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Vocabulary learning beyond memorization among Uzbek students of English

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Abstract. Vocabulary plays a central role in English language learning because it supports meaning-making in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This article examines vocabulary as more than a list of words to memorize. It includes knowledge of pronunciation, spelling, meaning, grammar, collocation, register, and appropriate use in context. The article focuses on common challenges faced by Uzbek students learning English in an English-as-a-foreign-language environment, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, pronunciation and spelling difficulties, dependence on translation and memorization, uncertainty about word choice, and lack of confidence in active use. Drawing on research in second language vocabulary learning and the experience of English learners in Uzbekistan, the article argues that vocabulary development improves when students combine deliberate study with meaningful exposure and regular communication practice. Practical strategies include learning words in context, noticing collocations, using learner dictionaries, reading and listening to authentic or graded materials, reviewing words through spaced repetition, and creating supportive English-speaking environments in schools and universities. The article concludes that vocabulary growth is a gradual and active process that requires both learner effort and institutional support.

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most important parts of learning English. It is commonly understood as the collection of words a person knows and uses, but in language learning it is much more than word count. To know a word means to recognize its form, understand its meaning, pronounce it, spell it, use it with suitable grammar, and choose it appropriately according to the situation. A learner may know the dictionary meaning of a word, but still be unsure about where, when, and how to use it naturally. This is why vocabulary learning is not only a matter of memorization; it is a process of building usable language knowledge.

Vocabulary and grammar work together in communication. Grammar helps learners organize ideas correctly, while vocabulary provides the meaning that communication carries. David Wilkins (1972) famously stated that without grammar little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. This does not mean that grammar is unimportant. Rather, it shows that words are essential for expressing ideas, emotions, needs, and opinions. Even a simple conversation depends on the learner's ability to select the right words at the right moment.

For Uzbek students, English vocabulary learning is especially important because English is often studied as a foreign language rather than used naturally in daily life. Many students meet English mainly in classrooms, textbooks, online materials, or examination preparation. As a result, they may understand vocabulary when reading or listening, but struggle to use the same words confidently in speaking and writing. This gap between passive knowledge and active use is one of the main difficulties in vocabulary development.

This article discusses the importance of vocabulary in English learning, the challenges faced by Uzbek students, and practical ways to make vocabulary learning more meaningful and effective. The purpose is not to present vocabulary as a separate skill, but to show how it supports all areas of language learning and how students can gradually turn memorized words into natural communication.

Vocabulary and the four skills of language

Vocabulary is closely connected with all four language skills. In reading, unknown words can prevent learners from understanding the full meaning of a text. A student may understand the general topic, but if key words are unfamiliar, the deeper message becomes unclear. Laufer (1997) explains that vocabulary knowledge is central to second language reading because words that are unknown, misunderstood, or impossible to guess can block comprehension. This is why students with a wider and more accurate vocabulary usually read with greater confidence.

In writing, vocabulary gives learners the ability to express ideas clearly and precisely. A student may have a good idea, but without suitable words, the idea may sound too simple, unclear, or repetitive. Strong vocabulary helps learners avoid using the same words again and again and allows them to choose expressions that match the purpose of writing. Academic writing, for example, requires words that are more formal and exact, while friendly messages allow simpler and more personal language. This ability to choose vocabulary according to purpose and context is an important part of language competence.

In speaking, vocabulary affects fluency and confidence. Many English learners experience the feeling of knowing what they want to say but not being able to find the correct word quickly. This pause can make students nervous, especially in classrooms, interviews, presentations, or conversations with foreign teachers. In listening, unfamiliar vocabulary can make even a familiar topic difficult to follow. If several important words in a sentence are unknown, the listener may lose the meaning of the whole message. Therefore, vocabulary is not an isolated area of English learning; it is the thread that connects communication skills.

Research also shows that knowing a word is a complex matter. Nation (2013) explains that word knowledge includes form, meaning, and use. Form involves pronunciation, spelling, and word parts. Meaning includes the concept of the word and its associations. Use involves grammar, collocation, frequency, and appropriateness. Read (2000) also emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge can be viewed in terms of both breadth and depth: learners need to know many words, but they also need to know those words well. For example, a learner may know that the word "strong" means powerful, but must also learn that English speakers usually say "strong tea," "strong argument," and "strong smell," while they do not normally say "powerful tea" in the same way. Such word combinations are called collocations, and they are essential for natural English.

Challenges faced by Uzbek students

One challenge faced by many Uzbek students is limited exposure to English outside formal study. In many parts of Uzbekistan, Uzbek or Russian is used in daily communication, while English is mainly used in academic or professional settings. This means that students often need to create their own opportunities to hear and use English. Krashen (1982) emphasized the importance of meaningful and comprehensible input in language acquisition. When learners meet vocabulary repeatedly in understandable contexts, they are more likely to remember it and use it. However, if English appears only in vocabulary lists or exam exercises, students may recognize words without being able to use them naturally.

Pronunciation and spelling can also create difficulty. English has sounds and sound-spelling patterns that may be unfamiliar to Uzbek learners. Uzbek spelling is generally more regular than English spelling, while English contains many words in which pronunciation and spelling do not match easily. Words such as "though," "through," "thought," and "tough" show how confusing English spelling can be for learners. When students are not sure how to pronounce a word, they may avoid using it in conversation. This can slow the movement from passive vocabulary to active vocabulary.

Another common issue is learning words through direct translation only. Translation can be helpful, especially at the beginning stage, because it gives learners a quick understanding of meaning. However, translation alone is not enough. Many English words do not match Uzbek words exactly. A single English word may have several meanings depending on context, and a single Uzbek word may need different English translations in different situations. Learners therefore need examples, collocations, and contexts, not only definitions.

Exam-oriented learning can also affect vocabulary development. Many students preparing for English examinations, especially tests that require academic writing and speaking, try to memorize long lists of advanced words. This can be useful if the words are understood well, but it becomes a problem when students use difficult vocabulary without knowing its register, grammar, or collocation. Schmitt (2000) notes that vocabulary knowledge grows gradually through repeated meetings with words in different contexts, and Schmitt (2010) further shows that vocabulary research must consider different levels of word knowledge. A word is not fully learned after one encounter. It becomes stronger when the learner sees it, hears it, writes it, speaks it, and notices how it behaves with other words.

Synonyms are a good example of this problem. Words such as "big," "large," "enormous," "vast," and "colossal" are related in meaning, but they are not always interchangeable. Their use depends on degree, tone, register, and collocation. "Big" is common in everyday speech, "large" is often neutral or slightly more formal, "vast" is commonly used for areas, amounts, or abstract scale, and "colossal" often gives a stronger or more dramatic effect. The difference is not simply that one word is academic and another is casual; the important point is that each word has its own pattern of use. Learners need to observe these patterns instead of treating synonyms as equal replacements.

Fear of making mistakes is another barrier. Some students know enough vocabulary to communicate, but they remain silent because they are afraid of wrong pronunciation, incorrect word choice, or being judged by classmates. This fear prevents practice, and without practice vocabulary remains inactive. Language learning requires a safe environment where mistakes are treated as part of learning. Teachers and classmates can help by encouraging communication rather than focusing only on correction.

Suggestions and solutions

To overcome these challenges, students should combine deliberate learning with meaningful use. Deliberate learning means consciously studying words, reviewing them, and paying attention to their forms and meanings. Meaningful use means meeting and applying those words in real communication. Webb and Nation (2017) explain that vocabulary learning improves when learners meet words several times and use them in different ways. Therefore, students should not only write new words in a notebook; they should use them in sentences, short conversations, diary entries, presentations, and essays.

A useful vocabulary notebook should include more than translation. For each important word, students can write the pronunciation, part of speech, one or two example sentences, common collocations, word family forms, and a short note about register. For example, instead of writing only "improve – yaxshilamoq," a student can add "improve vocabulary," "improve skills," "improve gradually," and "significant improvement." This method helps learners remember not only the word but also its natural partners. Gu and Johnson (1996) found that strategies such as contextual encoding, dictionary use, note-taking, attention to word formation, and activation of newly learned words were positively related to vocabulary learning outcomes.

Reading is one of the strongest ways to develop vocabulary. Students do not always need difficult literary texts at the beginning. Graded readers, short articles, stories, blogs, and news written at an appropriate level can provide repeated exposure to useful words. If a text contains too many unknown words, students may become tired and lose interest. If the text is understandable but slightly challenging, it can support vocabulary growth. Listening materials such as podcasts, interviews, classroom videos, films, and educational YouTube channels can also help, especially when students listen actively and note useful expressions. Music can be enjoyable too, but learners should remember that songs may contain informal, poetic, or unclear pronunciation, so they should be used as one resource among many.

Speaking and writing practice are necessary for turning receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary. Students can choose a small number of new words each week and make a personal goal to use them in class discussions, short speeches, or written paragraphs. Even simple activities such as explaining a picture, retelling a story, describing a daily routine, or summarizing a short video can help.

The aim is not to use difficult words for decoration, but to use suitable words accurately and confidently.

Dictionaries and digital tools can support vocabulary learning when used properly. A good learner's dictionary gives pronunciation, grammar information, collocations, example sentences, and common meanings. Language learning applications can be useful for review and motivation, especially for beginners, but they should not replace real reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Oxford (1990) explains that successful language learners use a variety of strategies, and digital tools should be understood as one part of a wider learning plan. Spaced repetition tools can help students review words at planned intervals so that vocabulary is not quickly forgotten. However, technology works best when it supports active learning rather than passive clicking.

Teachers and institutions also have an important role. Uzbek schools and universities can support vocabulary development by creating more English-speaking opportunities through clubs, conversation corners, presentations, peer discussions, debate activities, reading circles, and interaction with international teachers or students where available. Vocabulary should be integrated into all lessons rather than treated as a separate list at the beginning of a unit. Richards and Renandya (2002) highlight the importance of classroom methods that support meaningful language practice, and this is especially important for vocabulary instruction. Teachers can encourage students to notice how words are used in real sentences, how they combine with other words, and how meaning changes in different contexts.

Most importantly, students need patience. Vocabulary learning takes time because words are learned in layers. First, a learner may recognize a word. Later, the learner may understand it in context. After more practice, the learner may begin to use it in writing. Finally, with repeated use, the word may become available in speaking. This gradual movement from recognition to confident use is normal. It should not discourage students; rather, it should remind them that vocabulary growth is built through regular contact with English.

Conclusion

Vocabulary is the foundation of meaningful communication in English. It supports reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and it helps learners express ideas, emotions, and opinions with clarity. For Uzbek students, vocabulary learning can be challenging because English is often learned in a foreign-language environment with limited daily exposure. Pronunciation and spelling difficulties, translation-based learning, exam pressure, uncertainty about synonyms and collocations, and fear of mistakes can all make vocabulary development slower.

However, these challenges can be reduced through effective learning habits and supportive teaching environments. Students should learn words in context, review them regularly, use them actively, and pay attention to collocations, register, pronunciation, and word families. Teachers and universities can help by creating more natural English-speaking spaces and encouraging communication without fear. Vocabulary is not learned completely in one day or from one list. It grows through repeated exposure, meaningful practice, and confidence. When Uzbek students begin to use English not only as a subject but also as a tool for real communication, vocabulary learning becomes more natural, useful, and enjoyable.

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