INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OF RURAL ESL SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

By

RAJU DHULI *

RAJAKUMAR GUDURU **

*-** *School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.*

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary development significantly contributes to language proficiency, yet the journey of acquiring new words poses substantial challenges, particularly for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The objective of this study is to examine the particular difficulties encountered by ESL learners in acquiring new vocabulary and to gain insights into the root causes of these challenges. Additionally, the study seeks to explore effective targeted interventions that ESL teachers can employ to mitigate these difficulties. The study includes 520 ninth-grade students consisting of 315 boys and 205 girls from five government rural secondary schools, along with ten ESL teachers. To identify vocabulary learning difficulties, the facilitator administered a vocabulary learning difficulties questionnaire to students. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to understand the underlying reasons for these difficulties. Using SPSS version 28, the researcher analyzed quantitative data, and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The analysis revealed various difficulties in vocabulary learning, including difficulties in pronunciation, contextual usage, grammar comprehension, understanding homophones, homonyms, and homographs, spelling complex words, using collocates, phrasal words, and idioms, and memorization and translation issues. Interviews with teachers identified limited exposure to English, ineffective classroom instruction, lack of opportunities in vocabulary learning activities, and insufficient opportunities for reading and writing practice in English as primary reasons for vocabulary difficulties. The findings of the study offer valuable insights for ELT material developers, educational institutions, and language instructors aiming to alleviate vocabulary learning challenges.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning, Learning Difficulties, ESL Learners, Rural Students, Vocabulary Instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The global ascendancy of the English language as a principal medium of communication among leaders, professionals, social influencers, and celebrities underscores the critical importance of English language acquisition for the effective articulation of ideas. Mastery of English, particularly through the extensive development of vocabulary, has become indispensable for students striving to communicate with clarity and precision. Vocabulary mastery functions as a critical indicator of competence across all language domains, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Given the foundational role vocabulary plays in language acquisition, its instruction becomes a cornerstone of English as a foreign language (EFL) curricula. The acquisition of a diverse and expansive lexicon not only bolsters career prospects and learning efficiency but also instills confidence in language usage, thereby supporting the attainment of holistic language proficiency. McCarthy (1990) argued that effective communication in a second language is fundamentally dependent on

This paper has objectives related to SDGs

vocabulary, regardless of grammar proficiency or pronunciation accuracy. Recognizing the essential role of vocabulary in language acquisition, scholars have identified and developed various explicit and implicit methodologies known as vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2005; Schmitt, 2011; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Among the various taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), classification is particularly noteworthy for its comprehensive categorization of vocabulary acquisition techniques (Schmitt & Schmitt 2020). Schmitt's taxonomy identifies six overarching strategies, which are organized into two primary categories: discovery and consolidation. The discovery category is further divided into two sub-strategies: social and determination strategies. In contrast, the consolidation category comprises four sub-strategies: memory, social, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Additionally, a number of researchers have explored the application of VLS in different contexts. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL students at a Malaysian university. The study underscored the significance of strategies such as reading, utilizing dictionaries, and incorporating new vocabulary into daily conversations as effective means to enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Despite the provision of strategies aimed at improving vocabulary knowledge, ESL students continue to face significant challenges in developing their vocabulary, leading to widespread difficulties as documented in previous studies. Lutfiyah et al. (2022) examined the obstacles encountered by second-semester university students in vocabulary learning, identifying challenges such as spelling and pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary skill development, correct usage, and comprehension of connotations. Susanto (2021) analyzed the difficulties students face in acquiring English vocabulary, particularly in selecting appropriate word meanings and understanding contextual usage. The vocabulary learning challenges encountered by EFL students have been explored in several studies, which consistently highlighted struggles with pronunciation,

spelling, word memorization, and grammar as significant obstacles in vocabulary learning (Komalasari, 2022; Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Puteri et al., 2022; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021).

Arochman et al. (2023) concentrated on specific challenges in vocabulary learning, including pronunciation, memorization, meaning differentiation, similar-sounding words with different meanings, and the relevance of vocabulary to learners' needs. The study revealed that students encountered several difficulties in word memorization, including challenges in pronunciation, difficulty differentiating word meanings, issues with pronouncing words that have similar sounds but different meanings, and learning vocabulary that is not aligned with their needs. Rohmatillah (2017) stated a study on freshmen at IAIN Raden Intan Lampung highlighted challenges in word articulation, writing, spelling, and navigating grammatical forms, including inflections. Aristya (2018) examined various difficulties in vocabulary mastery among students, identifying issues such as word retention, sentence comprehension, meaning interpretation, and challenges in writing or pronunciation, thereby emphasizing the diverse nature of individual challenges.

A sufficient vocabulary empowers learners to articulate viewpoints, engage in discussions on complex concepts, and effectively convey general knowledge. Conversely, a limited vocabulary hinders the expression of ideas and thoughts. Therefore, understanding the challenges in vocabulary acquisition among rural ESL students is critical for improving their vocabulary knowledge and overall language proficiency. Despite the growing emphasis on vocabulary in second and foreign language acquisition research, certain areas, particularly vocabulary learning difficulties, require further empirical investigation. While numerous studies have explored vocabulary learning challenges among college-level students, there remains a notable gap in understanding the difficulties faced by rural ESL secondary school learners (Afzal, 2019; Arochman et al., 2023; Lutfiyah et al., 2022). Therefore, the study aims to investigate the obstacles encountered by students from five distinct rural secondary schools.

Additionally, it seeks to elucidate the underlying reasons for these vocabulary learning difficulties and to provide implications for ESL instructors and material developers to address these issues through targeted instruction.

1. Literature Review

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to the development of language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Wangdi, 2022). Emphasizing the significance of vocabulary in language acquisition is crucial, as learning a language without a solid vocabulary base is virtually impossible. It is widely acknowledged that successful language learning hinges on the establishment of a robust vocabulary foundation. Learning vocabulary in a learner's native language is generally more straightforward than in a second language, and learners at the early stages of second language development often struggle to expand their vocabulary size in the L2. The process of acquiring vocabulary in a second language is particularly demanding and complex. According to many ELT experts, Salam and Nurnisa (2021) identified four key components that contribute to vocabulary learning difficulties: pronunciation, spelling, word length, and meaning. Additionally, Lutfiyah et al. (2022) conducted a study on vocabulary learning obstacles among second-semester university students, revealing several challenges. These include difficulties in accurately spelling and pronouncing English words, developing vocabulary skills, using vocabulary correctly, and understanding word connotations. Additionally, Susanto (2021) analyzed the challenges students face in acquiring English vocabulary, finding that students struggled with selecting the appropriate meanings of words and using them correctly in context. EFL students' vocabulary learning difficulties have been investigated, revealing persistent challenges in pronunciation, spelling, word memorization, and grammatical usage (Komalasari, 2022; Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Puteri et al., 2022; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). Arochman et al. (2023) further examined obstacles to vocabulary memorization, particularly emphasizing difficulties related to pronunciation and meaning. These difficulties include challenges in utterance, differentiating word meanings, pronouncing words that sound similar but have different meanings, and learning vocabulary that is not suitable to learners' needs. Another study by Komalasari (2022) presented eighth-grade students' vocabulary learning difficulties. These difficulties, ranked from the highest to the lowest percentage scores, include difficulty in word classes, difficulty in pronunciation, difficulty in memorizing, difficulty in understanding word meanings, and difficulty in remembering word spelling. Lasabuda (2017) carried out a study to identify the difficulties of students' pronunciation in the 4th semester of the English Education Department of IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. In this study, the difficulties experienced by students in pronunciation are difficulty distinguishing words that have almost the same pronunciation, rare practice in English, lack of vocabulary, being carried away by local accent, shame, difficulty saying sentences rarely found, nervousness, and less understanding of the contents of the context intended.

The majority of past studies have focused on college-going students' vocabulary learning difficulties, and only a few studies have paid attention to understanding difficulties of school-level students in vocabulary learning (Komalasari, 2022; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Therefore, the rationale for focusing on 9th-class students is that these students have to appear for board exams conducted by the respective state government in the upcoming year. Hence, it is important for them to have good vocabulary knowledge to improve their English language proficiency. Hence, the focus of the present study is specifically dedicated to investigating the difficulties of rural secondary school 9th-class ESL students in learning vocabulary and what the ESL instructor and course designers could do to take necessary measures to address the same problems by bringing about changes in teaching and syllabus.

2. Research Question

The following are the research questions of the current study:

- What are the vocabulary-learning difficulties

encountered by rural 9th-class secondary school students?

- Why do rural ESL learners have difficulties in vocabulary learning, and how do institutions address it?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study includes 520 9th-grade students, including 315 boys, 205 girls, and 10 ESL teachers from five rural government secondary schools. All participants hailed from rural backgrounds and were aged between 14 and 15 years. Students' mother tongue is the primary language of instruction in these schools. The majority of these students are first-generation learners, originating from socially disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants, including the total number of students, gender distribution, age group, medium of instruction, and the educational background of the students' fathers.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 KET Test:

Before the study was conducted, the facilitator had administered a language proficiency test known as the Key English Test (KET) to see the current level of students' language proficiency. This test measures listening, writing, speaking, and reading comprehension. Each of the four sections carries 25% of the marks. The score in this test determines the level of proficiency according to the CEFR level system. For example, if the score is between 100 and 119, then the CEFR A1 level is assigned to the student; if the score is between 120 and 139, then the CEFR A2 level is assigned to the student. In this study, the results of the test revealed that the scores of the students ranged from 120 to 139, which means these students have A2-level

Factors	Description
Students	Total: 520 Total: 520 (315 boys; 205 girls)
Age group	14-16
Medium of Instruction	Odia
Education of Parents (Father's education)	Primary School-58; High School-154; Intermediate-55; graduation-53; Post Graduation-11; No Schooling-189

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

proficiency, which in turn implies that they share similar language proficiency and can be said to be homogenous participants.

3.3 Questionnaire

The current study employed a questionnaire to conduct a qualitative survey for the first research question. Before administering the questionnaire to the participants of the main study, a pilot study was conducted with a sample size of 60 students to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Also, the two ELT professors were asked to assess the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The random sample method was employed to select the above-said participants into the pilot study. Following the pilot study, the participants completed hard copies of the questionnaire provided by the facilitator in person. The questionnaire focused on identifying the vocabulary learning difficulties in six aspects, such as spelling, grammar, word meanings, contextual usage, memory and learning environments, and was adapted from previous scholarly studies. The reason that the facilitator focused only on the above six aspects is that the majority of the studies highlighted these aspects exclusively, and the students have major difficulties in these aspects. Data analysis was performed using SPSS, version 28 (Afzal, 2019; Altamimi & Ab Rashid, 2019; Lutfiyah et al., 2022; Komalasari, 2022; Rohmatillah, 2017; Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023).

The questionnaire was meticulously designed in a bilingual format, presenting questions in both English and the students' mother tongue to ensure clarity and effective responses from the students. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a bilingual ELT expert was asked to back-translate the questionnaire from the students' mother tongue to English. Before administering this questionnaire, the questionnaire was refined based on their feedback from the pilot study. This questionnaire consisted of 33 questions distributed across six categories. Each statement was presented on a five-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire structure was organized as follows: the first eight statements focused on

identifying difficulties in learning the form of words, while subsequent sections addressed difficulties in learning word meanings (statements 9 to 14), understanding word meanings from context (statements 15 to 20), grasping the grammar of words (statements 21 to 25), memorizing the words (26 to 29), and assessing the learning environment (statements 30 to 33).

The overall reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was deemed satisfactory. Internal consistency of the 33 statements within the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.884 for the present sample. Furthermore, reliability coefficients for the six subscales, namely difficulties in learning word form, meaning, context, grammar, memory, and learning environment, were determined to be 0.727, 0.722, 0.801, 0.708, 0.747, and 0.746, respectively. For the second research question, semi-structured interviews with teachers were administered. In order to gather information and data to answer the second research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers. Upon completing interviews, the facilitator made a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within gathered data.

4. Results

4.1 What are the vocabulary-learning difficulties encountered by rural 9th-class secondary school students?

In order to answer the first research question, 'What are the vocabulary-learning difficulties encountered by students?' it is important to examine the descriptive statistics for the difficulties in vocabulary learning in the aspects of spellings, grammar of words, meanings of words, or usage of words in the context and any learning environment. The students' responses have been presented in the following tables from 1 to 5.

The difficulties that ESL students find in learning the spellings of the word are shown in Table 2. With the close interpretation of the table, the facilitator identified the most difficulties students face when learning spellings were item 6 (I misplace letter in words like calm/*caml)

No	Section I: Difficulties in Learning Spellings of the Words	Total	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	I find problems in words that have no relation between pronunciation and spelling like honest, half, and island.	520	4.09	.766
2.	I have some confusion in words which have similar spellings like conceal/ cancel; price/prize.	520	4.17	.767
3.	I sometimes leave letters in words while writing e.g., guess or *gues.	520	4.09	.759
4.	I miswrite letters in words like hungry or *hangry.	520	4.18	.736
5.	I have difficulty in finding silent letters in words like know/wrong.	520	3.86	.989
6.	I misplace letter in words like calm/*caml.	520	4.28	.737
7.	I cannot spell complex words like comprehensible while reading.	520	3.90	.789
8.	I have difficulties in pronouncing unique and difficult words, like Epithet.	520	4.10	.771

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Difficulties in Learning Spellings of the Words

with a mean score (4.28), item 4 (I miswrite letters in words like hungry or hangry) with mean score (4.18), item 2 (I have some confusion in words which have similar spellings like conceal/cancel; price/prize) with a mean score (4.17), item 8 (I have difficulties in pronouncing unique and difficult words, like Epithet.) with a mean score (4.10), item 1 (I find problems in words that have no relation between pronunciation and spelling like honest, half, and island) with the mean score of (4.09), item 3 (I sometimes leave letters in words while writing e.g., guess or gues) with a mean score (4.09), item 7 (I cannot spell complex words like comprehensible while reading) with mean score (3.90), and item 5 (I have difficulty in finding silent letters in words like know/wrong) with mean score (3.86).

Based on the students' responses, it can be observed that the majority of the students have expressed their difficulties in learning spellings of the words, such as the first one, which is that students tend to misplace letters in words like calm/*caml; this is because of the fact that students lack writing practice in English in the classroom, and as a result, they get confused in writing or misplacing the letters in words while writing, and the second difficulty is that writing letters in words like hungry or *hangry, because they sound the same but have different meanings. Lutfiyah et al. (2022) and Rosyada-AS and

Apoko (2023) found results that align with the findings of this section. Rosyada-AS and Apoko (2023) found that a significant number of students faced difficulties in learning vocabulary. Interestingly, these findings align with the results of studies by Lutfiyah et al. (2022) and Rosyada-AS and Apoko (2023). Rosyada-AS and Apoko (2023) observed that many students encountered difficulties in learning vocabulary, particularly in areas such as accurate pronunciation, correct spelling, appropriate usage of word meanings, and effective retention of vocabulary. Similarly, Lutfiyah et al. (2022) reported challenges in articulating and spelling words correctly, improving vocabulary skills, and using vocabulary accurately.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the difficulties in learning the meanings of words. Upon analyzing the data in the above table, the researcher identified the most difficulties students face when learning the meaning of the words were item 9 (I find it difficult to think of other related words (collocates) while using a word in speaking), item 14 (I have problems in knowing meanings of new words), and item 12 (I have some difficulty in knowing synonyms or antonyms of a word) with mean scores of 4.23, 4.22, and 4.16, respectively. It is clear that the least difficulty the students faced in learning the meanings of the words was item 10 (I have difficulty in knowing several meanings of words). (e.g., bank), item 13 (I don't know how to use prepositions like on/off/instead), and item 11 (I have difficulty in using the right word to express the exact

meaning) with mean scores of 3.95, 3.95, and 4.07, respectively.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of difficulties in using the words in context. The most difficulties students face while using the lexical words in the context were item 20 (I have some difficulty in finding similar-sounding words (one & won) and similar-spelling words (desert & desert)), item 17 (I get confused between normal words and phrasal words like get up), item 16 (I know the meaning of words but cannot use them in speaking and writing), and item 19 (I don't know how to translate words or phrases into English from Odia or vice-versa) with the mean scores of 4.26, 4.25, 4.16, and 4.00, respectively. Whereas the least difficulties the students faced in using the lexical items in the context were item 15 (I find it difficult to use words in sentences) and item 18 (I have confusion with idioms like break a leg), with mean scores of 3.95 and 3.98, respectively.

Table 5 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of difficulties in learning the grammar of the words. The most difficulties students struggle with while learning the grammar of the words were item 22 (I face some confusion in identifying negative prefixes of words like misuse and disuse) and item 23 (I have problems in finding right suffixes and prefixes (innumerable, irresponsible)) with mean scores of 4.18 and 4.12, respectively. On the other hand, the least difficulties the students faced in learning the grammar of the words were item 24 (I find it difficult to add suffixes to word endings), item 21 (I do not know the various forms of verbs like past

No	Section II: Difficulties in Learning Meanings of the Words	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
9.	I find it difficult to think of other related words (collocates) while using a word in speaking.	520	4.23	.735
10.	I have difficulty in knowing several meanings of words. (E.g., bank)	520	3.95	.777
11.	I have difficulty in using right wod to express the exact meaning.	520	4.07	.806
12.	I have some difficulty in knowing synonyms or antonyms of a word.	520	4.16	.727
13.	I don't know how to use prepositions like on/off/instead.	520	3.95	.743
14.	I have problems in knowing meanings of new words.	520	4.22	.756

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Difficulties in Learning the Meanings of Words

No	Section III: Difficulties in Using the Words in Context	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
15.	I find it difficult to use words in sentences.	520	3.95	.822
16.	I know the meaning of words but cannot use them in speaking and writing.	520	4.16	.858
17.	I get confused between normal words and phrasal words like get up.	520	4.25	.738
18.	I have confusion with idioms like break a leg.	520	3.98	.796
19.	I don't know how to translate words or phrases into English from Odia or vice-versa.	520	4.00	.749
20.	I have some difficulty in finding similar-sounding words (one & won) and similar-spelling words (desert & desert).	520	4.26	.729

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Difficulties in Using the Words in Context

No	Section IV: Difficulties in Learning Grammar of the Words	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
21.	I do not know the various forms of verbs like past and present forms.	520	3.93	.845
22.	I face some confusion in identifying negative prefixes of words like misuse and disuse.	520	4.18	.829
23.	I have problems in finding right suffixes and prefixes (innumerable, irresponsible).	520	4.12	.747
24.	I find it difficult to add suffixes to word endings.	520	3.86	.989
25.	I have difficulty in identifying the part of speech of words.	520	3.98	.795

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Difficulties in Learning Grammar of the Words

and present forms), and item 25 (I have difficulty in identifying the part of speech of words), with mean scores of 3.86, 3.93, and 3.98, respectively.

Mean scores and standard deviations of the items on difficulties in memorizing words are shown in Table 6. The most difficulties students face in memorizing words were item 26 (I have a problem memorizing new words), item 28 (I have trouble recalling vocabulary words when I try to use them in conversation), and item 29 (I forget learned words easily after a short period of time), with the mean scores 4.30, 4.11, and 4.11, respectively. Also, the item with the fewest difficulties in memorizing words was item 27 (I can recognize vocabulary words when I see them, but I have difficulty recalling them without prompts) with a mean score of 3.98.

Table 7 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of learning environment statements. The responses of the participants indicated that their learning environment was not supportive for their learning, as students equally responded to the statements, such as item 30 (I don't

No	Section V: Difficulties in Memorizing Words	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
26.	I have a problem memorizing new words.	520	4.30	.692
27.	I can recognize words when I see them, but I have difficulty recalling them without prompts	520	3.98	.863
28.	I have trouble recalling words when I try to use them in conversation	520	4.11	.812
29.	I forget learned words easily after a short period of time.	520	4.14	.806

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for the Difficulties in Memorizing Words

No	Section VI: Learning Environment of the Students	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
30.	I don't have sufficient exposure to the English language.	520	4.28	.874
31.	I face some problems in learning vocabulary due to lack of resources.	520	3.96	.808
32.	I am less likely to meet words daily that I learnt.	520	4.11	.805
33.	Most of the classroom instruction is given in my mother tongue.	520	4.10	.796

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the Learning Environment of the Students

have sufficient exposure to English.), item 32 (I am less likely to meet words daily that I learn), item 33 (Most of the classroom instruction is given in my mother tongue.), and item 31 (I face some problems in learning vocabulary due to lack of resources.) with the mean scores of 4.28, 4.11, 4.10, and 3.896. Since the instruction of the classroom is in students' mother tongue, it is obvious that students do not get adequate exposure to English; as a result, they are less likely to meet the words that they learn daily.

4.2 Why do rural ESL learners have difficulties in vocabulary learning, and how do institutions address it?

Semi-structured interviews with 10 English language teachers from five different schools were administered to gain insights into the vocabulary learning difficulties students encounter. The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was performed to identify patterns and themes in the collected data. The analysis revealed two main areas of focus: teachers' beliefs regarding the reasons for vocabulary learning difficulties and the solutions they proposed to address these challenges.

4.2.1 Teachers' Beliefs on Reasons for Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

Table 8 presents the teachers' beliefs on why students face difficulties in vocabulary learning, as articulated during the interviews. The findings are discussed according to the thematic categories outlined.

Teachers' stated beliefs indicate that the majority of ESL students have come from the remotest areas, where the medium of instruction is in the Odia language rather than English in their schools. This situation limits their exposure to

Theme	Belief
Learning Environment	Rural background
	Odia medium instruction
	Limited exposure to English
	Classroom dynamics: seating arrangements, lighting, and acoustics
	Lack of visual, and auditory tools in the classroom
	Lack of technological tools
Practice and Guidance	Insufficient usage of learned words
	No active participation in reading and speaking activities
	Inadequate repetitive exercises focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation
	Dearth of collaborative activities: group discussions, debates, or study groups
Motivation and Support	Lack of self-interest
	No idea about setting word learning goals
	No sufficient provision of rewards, or certificates for achieving vocabulary milestones

Table 8. Teachers' Belief Statements on Vocabulary Difficulties

the English language. Due to this fact, students fail to know subtle nuances of the English spelling system, including homophones, homonyms, silent letters, and contractions. The second reason expressed by the teachers is the dearth of English reading and writing practice. Lack of proper practice and guidance hinders students' ability to internalize and differentiate various spelling patterns. Moreover, students learn words without using them in day-to-day communication, and then comprehension and retention of the words suffer profusely. Without contextual scaffolding or real-life usage scenarios, students find it challenging to imbibe the nuanced meanings and usage of unfamiliar words. Thirdly, teachers expressed the importance of keen listening in the classroom. When students pay less attention to listening, that makes them unable to understand the sound and spelling correspondence; consequently, they have issues in learning the pronunciation of words. Fourth, lack of motivation, guidance, and supportive materials contribute to students' vocabulary learning difficulties and low proficiency in language skills. Teachers 5 and 6 stated that the pedagogical landscape, particularly in rural settings, prioritizes grammar-focused instruction at the expense of vocabulary development. This disparity underscores the need for a balanced instructional approach that affords due attention to vocabulary

enrichment alongside grammatical mastery.

Additionally, three teachers asserted that a lack of emphasis on tasks, activities, and explicit tests on vocabulary aspects, the majority of the time spent in the classroom being devoted to only teaching, and less focus on vocabulary learning activities. Therefore, students usually have problems in vocabulary learning.

4.2.2 Institutes' Solutions to Address the Difficulties in Vocabulary Learning

Table 9 shows the opinions and suggestions expressed by the teachers to address the difficulties in vocabulary learning. Four teachers expressed that to effectively address the vocabulary learning difficulties, classroom instruction should be conducted predominantly in English to help students access language input. The traditional chalk-talk method should be replaced with a game- or task-based teaching method in the classroom. English instruction in the classroom is essential for improving communication skills in English, which in turn ensures consistent exposure to English and reinforces vocabulary acquisition. Another teacher said that instructional materials should be designed to include comprehensive vocabulary units covering diverse aspects such as meaning, spelling, grammar, collocation, synonyms, and

Theme	Opinions of the Teachers
Classroom Instruction	English language instruction
	Task-based language instruction
	Exercises and interactive tasks
	Vocabulary lessons on aspects of vocabulary
Instructional Materials	Display of words on walls
	Charts, and pictures of words
	Monolingual dictionaries
	Graded story books on vocabulary
Language Learning Activities	Ample amount of time for engagement in activities
	Word games and puzzles
	Quizzes, exercises, and word cards,
	Exercises that include fill-in-the-blanks, matching words to definitions, and sentence construction
Curriculum	More on practice and learning rather than only teaching
	Exclusive focus on integration of language skills with grammar and vocabulary
	More focus on game, task based learning than chalk and talk
	Balance between teaching core subjects and English language

Table 9. Teachers' Perspectives on Institutional Solutions for Overcoming Challenges

antonyms. Language immersive activities should also be incorporated, providing focused practice on vocabulary through engaging exercises and interactive tasks. Moreover, educators should encourage students to utilize effective vocabulary learning strategies, drawing from research findings, such as those proposed by Schmitt and Schmitt (2020). Also, two teachers stated that to improve vocabulary knowledge and mitigate difficulties in vocabulary learning, there must be an ample amount of time that must be given to students for speaking, listening, reading, and writing practice. In the school curriculum, the majority of the scope is dedicated to teaching and learning core subjects rather than language skills improvement. As a result, students' language skills suffer heavily. Therefore, it is pivotal that students spend time reading large chunks of materials in English; consequently, they will for sure encounter multiple words and phrases so that they can memorize and use them in context. Also, when students practice writing in English, it will enhance spelling skills and help them figure out how to use words in sentences.

Additionally, three teachers expressed that curriculum needs to be modified according to students' unique language needs. The majority of the schools' curriculum focuses on core subjects; scant attention is accorded to the improvement of language skills. Consequently, students' language skills suffer profusely. So, it is pivotal that curriculum developers make a point to reconsider giving sufficient attention to language skills improvement. So that students get better chances of learning and improving vocabulary knowledge and language skills. Finally, ESL instructors should adopt a balanced instructional approach that integrates both grammar-focused and vocabulary-focused instruction within the curriculum (Nation, 2005). Finally, almost three teachers asserted that activities in the classroom need to be improved; ESL teachers pay attention to only teaching the content all the time, and limited time is given to practice and engage students in language and vocabulary learning activities in the classroom. Thereby, students have theoretical knowledge of language, but they lack practical experience of knowledge. Therefore, students find it difficult to put the knowledge into use.

5. Discussion

The facilitator discovered that rural ESL students had difficulties in vocabulary learning. These difficulties can be attributed to various reasons, as mentioned below: First, teachers do not pay extensive attention to teaching the relation between sounds and the spelling system. As a result, students tend to make mistakes in spellings, like misplacing letters in words, as in calm/*caml, leaving letters in words while writing, e.g., hangry or *hungry, and using one word in place of another word, like cancel vs. conceal. Second, more focus is dedicated to teaching grammar and vocabulary, and less attention is given to operationalizing the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in communicative situations (Aristya, 2018). This in turn makes it difficult for students to remember and recall grammatical and lexical knowledge when using the same for speaking and writing. That is why students struggle to use collocates and the right words in speaking. Third, the medium of instruction is in students' mother tongue, where students read, listen, speak, and write more in their mother tongue than in English; consequently, they receive less English language input. According to Krashan (1992), input is crucial for second language development. Unless sufficient language exposure is provided to students, there will be problems, like students failing to understand the difference among normal words, phrasal words, and idioms. They also struggle to translate sentences from their mother tongue to English or vice versa. Moreover, they find it difficult to use the right suffixes and prefixes and identify parts of speech. Even students have difficulties in memorizing learned words. This is because of a lack of using cognitive and memory vocabulary learning strategies. Finally, lack of motivation from teachers to students precipitates the difficulties in learning vocabulary.

Besides enumerating the reasons for vocabulary difficulties, the facilitator elicited the teachers' opinions on the solutions that the educational institutions take to resolve the above-stated problems. Some of the solutions stated by the teachers in interviews are as follows: replacing L1 instruction with English instruction in the classroom, making the teaching more activity- and task-

oriented rather than chalk-and-talk, dedicating time to teaching vocabulary aspects, providing supplementary learning materials like bilingual dictionaries, charts, and storybooks, and optimizing technological tools in the classroom for effective learning. These solutions mainly highlighted the crucial changes and recommendations in educational policies that affect curriculum, classroom instruction, learning activities, and instructional materials. The results of this study corresponded with the findings of the past studies that explored vocabulary learning difficulties among ESL/EFL students (Puteri et al. 2022; RosyadAS & Apoko, 2023; Rohmatillah, 2017).

6. Findings of the Study

This study investigated the challenges that rural ESL learners face when acquiring vocabulary. The study's key findings showed that students' poor English reading habits and lack of basic vocabulary knowledge cause them confusion with phrasal verbs, homophones, and homonyms. Another significant finding is that students' inability to distinguish between sound and spelling correspondence stems from their lack of phonetic awareness, which causes them to make spelling mistakes like misplacing letters, omitting letters, and confusing words with similar sounds. Also, they are not practicing speaking English and listening to English conversations, which, in turn, results in a lack of proficiency with collocations, phrasal verbs, synonyms, and antonyms. Additionally, learners do not receive the English language exposure, sufficient motivation, and guidance; hence, they face difficulties in vocabulary learning. One of the important findings of this study is that learners are not taught intensive reading in order to familiarize them with grammar and word formation rules. When learners know how to read intensively, they can understand the nuances in word-formation rules. Moreover, as per the results, learners have less retention or memory power when it comes to remembering and recalling learned words, so it can be inferred that learners are not practicing vocabulary learning strategies in order to remember, recall, and use words better as and when needed in communication. Finally, important findings from the teacher interviews indicated that game- or task-based learning methods and classroom English education are effective ways to help students overcome the challenges they have when acquiring vocabulary. Additionally, tasks like phrase construction, fill-in-the-blanks, and matching words to meanings can help overcome difficulties with vocabulary learning.

7. Implications of the Study

The implications of the study offer insights for ESL teachers and institutions to address the vocabulary learning difficulties and improve the quality of instruction in the classroom. The study offers some key implications for English language teachers:

- English language teachers should integrate intensive and extensive reading courses into the curriculum. In doing so, students get chances to read a bulk of materials in English; consequently, students improve their basic vocabulary knowledge.

- Teachers should encourage students to use language learning techniques, such as mnemonic devices, contextual guessing, and semantic mapping of words in the classroom for improving word knowledge.

- ESL instructors must explicitly make students aware of various vocabulary learning strategies to develop vocabulary-related memory retention.

- Making a balanced syllabus that includes proportionately both grammar- and vocabulary-based content is necessary for students to diminish the difficulties confronted by them.

- Teachers also need to make students aware of distinct spelling systems and nuances of vocabulary such as homophones, homonyms, and homographs.

- Learners should be motivated and properly guided on reading, speaking, and listening to English so as to improve vocabulary knowledge.

- It is also important to incorporate technology and multimedia resources, such as online dictionaries, vocabulary-building apps, interactive games, and multimedia materials, to engage students in vocabulary learning.

- Teachers should urge students to participate in extracurricular activities, including reading books written in English, viewing English-language films or television series, listening to English podcasts, and taking part in language exchange programs.

- Syllables designers should give ample scope for students to engage in vocabulary learning activities, exercises, and games to improve short- and long-term memory.

- Students should be encouraged to consider how they have learned vocabulary and to come up with efficient ways to increase their word knowledge.

- Teachers should provide ample opportunities for the students to engage in tasks and activities of vocabulary aspects.

Conclusion

This study highlighted several significant challenges faced by rural ESL students in vocabulary acquisition. Key issues include insufficient emphasis on the relationship between sounds and spelling, an overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary without adequate application in communicative contexts, limited exposure to English due to instruction primarily in the students' mother tongue, and a lack of effective cognitive and memory-based vocabulary learning strategies. Additionally, low teacher motivation has been identified as a contributing factor to these difficulties. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Teachers suggested several solutions to improve vocabulary learning, including replacing the primary language of instruction with English, adopting activity-based and task-oriented teaching methods, dedicating more time to vocabulary instruction, providing supplementary learning materials such as bilingual dictionaries and charts, and integrating technological tools into the classroom. Implementing these recommendations could lead to significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition by enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of instruction. These changes are crucial for developing educational policies and practices that better support rural ESL students in overcoming their vocabulary learning difficulties. By focusing on these areas, educational institutions can create a more conducive learning environment that addresses the specific needs of these students and fosters their language development more effectively.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix: Vocabulary-Learning Difficulties

Questionnaire

Rate your level of agreement by putting a right tick

with each statement

Form:

1. I find problems in words that have no relation between pronunciation and spelling like honest, half, and island.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

2. I have some confusion in words which have similar spellings like conceal/cancel; price/prize.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

3. I sometimes leave letters in words while writing e.g., guess or *gues.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

4. I miswrite letters in words like hungry or *hangry.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly

disagree ( )

5. I have difficulty in finding silent letters in words like know/wrong.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

6. I misplace letter in words like calm/*caml.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

7. I cannot spell complex words like comprehend while reading.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

8. I have difficulties in pronouncing unique and difficult words like Epithet.

Meaning:

9. I have difficulty in using right word to express the exact meaning.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

10. I have difficulty in knowing several meanings of words. (E.g., bank)

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

11. I find it difficult to think of other related words (collocates) while using a word in speaking.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

12. I have difficulty in knowing synonyms or antonyms of a word.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

13. I Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

14. I have problems in knowing meanings of new words.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

Context:

15. I find it difficult to use words in sentences.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

16. I know the meaning of words but cannot use in speaking and writing.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

17. I get confusion between normal words and phrasal words like get up.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

18. I have confusion with idioms like break a leg.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

19. I don't know how to translate words or phrases into English from Odia or vice-versa.

20. I have some difficulty in finding similar-sounding words (one & won) and similar-spelling words (desert & desert).

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

Grammar:

21. I do not know the various forms of verbs like past, present forms.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

22. I face some confusion in identifying negative prefixes of words like misuse, and disuse.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

23. I find it difficult to add suffixes to word endings.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

24. I have problems in finding right suffixes and prefixes (innumerable, irresponsible).

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

25. I have difficulty in identifying part of speech of words.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly

disagree ( )

Memory:

26. I have problem in memorizing new words.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

27. I can recognize words when I see them, but I have difficulty recalling them without prompts.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

28. I have trouble recalling words when I try to use them in conversation.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

29. I forget learned words easily after short period of time.

Learning environment:

30. I don't have sufficient exposure to the English language.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

31. I face some problems with lack of learning resources.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

32. I am less likely to meet words daily which I learnt.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

33. Most of the classroom instruction is given in my mother tongue.

Strongly agree ( ) agree ( ) neutral ( ) disagree ( ) strongly disagree ( )

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Raju Dhuli is a Ph.D. scholar in the field of English Language Teaching, currently pursuing his Doctorate at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar. His academic journey has been marked by notable achievements and a deep passion for linguistic studies. He earned his Master's degree in English from the Central University of Andhra Pradesh, where he demonstrated exceptional aptitude and dedication. In 2019, he qualified for the University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) in Linguistics. His research, initiated in 2021, focuses on improving speaking skills among rural secondary school students. His research interests include Vocabulary Development, Speaking Skills, Second Language Acquisition, Language Assessment, and Teacher Education.

Dr. Rajakumar Guduru is currently working as an Assistant Professor of English at the School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, IIT Bhubaneswar, India. He received his M.A. (TESL), M.Phil., and Ph.D. in English Language Teaching (ELT) from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. He has been honored with the Teaching Excellence Award for five consecutive years at IIT Bhubaneswar in recognition of his outstanding teaching. His research interests include the Development of Critical Vocabulary among ESL Learners, Cognitive Reading Skills, Second Language Acquisition, Teacher Education and Development, Communication Skills, and the Integration of Technology in Language Learning.