

## A Study on Vocabulary-Learning Problems Encountered by BA English Majors at the University Level of Education

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### Abstract

Proficiency in English language depends on the knowledge of its vocabulary possessed by the second and foreign language learners and even the native speakers. Though developing the vocabulary is vital, it poses several problems, especially, to non-native students of English. Students with a low vocabulary knowledge show weak academic performance in different courses related to the language skills, linguistics, literature, and translation at the university level of education. This study, in particular, aims to investigate the problems faced by English majors in learning the vocabulary at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU) in Saudi Arabia. It also puts forward some vocabulary-learning strategies to minimize the potential problems. The data consist of the responses of 100 student-participants (undergraduates) randomly picked up from five different levels (four, five, six, seven, and eight) of 4-Year BA English Program at PSAU. This quantitative study uses an online questionnaire, as an instrument, to collect the data. The results reveal that the English majors at PSAU face several problems in learning the vocabulary such as knowing the meanings of new words, pronouncing new words, using new words correctly, memorizing and spelling new vocabulary and so on. To its contribution, this study emphasizes the importance of learning the English vocabulary, draws students' attention towards it, highlights the problems encountered by students, and raises their awareness of the vocabulary. Future research may explore teachers' perspectives on students' vocabulary-learning problems and instructional methods implemented to teach the vocabulary in English language classrooms.

**Keywords:** English majors, Saudi students, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary-learning problems, vocabulary-learning strategies.

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## Introduction

This paper investigates the problems faced by English majors (undergraduates) in learning the vocabulary at Prince Stattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU) in Saudi Arabia. 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 to communicate in English due to lack of vocabulary items, methods of teaching and incompatible learning environment. This quantitative study emphasizes the importance of learning target vocabulary, draws students' attention towards it, highlights the problems encountered by students, and raises their awareness of vocabulary. It depends on the responses of the participants who are PSAU students studying at different levels of 4-Year BA English Program. The results reveal that students faced a range of problems in learning the vocabulary of the English language. It also suggests strategies that, hopefully, would enrich students' vocabulary knowledge and minimize their difficulties. It begins by introducing the vocabulary.

In learning a mother tongue 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 without learning the vocabulary communication in the second language becomes harder. Further, vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language; it is central to communicative competence. Low vocabulary knowledge poses severe problems to its learners, which consequently impedes the learning of English language (Alqahtani, 2015). Schmitt (2002) argues that vocabulary plays a vital role in teaching and learning the second language as lexical knowledge is fundamental to communicate effectively. The language of the human beings depends on the vocabulary used or gained. Thus, without vocabulary, the learners will be demotivated to use the language (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The term vocabulary has a variety of meanings proposed by teachers. To some, it represents sight-word vocabularies as the immediate recognition of words by students. Others describe it as meaning-vocabularies representing the words understood by students; it is also considered as listening-vocabularies or students' understanding of the heard and spoken words. The content teachers further describe it as an academic vocabulary that reflects the content-specific words or students' understating of the oral and print words (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2011). Hiebert and Kamil (2005) provide another definition for the term vocabulary, which is the knowledge that the learners should have about the meanings of words. They argued that words come into two types, oral and print and the knowledge, too, comes in at least two types: receptive (understand or recognize) and productive (write or speak). The oral vocabulary belongs to a set of words for which the learners know the meanings while speaking or reading orally. The print vocabulary consists of words for which the learners know the meanings when they write or read silently. To Hiebert and Kamil, the productive vocabulary is a set of words that are well-known and used frequently by the learners in speaking or writing. The receptive vocabulary is a set of words, which are less

frequent and for which learner assign meanings while listening or reading (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

Also, the vocabulary has two types as active and passive. The active vocabulary refers to the words taught to students, and they can use these words in speech or writing as oral or written expressions. The passive vocabulary refers to the words that students recognize and understand in a context. Such a passive type of vocabulary occurs in a listening or reading material (Harmmer, 2007). Besides, Webb (2009) advocates that students recognize the receptive vocabulary when it is used in a context, i.e. the one seen in a reading text and the one that cannot be produced by students in a written or spoken form. To Neuman and Dwyer (2009), vocabulary refers to the words in spoken (expressive vocabulary) and listening (receptive vocabulary) forms that the learners need for a competent interaction. Hatch and Brown (1995) consider vocabulary as a group of words that the language users use differently. Vocabulary knowledge usually indicates the learners' progress. Learning the vocabulary has always been a skill taught and evaluated in other language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Schmitt, 2000). Instead, it promotes the development of language skills (Mart, 2012).

### **Problem Statement**

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. For instance, in Saudi Arabia some of the studies have underscored faulty practices adopted in teaching and learning English. Al-Seghayer (2015) emphasizes that the teachers in Saudi Arabia follow traditional methods in teaching English. They use the students' mother tongue more than the target language to deliver lessons, which causes students' low performance. Some other studies pointed out problems in learning the vocabulary on the part of the students as well (e.g., see Baniabdelrahman & Al-Shumaimeri, 2014; Elttayef & Hussein, 2017; Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013).

Despite some deficiencies in teaching and learning strategies, the demand for English in Saudi Arabia has dramatically increased. The individuals have to do jobs that demand competence in the English language considered as one of the most critical factors in political, educational (Al-Saraj, 2014), and social as well as technological development in the country (Khan, 2011). Consequently, the learners have to get command over vocabulary to prove that they are competent users of English. Similarly, it is a hard task for the teachers to fulfill the students' needs and make them learn vocabulary in an unforgettable way. Thus, it is crucial to highlight vocabulary-learning problems faced by students, propose vocabulary-learning strategies that can enhance students' understanding of the target vocabulary, and offer them opportunities to acquire new words. The present study advocates that students in the Saudi Arabian universities need enough vocabulary knowledge to tackle on-campus lectures delivered in English and to improve their communication skills. Rababah (2005) claims that departments of English in some universities in the Arab countries accept high school students with a low proficiency level in English. By arguing that the Department of English at PSAU also admits high-school students into its 4- Year BA English Program without assessing their proficiency level, this study investigates vocabulary-learning problems faced by PSAU students as soon as they approach higher-level courses.

### **Research Objectives**

This paper aims:

- 1- To investigate the problems faced by PSAU English majors in learning the vocabulary.
- 2- To recommend strategies that can minimize PSAU students' problems in learning the English vocabulary.
- 3-

### **Research Questions learning the vocabulary**

This paper answers the following questions:

- 1- What are the problems faced by PSAU English majors in learning the vocabulary?
- 2- What are the strategies that can minimize PSAU students' problems in learning the English vocabulary?

### **Literature Review**

Vocabulary learning helps acquire language, develop the learners' reading proficiency, and is beneficial for reading comprehension (Tozcu & Coady, 2004). Learning the vocabulary encompasses four stages: discrimination, understanding meaning, remembering, and consolidation and extension of the meanings. First, the discrimination stage involves distinguishing sounds and letters. It helps in speaking, listening, reading, and writing because by distinguishing sounds, the learners pronounce words correctly and understand them when they read or hear. Secondly, understanding meaning involves understanding the concept of words by relating them to their referents. Thirdly, the remembering stage consists of the ability to retain the meanings. Fourthly, the consolidation and extension stage refers to learning new vocabulary and its integration in the learners' vocabulary system (Grauberg, 1997). However, learning the vocabulary usually causes a heavy burden on the learners. In other words, languages are productive and they continually create and add new words to their vocabulary stock. Oxford (1990) argues that generally, no rules are followed in learning the vocabulary as used in learning the grammar. Students usually encounter hundreds of words that they need to learn and practice during their studies.

Altyari (2017) considers that the Saudi students' weak linguistic performance in English reflects their deficient vocabulary knowledge. The researcher points out two compelling facts that contribute to poor vocabulary uptake and lexical insufficiency by the Saudi students in public high schools. The participants included thirty-five students from different educational levels and nine male Saudi teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at intermediate and secondary schools. The data were collected through questionnaire and secondary school textbooks. The results reveal that students-participants ineffectively used vocabulary strategies such as by mainly relying on a bilingual dictionary, asking others to know the meanings and so on. Similarly, the results also indicate insufficient recycling of the vocabulary items and presentation of all aspects of the vocabulary knowledge. The study strongly recommends an incremental process of teaching vocabulary.

Rohmatillah (2017) investigated the difficulties faced by students in learning English vocabulary. This qualitative research, using interviews and questionnaires, points out at several challenges that hinder vocabulary-learning practices adopted by students. This study outlines the problems such as pronouncing and spelling words (written and spoken forms do not match most of the time), choosing appropriate meanings of words (complexity of vocabulary knowledge),

inflections of word forms, (inadequate understanding of grammar), and an excessive number of words that students need to learn. It also reveals some important factors of difficulty in learning the vocabulary and attributes learning difficulties to various levels of language. To cite, pronunciation difficulties are related to the sound system of English, inflections and word forms are related to the morphological system, word associations, such as collocations, and phrasal verbs are related to semantics, the word categories relevant to syntax and so on. Khan (2011) also points out the vocabulary areas in which the Saudi target language learners face difficulties. These areas include learning the vocabulary meanings, spelling, using synonyms, prefixes, and suffixes.

Elttayef and Hussein (2017) probed the difficulties that teachers face in teaching English to the Arab learners. The study argues that the learners have insufficient basic knowledge; however, they are taught English in schools. Secondly, it points out the lack of attention on the part of the teachers in highlighting the significance of English in classrooms. It also asserts that the teachers' role in teaching English is doubled because their students depend them with the expectations that they would make students learn English soon. This study claims that the socio-cultural background also affects teaching English to the Arab learners who attend English classes mostly to pass the courses. The researchers argue that with this weak background, students find difficulties later at college and universities when they engage themselves in specialized courses. This study concludes that the learners encounter difficulties in practicing language skills such as listening, speaking, and highlighted problems related to teachers and curricular (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017).

In another study, Alqahtani (2015) declares the learning of vocabulary as an important aspect of the foreign language learning with an emphasis on the meanings of new words. This study summarizes the important research on vocabulary and sheds light on teaching techniques employed by teachers while teaching vocabulary. As a teacher-researcher, Alqahtani observes that, generally, the Saudi students are taught grammar rules more than the vocabulary.

Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), by using the cluster sampling methods, examined the techniques adopted by the first-year students, at a Saudi university, to guess the meanings of unknown words in reading a text. The participants contained students from the preparatory-year at King Saud University from six male (120) and six female (120) classes. The study claims that most students were unable to use the strategies for guessing the meaning of an unseen vocabulary. The results of this study encourage the teachers to, practically, train the students in using various strategies to derive correct meanings of new vocabulary.

Farjami and Aidinlou (2013) argue that learning a foreign or second language at various levels of proficiency requires a high number of words for which the learners make efforts to retain words in their long-term memory. This study also elaborates the learners' problems in learning the vocabulary and offers some practical learning and teaching strategies to improve these problems. However, it places stress on the long-term vocabulary techniques than the short-term ones. For such reasons, Farjami and Aidinlou suggest one of the practical approaches to enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge. They assert that teachers should present new vocabulary items in contexts, which are rich enough and provide the learners clues to guess the meanings (e.g., see Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013).

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach that explains the phenomena based on a numerical data (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2002). Its participants are comprised of 100 male undergraduate students enrolled in 4-year BA English Program at PSAU. They were randomly handpicked from five different levels of the program. Table 1 represents the profile of the participants.

**Table 1**  
*Profile of the participants*

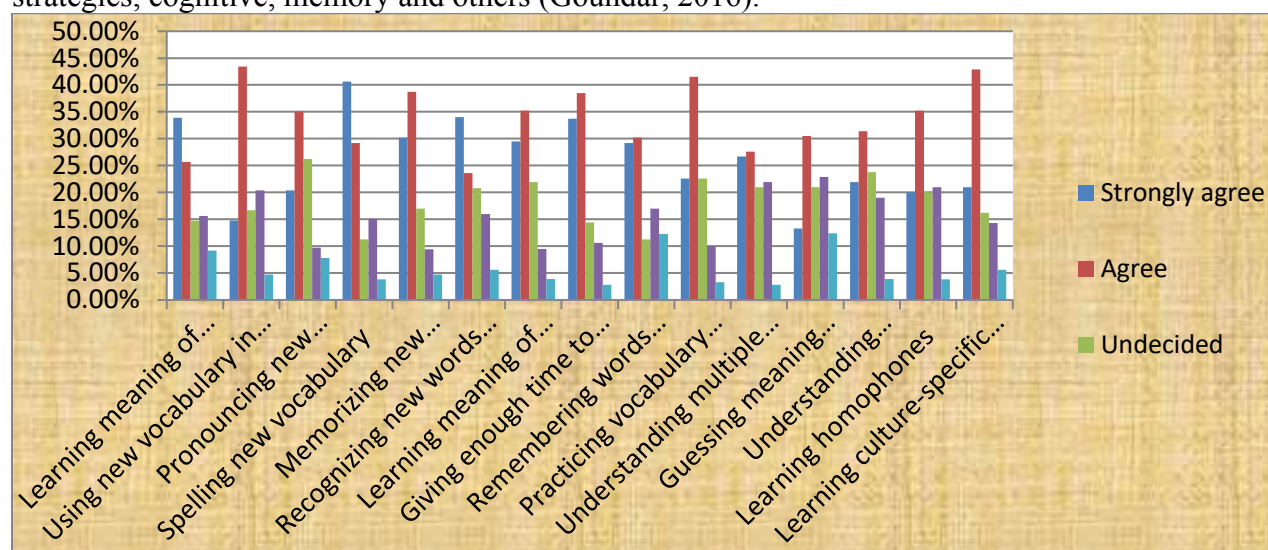
Level of education	No of participants	Program of study	Gender	Age
Level 4	20	4-year BA English program (PSAU)	Male (Arab background)	19 to 23 years
Level 5	20			
Level 6	20			
Level 7	20			
Level 8	20			

The data were collected during the academic year 2017-2018. For this purpose, a questionnaire was adapted from previous scholarly studies (e.g., see Alqahtani, 2015; Altyari, 2017; Baniabdelrahman & Al-Shumaimeri 2014; Dickins, 2012; Elttayef & Hussein, 2017; Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013; Khan, 2011; Rohmatillah, 2017; Saigh & Schmitt, 2012). Through the piloting stage, it was ensured that the participants were competent enough to understand the questionnaire. This study uses the Google Docs platform that serves as a real-time collaboration and communication for creating and administering the online questionnaire (Blankenship, 2017; Denton, 2012). It increases the efficiency and handles the data with more accuracy via a unique URL (Rayhan et al., 2013). To assess the students' vocabulary-learning problems, a questionnaire was created in Google Docs with a 5-point Likert scale options: (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree (3), Undecided (4) Disagree, and (5) Strongly disagree, (Brown, 2010). The questionnaire consisted of 15 items and the students were instructed to complete it by rating their problems accordingly. After the successful completion of the questionnaire, Google Docs summary of all the scaled responses generated the percentage of the vocabulary-learning problems interpreted in the results section.

### Results and Discussion

The primary focus of this study was to examine the students' vocabulary-learning problems and suggest strategies to overcome the potential problems. The analysis indicates (see Figure 1) that English majors at PSAU faced the problem in "Learning Meaning of New Vocabulary". A majority of 59.6% of the participants (strongly agree 33.9% and agree 25.7%) responded positively to this questionnaire item. 24.8% of the participants (strongly disagree 15.6% and disagree 9.2%) responded negatively to this problem. The learners of English often face problems in discovering the meanings of new words and retaining them in their memory (e.g., see Altyari, 2017; Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013). Learning L2 vocabulary enhances the learners' understanding of the target language. One strategy is to use the vocabulary cards as valuable tools that "contain key elements about the target word" (p. 216). The learners can be instructed to manage such vocabulary cards and optimize the learning (e.g., see Sheridan & Markslag, 2017). Form the students' perspectives,

it is argued that the learners should expand their plans and develop autonomous learning strategies. Foreign language learners can actively learn the meanings of new words through deliberate vocabulary acquisition strategies and by using contextual clues for a generation of the meanings of new words (Lawson & Hogben, 1996). Similarly, the learners may apply activation strategies that involve different tactics such as to practise the new words in different contexts. These strategies can work in addition to other essential learning strategies such as metacognitive strategies, cognitive, memory and others (Goundar, 2016).



**Figure 1 Vocabulary learning problems faced by PSAU English majors**

Source: Data collected from the questionnaire adapted from previous studies (e.g., see Alqahtani, 2015; Altyari, 2017; Baniabdelrahman & Al-Shumaimeri 2014; Dickins, 2012; Elttayef & Hussein, 2017; Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013; Khan, 2011; Rohmatillah, 2017; Saigh & Schmitt, 2012).

Figure 1 illustrates that PSAU students also faced problems in “Using New Vocabulary in Speaking or Writing”. A high number of positive responses reflected the problem, 43.4% of the respondents agreed and 14.4% strongly agreed. However, 25% of the respondents disagreed. Since vocabulary represents the words that the learners need to communicate (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009), they must have enough practice to use it effectively in speaking and writing. The correct use of new vocabulary indicates the productive knowledge that “means to be able to use a word correctly in a written work or a speech” (Pignot-Shahov, 2012, p. 43). Qian (2002) also comments that, for students, the vocabulary knowledge includes an in-depth understanding of the meanings, syntax, sound structure, and pronunciation. Several previous studies have observed that vocabulary significantly contributes to the formation of written or spoken texts (e.g., see Gu, 2003; Nation, 1990). To advance their vocabulary, students should have opportunities to repetitively see and hear the new words, through different activities, which they are likely to forget otherwise. It is suggested that students should maintain vocabulary logs as separate notebooks to record new words that are exchangeable among peers and can be used inside and outside the classrooms for home assignments as well (Erling, Ashmore, & Kapur, 2016).

The results indicate (see Figure 1) that 55.4% of the participants admitted that they faced the problem in “Pronouncing New Vocabulary”. On the contrary, only a low proportion of the participants (17.5%) disagreed while others remained undecided. Rohmatillah (2017) confirms the students’ “difficulties in pronouncing the words” (p. 82). This is mainly due to the difference in spoken and written English, for instance, pronouncing words like muscle, listen and so on. Schmitt (2000) also establishes that students face difficulties in pronouncing the words with similar forms, for instance, pool, polo, pollen, pole, pall, pill, etc. Such challenges may cause confusion in both spelling and pronunciation. Rababah’s (2005) study also reveals that the Arab students encounter problems related to stress and intonation due to the pronunciation difference between English and Arabic. Some strategies may solve students’ pronunciation problems. To cite, the teachers should identify pronunciation errors and teach to pronounce words correctly through special pronunciation classes as well as students should be encouraged to consult the dictionary (Hassan, 2014). The learners should be informed that their unintelligible language could annoy the listeners; therefore, they should practice important and complex sounds to improve their pronunciation. Besides, pronunciation should be taught as an integral part of the spoken language and so on (e.g., see Al-Zayed, 2017; Begum & Hoque, 2016; Sara, 2015; Simon, Kilyeni, & Suci, 2015).

An overwhelming majority, 69.8%, of the undergraduates also agreed (see Figure 1) that “Spelling New Vocabulary” was problematic for them. On the contrary, 11.3% of the participants were undecided and 18.9% responded negatively. The learners have to focus on what words look (spelling) and what they sound (pronunciation). Usually, errors are caused when students fail to perceive a sound-spelling mismatch, which ultimately causes word-learning difficulties. Moreover, different “spelling patterns can also cause confusion where the pronunciation is concerned” (Rohmatillah, 2017, p. 82). Spelling is a critical literacy skill. However, the teachers sometimes marginalize it. Presumably, more attention is placed on reading and writing skills based on the belief that the English spelling system is unsymmetrical. Arguably, spelling is also important as it promotes reading (Reed, 2012). Bowen (2011) acknowledges that students face spelling problems peculiar to the L1 Arabic learners of English. One of the most obvious reasons can be that spelling is not taught with a prescribed syllabus in mind. Bowen suggested some activities for teachers that must be engaging and memorable, tailor-made to solve the students’ general and specific problems, and related to the making and breaking of words. The activities include segmentation, phoneme/grapheme correspondences and so on. Simmons (2007) also claims that students in “general have difficulty using the correct spelling strategies” (p. 160). As suggested, a more systematic methodology should be employed to spelling while teaching the students. The learners’ spelling problem can be addressed through strategies such as rule-based approach, multiple efforts, resource based, and brute force (Peterson, 2005). Several other previous works on vocabulary have recommended different strategies to lessen the learners’ spelling problems (e.g., see Basner, 2011; Dymock & Nicholson, 2017; Jackson, Konza, Ben-Evans, & Roodenrys, 2003; Rashid, Yousuf, & Imran, 2012; Shankweiler & Lundquist, 1992).

As the results indicate, the responses to the problem “Memorizing New Vocabulary” were also recorded in a high number (see Figure 1). 68.9% of the participants claimed that they faced difficulty. Comparatively, a low proportion (14.1%) of the participants disagreed to this problem. During the vocabulary acquisition process, a reasonable time is spent on memorizing the words but in a quite traditional manner such as remembering with the assistance of contextualized or non-contextualized fixed wordlists from textbooks (Mondria & Mondria-De Vries, 1994). The Saudi



university students have difficulty in memorizing new vocabulary; particularly, they have “difficulty in memorizing the prefix and suffix of words” as reported by Baniabdelrahman and Al-Shumaimeri (2014, p. 89). Memory strategies, known as mnemonics, retain words in the memory in different ways. First, they include classifying language material into meaningful units (nouns, verbs, and topics). Second, they link the new language knowledge with concepts already established in the memory. Third, they engage in a new language in a context (use a words or phrases in meaningful sentences). Fourth, they relate a new language to memory concepts by using visual imagery, semantic mapping (arrange words into diagrams), and remembering words by using auditory and visual links and their sounds (see Li, 2004; Oxford, 1990). Similarly, Zhang (2011) suggests that students might also memorize words by listening to words repeatedly, by reading words, and by guessing the meaning from context that helps the students to understand the meanings of unknown words. For more information about memorizing vocabulary and related strategies, see other works (e.g., Easterbrook, 2013; Nemati, 2009; Yu, 2011).

In response to the problem related to “Recognizing New Words,” the results confirm that majority of the participants (57.6%) responded positively, 20.8% of the participants remained undecided but a small minority of the participants (21.6%) responded negatively. San and Soe (2016) report the grammatical difficulties encountered by the EFL learners at the university level of education. The study shows that students positively responded to the problems they faced in identifying plural forms of nouns, past tenses of verbs. Rohmatillah (2017) also reveals that the “grammatical form of a word known as inflections” (p. 69) has been a difficulty for students in learning the vocabulary. However, without information about the words as noun, verb, adjective, or adverb, it would be impossible for students to use words correctly in speaking or writing forms. Students should recognize different types of learning circumstances for different words. Some words exist in the students’ oral vocabularies for which they need to learn to use them. Other words may act as labels for familiar concepts. Further, some words may represent a concept that must be acquired but not through traditional vocabulary instructions (Nagy, 1988). Several researchers have investigated the word recognition phenomenon from different perspectives (see e.g., Alco, 2010; Chard, & Osborn 1999; Phala, 2013; Probert & De Vos, 2016). One particular strategy with significant benefits for identifying unfamiliar words is a “vocabulary self-collection” (p. 88) strategy. It promotes the words consciousness and independent learning because the learners are actively engaged in knowing news words from their readings and develop vocabulary (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2011).

The analysis also reveals that PSAU undergraduates even confronted problems in “Learning Meaning of Technical Terms” (see Figure 1). A high percentage (64.7%) of the participants acknowledged facing this problem. Nonetheless, the lowest proportion of the participants (13.4%) reacted negatively. Technical words create difficulties due to their specific meanings and rare uses. Chung and Nation (2003, 2004) observe that technical terms in textbooks are a main concern for the language learners. These words appear in textbooks of various academic disciplines and become challenging for students in understating their meaning. Several strategies can solve this problem; for instance, students can rely on dictionaries and guessing strategies to learn technical terms (Fan, 2003). Students at the university level of education from different streams can exploit different learning strategies to deal with technical vocabulary such as determination strategies (by discovering new word’s meanings), social strategies (by interacting with other people), memory strategies (by recalling meaning), cognitive and metacognitive

strategies (by evaluating their own leaning) as suggested by Wanpen, Sonkoontod and Nonkukhetkhong (2013). Effective learning strategies and appropriate instructional methods are useful for students to make sense of new vocabulary. One such proposed activity is the “same word different subject” activity. It gives the students an explanation about technical words that have one meaning and used in one subject and specialized words used in different subjects and have different meaning. Some more similar activities include “scavenger hunt” and so on (Stowe, 2015, pp. 4-5).

Likewise, the questionnaire item “Giving Enough Time to Studies” indicated that a vast majority of the respondents (72.2%) accepted that they do not spare enough time for their studies whereas 13.4% of the participants disagreed. On the contrary, sparing time for studies has shown a positive impact on the university students’ academic performance. Alsalem et al. (2017) in their research conclude that the university students in Saudi Arabia who exercised the time management skills for completing their home assignments yielded better academic performance. Thus, the practice of not sparing time by PSAU students for their studies is a ‘bad study habit’ that may affect their academic performance. Previous research has confirmed the role of the study habits in academic achievements. Ebele and Olofu (2017) point out that good study habits guarantee the success in learning the vocabulary because they have a close relationship with students’ academic performance. Similarly, the students’ level of motivation and length of study time do determine the degree of academic achievements (see Gbore, 2006; Kunal, 2008; Ukpong & George, 2013). Based on such recommendations and empirical confirmations, PSAU English majors should devote a long time to their studies to improve their academic grades. Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, and Willingham (2013) also propose “a schedule of practice that spreads out study activities over time” (p.6) should be implemented. Time management is one of the effective skills categorized under good study habits. Students should study in their peak study time when they are fully awake, alert and able to absorb new information. They can also make use of bonus study time that is free or extra time such as unexpected break, free hours, and cancelled lecturers (Mayland Community College, 2002).

The results also point out that 59.4% of the participants believed in “Remembering Words without Understanding Meaning.” Thus, PSAU students try to learn English vocabulary without understanding the meanings essential for text comprehension. However, the difficult vocabulary is an indicator of a difficult text and the readers’ vocabulary knowledge is a predictor of their understating of the text. Readers’ lack of knowledge as a fundamental part of education is a severe obstacle for many students (Nagy, 1988). Cain and Oakhill (2014) suggest that vocabulary is connected with comprehension in some aspects, for instance, inference making, and global coherence. The PSAU English majors acknowledged that 64.1% of the participants never practised any “Vocabulary Learning Strategies” to improve their knowledge of words. On the contrary, learning strategies play an instrumental role in learning a second or foreign language. Studies have proved that successful students follow the learning strategies covering all language skills (e.g., see Manzanera Pagès, 2015). It has also been argued that vocabulary plays a vital role in English language acquisition at a college level. The process of vocabulary learning includes not only knowing the meanings of the words but also all aspects of a particular word have to be known (He, 2010).

As demonstrated in Figure 1, 43.8 % of PSAU undergraduates “Never Guess Meaning through Context”. The technique is useful to deal with unfamiliar words. The context is of two

types: context within the text including information related to morphology, semantics, and syntax and the general context related to the readers' background knowledge about the subjects (Nation & Coady, 1988). This technique is a sub-skill of reading, which can make the learners depend more on the context than relying heavily on a dictionary (Selçuk, 2006). The study also confirms that EFL university students, both successful and unsuccessful guessers, sometimes need proper training and monitoring to learn the meanings from the context. Hardanti, Sutarsyah, and Yufrizal (2015) also advocate that guessing the meanings from the context "is the most practical method to comprehend both written and oral communication" (p.3). Without vocabulary knowledge, comprehension stays afar from students because it involves more than just remembering words, for instance, the use of words in a natural way inside a context. Some other strategies also include guessing the meanings from the context, looking up dictionaries frequently, remembering words by the meanings when reading again, connecting new words to the students' first language, repeating words, and practising (Easterbrook, 2013). Teachers should also use various strategies to help students understand the meaning through the context, associate new vocabulary with already learned words and even help them memorise words and meanings. No doubt, the students need a large number of word meanings to communicate effectively (Ferreira, 2007). For more works related to teaching and learning the vocabulary, see other studies (e.g., Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 2008).

Concerning the problem of "Learning Cultural-Specific Vocabulary", 63.9% of the participants responded positively (see Figure 1). In contrast, only a small minority of the participants (19.9%) found it easy to understand such type of vocabulary and 16.2% remained undecided. Usually, culture-loaded words are simple words, idioms, or expressions that convey a deep meaning about a specific nation or culture. A foreign language learner interested in learning such culture-loaded vocabulary should also know the cultural implications of such words. The results illustrate that PSAU English majors' are mostly unable to follow the culture-loaded vocabulary. Instead, their knowledge and awareness about such words must be enhanced. To solve this problem, teachers should expand their instructional method to teach the culture-loaded words by employing various resources. The students themselves should also realize the importance of the cultural-loaded vocabulary and make efforts to advance their knowledge of a native and target culture by learning the vocabulary (Yuewu, 2015). Zhao (2014) recommends that teachers should enhance their own and students' cultural consciousness of English words to facilitate comprehension and interpretation of literary texts. Similarly, the teachers equipped with the latest linguistic and pedagogical theories can teach vocabulary in a better way. The teaching practice through the contrastive method yields better results where students can draw a comparison between a native culture and target culture. In addition, the teachers should strengthen the students' autonomous learning ability so that they can draw conclusions themselves and act as guides to recommend different sources vital for enhancing the vocabulary knowledge. On the other hand, students should pay attention to the cultural-loaded words and learn these words via various channels, such as "surfing the Internet, chatting with foreign friends ... attending online micro-class" (p, 41) to improve their self-study learning abilities and cultural communicative abilities (Guan & Zhao, 2016).

Figure 1 illustrates that a large percentage (53.3%) of PSAU students also accepted that the problem occurred in "Understanding Compound-word Meaning." A lexical item may seem

problematic if it consists of more than one words encountered by the language learners, for instance, a compound noun, phrasal verbs and so on (Rohmatillah, 2017). Another study, investigating the university students' problems in learning English, advocates that the learners of English as a second language (ESL) and native speakers both face comprehension problems in following compound nouns (Charteris-Black, 1998). Compound words appear in the text in different forms, some of which may not have clues for readers to decipher the meanings. Therefore, the teachers should introduce compound words from text and train their students to find the meanings (Fernandes, 2006). When questioned about "Learning Homophones," 55.2% of PSAU English majors admitted their inability to understand and learn the words having the same pronunciation but different spelling and meanings. The results concur with the study about difficulties encountered by the Arab learners of English in differentiating and giving the right spelling of homophones (Ja'far, 2011). Similarly, another study conducted by Ibrahim (2018) witnesses that the university undergraduates face problems in "using homophones and homographs words...not able to distinguish...in context...confusion among students when using the words" (p. 3). To solve this problem, a seven-step plan can be implemented in a language classroom, which includes reading or listening to the text, visualizing the meaning, identifying grammatical structures, categorizing words, analyzing word meanings within the context, owning the words and assessing the new meanings (see Jacobson, Lapp & Flood, 2007).

The results also demonstrate that PSAU undergraduates (54.3 %) fail to understand "Multiple-meaning Words" required for communication in classrooms. In comparison, only 24.7 % of the participants disagreed and 21% remained undecided about the problem. Lin (2014) also points out that learning the meanings of multiple words is a challenge for the learners of English. They fail to identify additional meanings and the context. To facilitate students in learning the words with multiple meanings, the teachers should offer explicit instructions and enhance the students' awareness. The teachers can provide students with direct instructions and definitions of the words with new meanings and give examples. Secondly, the teachers can introduce a new meaning in a particular context. However, one word with the multiple meanings may not be taught simultaneously. The words should be constantly reviewed through different learning points to have retention. The students should be encouraged to increase their consciousness of the multiple-meaning words by highlighting the words that pose confusion, reading sentences, and consulting a dictionary (Lin, 2014). Large dictionaries that have sub-entries for a unique sense of a word are also accommodating for students facing such problems (Anderson & Nagy, 1993).

Overall, this study reflects that a high percentage of PSAU English majors acknowledged facing the problems in learning the vocabulary by responding to the questionnaire items enlisted in Figure 1. Based on the results, the current study has discussed some of the strategies to minimize the problems and enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

This study, utilizing the questionnaire, has investigated vocabulary-learning problems confronted by PSAU English majors in pursuing their 4-year BA program at the Department of English. By analyzing the responses of the student-participants, it has been confirmed that the learners face vocabulary-learning problems even at the university level of education. The problems surfaced as difficulties in pronouncing new words, spelling new words, using new words correctly,

identifying grammatical structure of words, guessing the meanings from the context and others. Hence, this study argues that PSAU students have a limited 'word repository,' an issue that should be addressed seriously. These vocabulary-learning problems cause to weaken the students' reading comprehension, writing power, and communication skills due to lack of the vocabulary knowledge. It also puts forward some strategies, from the teaching-learning perspectives, which can resolve the difficulties related to learning the vocabulary.

To its limitations, this study focuses on emphasizing the problems faced by the students in learning the English vocabulary. It is suggested that the future research should examine in detail the reasons behind vocabulary-learning problems. Also, the future studies may investigate teachers' perspectives on instructional methods they use inside the language classrooms and the problems they face in teaching vocabulary to students.

Hopefully, this study will raise awareness in students, highlight the importance of learning the vocabulary, and motivate the students to overcome their problems by following the proposed strategies. This study also recommends that PSAU 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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