learners engage in speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities. They argue that lacking a robust vocabulary and effective strategies for acquiring new words can hinder learners' progress and deter them from engaging in language learning opportunities, such as listening to native speakers, using language in varied contexts, reading, or watching television. Richard, as cited in Schmitt (1997), expands on this, suggesting that understanding a word entails knowledge of its frequency, collocations, appropriateness in different contexts, syntactic behavior, morphology, derivations, associations, and semantic features.

From these definitions, it is evident that vocabulary forms the foundation of English proficiency. Without a sufficient vocabulary, skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing may be impaired. Therefore, mastery of English vocabulary is pivotal for effective English language learning.

Aspects of vocabulary

According to **Harmer (1991),** these were four vocabulary learning aspects that the learners need to learn in learning vocabulary, they were (1) word meaning, (2) word usage, (3) word-formation, (4) word grammar. Therefore, the students learning vocabulary should consider these aspects before learning to be able to clearly define what they need to learn while learning vocabulary.

Word meaning

Initially, certain English words can possess multiple meanings. Take the word "book," for instance, which can refer to a collection of printed pages bound within covers for reading, as well as to the action of reserving something, forming a phrasal verb when combined with a preposition. Therefore, the term "book" may denote the physical object of reading or convey an action, among other interpretations. When encountering a word and

endeavoring to comprehend its significance, it becomes imperative to consider the context in which it is utilized. For instance, if witnessing a woman disputing at a theater ticket counter, stating, "but I booked my tickets three weeks ago," the understanding of the word "book" in that context would clearly differ from its usage as a noun. Furthermore, words may possess opposites, known as antonyms, and also share similar meanings, termed synonyms. For instance, "poor" and "rich" represent antonyms. While words seldom exhibit absolute synonyms, contextual nuances may occasionally render them interchangeable.

Word usage
Another crucial aspect for students to grasp in learning English vocabulary pertains to the usage of words. Given that the meaning of a word can be influenced, broadened, or constrained by its contextual usage, students must remain cognizant of this fact. The significance of words often undergoes expansion through the employment of metaphors and idioms. For instance, while "hiss" typically describes the sound emitted by snakes, it can also metaphorically convey interpersonal communication, as in "Don't move or you're dead," he hissed. Such usage exemplifies metaphorical language.

Furthermore, the meaning of words is further nuanced by their collocation with other words. For instance, to convey the idea of "sprained," one would typically say "sprained ankle" or "sprained wrist," rather than "sprained thigh" or "sprained ribs." Similarly, certain ailments are colloquially associated with specific body parts, such as headache, stomachache, or earache, rather than "throat ache" or "leg ache." Recognizing metaphorical language and understanding word collocation are essential for students.

Moreover, the context in which words are employed, both stylistically and thematically, significantly influences their usage. Students must discern appropriate expressions based on the style and register appropriate for a given situation. For instance, when expressing anger, one must choose between a neutral expression (I'm angry) and a more informal version (I'm really pissed off). It is imperative for students to comprehend the stylistic and thematic contexts in which words and expressions occur.

Word-formation
Words have the capacity to undergo alterations in their structure and grammatical function. It is essential for students to grasp the concept of word formation and understand how to manipulate words to suit various grammatical contexts. For example, the verb "understand" can be transformed into participles such as "understanding," "understandable," and "understandably."

Word grammar
Words have the ability to alter their structure based on their grammatical significance, thereby influencing the selection of specific grammatical patterns. For instance, a differentiation exists between countable and uncountable nouns, with the former having both singular and plural forms. For example, "chair" can be singular ("one chair") or plural ("two chairs"), while the latter remains singular, as in "furniture" (e.g., "one piece of furniture"). This distinction bears grammatical implications, as countable nouns like "chair" can collocate with plural verbs when pluralized, whereas uncountable nouns like "furniture" cannot (unless, of course, it pertains to the name of a musical group).

The importance of learning vocabulary
The acquisition of vocabulary holds paramount importance for individuals learning English, whether as a foreign language or as a second language. According to Fauzi (2005), vocabulary stands at the core of language acquisition and bears crucial significance for typical language learners. Schmitt (2000) further underscores the centrality of lexical knowledge in achieving communicative competence and mastering a second language.

Additionally, Evelyn (2008) asserts that proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing hinges upon one's mastery of vocabulary.

Tozcu and Coady (2004) highlight the pivotal role of vocabulary acquisition in both second language and foreign language learning, emphasizing its correlation with academic achievement, reading comprehension, and overall language proficiency. Similarly, Rivers (1998) underscores the indispensability of vocabulary in language acquisition, emphasizing its role in imbuing language with vitality and facilitating comprehension.

In essence, learners who possess a rich vocabulary find it easier to comprehend English texts and articulate their ideas both verbally and in writing. Conversely, inadequate vocabulary poses challenges for students, particularly those in English study programs, hindering their development of language skills. Hence, mastering vocabulary serves as a key determinant of success in language learning endeavors.

Previous studies

The field of understanding students' challenges with vocabulary acquisition has been extensively explored through various studies. Saniyah's (2011) research, titled "Students' Problems in Learning English Vocabulary," employed descriptive research methods utilizing interviews and questionnaires. The study revealed that English Department students at IAIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya encountered difficulties in vocabulary learning, particularly in remembering new words, with errors categorized into word classes, homonyms, homophones, homographs, polysemy, and word formations.

Subsequently, Rohmatillah (2014) conducted a qualitative study titled "A Study on the Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary" at IAIN Raden Intan Lampung. Findings from interviews and questionnaires highlighted challenges faced by first-semester students, including pronunciation, writing, spelling, grammatical form, choosing appropriate meanings, and understanding idiomatic expressions.

Alam (2009) contributed to this area of research by examining factors impacting teaching and learning English vocabulary. The study identified readiness, learning sources, strategies, media and teaching techniques, materials, and environment as influential factors. Notably, pronunciation and spelling emerged as key areas of difficulty. Alam concluded that teaching English vocabulary to fifth-year students presented challenges in pronunciation, translation, spelling, and differentiating word types.

These studies collectively underscore the complexity of vocabulary acquisition among students and emphasize the multifaceted nature of challenges encountered in the process.

III.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study was conducted at Phan Thiet University in the academic year 2023-2024. This study concentrated on second and third-year English major students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. 135 students of two courses were invited to participate in the questionnaire survey.The researcher collected from 135 surveys, 59.3% of the participants were second-year students and 40.7% were third-year students majoring in English at Phan Thiet University.

Research method

In this study, a descriptive qualitative method was employed to conduct this case study. Data collection techniques were utilized through survey questionnaires. Subsequently, the data from the survey and interview were compiled by using the statistical, descriptive, and analytical methods to produce the authentic results investigated.

IV.   FINDINGS

Difficulties in learning vocabulary

In learning English, enriching your own vocabulary is very important. However, through the results of the survey and interview, the researcher found that most students have difficulties in learning English vocabulary and these difficulties they faced were generally identical.
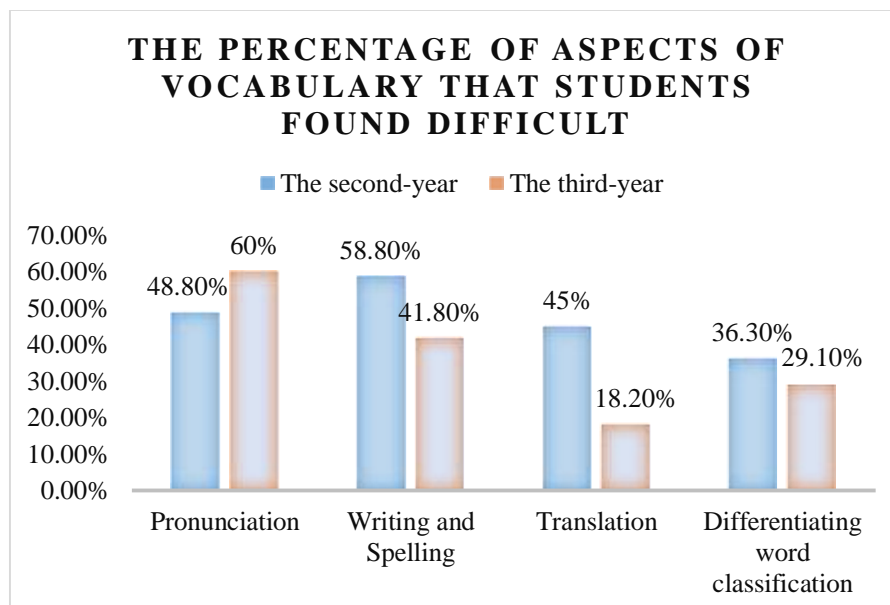
THE PERCENTAGE OF ASPECTS OF VOCABULARY THAT STUDENTS FOUND DIFFICULT

Chart 1. The percentage of aspects of vocabulary that students found difficult

Pronunciation

Pronunciation holds significance in the process of learning English as it serves as a bridge connecting various language skills. Concerning pronunciation, certain challenges may arise for students, including difficulties in stress placement, final pronunciation, intonation, linking words in speech sequences, and the influence of Vietnamese on English pronunciation. According to the data presented, third-year students expressed greater difficulty in this aspect compared to second-year students, with 60% and 48.8% respectively for third and second-year students.

One student interviewed highlighted the challenge of correctly pronouncing word stress for clarity in communication. They noted the absence of stress in Vietnamese compared to English, leading to instances where their pronunciation was misunderstood by teachers. This issue is commonly encountered by many students in the process of learning English vocabulary.

Writing and spelling

The spelling of English words presents a challenge for students, with approximately 58.8% of second-year students and 41.8% of third-year students identifying it as a difficulty in vocabulary learning. This aspect is particularly problematic for second-year students, as it garnered the highest percentage of choices. Spelling difficulties are a common issue encountered by students, particularly when writing in English.

Some students elaborated on this issue, noting instances where they omit certain letters in pronunciation but find them present in the written form. For example, the word "hour" lacks the 'h' sound in pronunciation but includes it in spelling. Consequently, students may mistakenly interpret it as "our" if not contextualized properly.

Translation

Around 45% of second-year students identified translation as a challenging aspect, whereas approximately 18.2% of third-year students did so. Similar to Vietnamese, English contains words with multiple meanings or several synonyms to express a single concept. The key approach to address this challenge is to comprehend and memorize the meanings of words along with their synonyms.

One student explained, "A word can have various meanings depending on the context. Sometimes, I select a meaning for a word, but it doesn't align with the context, resulting in difficulty understanding the meaning of the sentence or paragraph."

Differentiating word classification

Derived from a root word, there exist related words categorized by their respective word types. For instance, "beauty" functions as a noun, with associated words like "beautiful" (adjective) and "beautify" (verb). This aspect

posed challenges in vocabulary acquisition, yet students often overlooked it and failed to recognize it as a difficulty. Consequently, this aspect garnered the lowest percentage of choices compared to previous challenges, with 36.3% and 29.1% for second and third-year students, respectively.

Furthermore, students highlighted additional difficulties encountered in vocabulary acquisition. These included struggles in selecting the correct meaning for a word, utilizing the appropriate word in context, and confusion when encountering words and expressions containing idiomatic expressions.

V.   DISCUSSION

The outcomes derived from survey questionnaires and interviews unveiled that second and third-year English majors at Phan Thiet University encounter vocabulary challenges akin to those highlighted in prior studies. Four primary difficulties surfaced during vocabulary acquisition: pronunciation, writing and spelling, translation, and distinguishing word classifications.

According to the author's survey data, the prevalence of these challenges was lower than in Muzdalifah's study. However, a notable resemblance existed in both observations, particularly in pronunciation emerging as the most arduous aspect. The researcher posits that Vietnamese students may experience fewer vocabulary hurdles due to the shared alphabet with English. Ahmed Maher Mahmoud Al Nakhalah (2016) corroborated this difficulty, with 71.43% citing specific challenges in pronouncing the final syllable. Despite the significance of ending sounds, students often overlook them, impeding effective communication.

Notably, students acknowledged their struggles with these vocabulary aspects, particularly in pronunciation, writing, and spelling. This suggests a close interrelation between these aspects. The researcher contends that mispronunciation often leads to incorrect spelling and writing. However, correct pronunciation does not necessarily guarantee accurate spelling. For instance, the pronunciation of "muscle" may inadvertently result in "mussel." Additionally, certain words lack syllables in pronunciation yet are present in writing, such as "listen," "write," "honor," "honest," and notably, "hour," posing challenges in accurate transcription without considering contextual cues.

Translation also emerged as a formidable hurdle in vocabulary acquisition. Stuart Campbell (1998) elucidated the challenges of translating into a second language, emphasizing the difficulty in reproducing a target text that aligns with the nuances of the source text. While looking up words in a dictionary is feasible, understanding them within a specific context and accurately translating them into another language poses significant challenges.

Lastly, differentiating word classifications proved challenging for students. Derived from root words, related words are classified based on their word type. For instance, "beauty" is a noun with related words such as "beautiful" (adjective) and "beautify" (verb). Despite its importance, students often err in speaking and writing, frequently failing to distinguish word classes correctly. However, students can employ intonation or body language to convey information despite these challenges.

These findings shed light on the prevalent difficulties encountered by students in learning English vocabulary, which extend beyond the confines of Phan Thiet University's second and third-year English majors. They are common hurdles encountered by students across various levels and disciplines. Furthermore, these challenges are not exclusive to English vocabulary learning but are also pervasive in other languages. Therefore, the findings of this study hold applicability in vocabulary acquisition across different contexts.

Ultimately, while teachers and educators play a pivotal role in addressing students' vocabulary challenges, the study underscores the importance of students' active involvement in overcoming these hurdles.

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