The Difficulties That Faced Libyan Students in Learning English Vocabulary and Understanding Academic Texts

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Abstract

This study examines Libyan students' difficulties in acquiring the English language and comprehending academic writing. The research delineates particular vocabulary-related challenges and their effects on reading comprehension and academic achievement. A quantitative methodology was employed, utilizing a questionnaire administered to 32 students from the English department at Aljufra University. The results demonstrate that students face considerable difficulties in enhancing their vocabulary, employing words correctly, and comprehending phrasal verbs. The challenges are frequently intensified by cultural and linguistic disparities between Arabic and English, impeding students' ability to identify equivalent concepts in both languages. It also reveals that many students rely on traditional learning methods, such as dictionaries, flashcards, and repetition. While these strategies are somewhat effective, they are insufficient for mastering the complexities of academic English. The research highlights the necessity for educational institutions to provide additional support, including targeted vocabulary instruction, workshops, and one-on-one tutoring, to enhance students' academic writing and comprehension skills. Over 60% of the participants expressed the need for more excellent institutional support in academic writing, emphasizing the importance of structured resources to improve their learning outcomes.

The results further emphasize the challenges associated with phrasal verbs and complex vocabulary, which remain common obstacles for non-native speakers. Addressing these areas through culturally responsive teaching techniques and providing real-world examples could make learning more relatable for students.

The research underlines the importance of a comprehensive approach to vocabulary learning that incorporates both traditional and modern methods. Educators' focused effort to provide vocabulary support, academic assistance, and culturally relevant instruction is essential for improving Libyan students' vocabulary, enhancing their comprehension of scholarly texts, and ultimately enabling their educational success.

Keywords: English vocabulary, difficulties, understanding academic texts

1. Introduction

In today's world, where English has become integral to every aspect of life, teaching and learning the language are gaining momentum. English is the language of science, technology, and global communication, playing a significant role in a country's development. Besides its importance as an international language, it is also referred to as the "major window on the world," highlighting its role as

a crucial tool for communication. We share our ideas, feelings, views, and thoughts with others through language.

Proficiency in vocabulary is essential for understanding the material. Understanding word definitions and properly utilizing this knowledge isvitalfor reading comprehension. A diverse vocabulary enhances readers' comprehension of materials. Proficient readers typically possess a vast vocabulary, facilitating their ability to read and understand texts effectively. An extensive vocabulary offers readers greater mastery over their cognition and improves their knowledge. Enhancing vocabulary knowledge is a crucial component of education, functioning as both a method to facilitate learning and an objective [7].

The significance of vocabulary in language learning is evident from the many studies published on the topic. Various studies [16; 19; 22] have shown that the growth of reading vocabulary in ESL/EFL students is slower than in their first language. For example, after two cycles of action research, students' mean scores increased from 33.57 (pre-test) to 80 (post-test of cycle II). Marbun (2017) also conducted action research using the Team Games Tournament method to improve junior high school student's vocabulary, with successful results after two cycles. Although vocabulary is often seen as challenging by students learning a second language, it is relatively easier than mastering new structures in content and expression [8]. Steven Stahl (2005) states, "Vocabulary knowledge not only implies knowing a word's definition but also understanding how that word fits into the world." Therefore, this research explores various strategies to enhance English vocabulary learning, especially since many students lack basic knowledge of English rules despite being taught as a fundamental subject in schools.

2. Statement of the Problem

A lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge is already a significant and obvious obstacle for many students, and this problem is likely to worsen as more students fall into categories considered educationally at risk. At the same time, advances in knowledge are creating an ever-larger pool of concepts and words that students must master to be literate and employable.

Our studies of English language learning and communication with English department students show that Libyan students face numerous problems learning English vocabulary during their college years. The researcher believes that English language majors and graduates in Libya struggle with using English for communication, both during their education and after graduation. In authentic communicative situations, they often lack the necessary vocabulary. The researcher has observed several difficulties Libyan students face in understanding language, particularly in literary texts. One of the reasons for these problems is the cultural and linguistic differences between English and Arabic, which prevent students from finding equivalents for some words.

Additionally, they struggle with:

- Increasing their vocabulary.
- Using words correctly.
- Managing words with multiple meanings.
- Remembering new words.
- Limited time and materials for learning.
- Lack of interest and knowledge about how to learn or pronounce new words.

When Libyan students read, they often encounter complex ideas that require them to rely heavily on dictionaries, which can impede their comprehension [6]. The insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and the inability to use it effectively contribute to their weaknesses in English language skills.

Albosaif (2011:20) highlighted that the lack of vocabulary and the time-consuming use of dictionaries contribute to students' struggles in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Robert Lado (1955) also addressed difficulties in teaching vocabulary, emphasizing three critical aspects of words: form, meaning, and distribution. He also noted the importance of considering different word classes and functions in language teaching.

3. Aim and Objectives

This research paper aims to investigate whether there is a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the comprehension of academic texts. It also seeks to identify the difficultiesfaced by English department students at Aljufra University in learning vocabulary and explore teaching strategies to help Libyan studentsexpand their English vocabulary. The objective is to enhance vocabulary knowledge, enabling students to use more descriptive words for better communication. Understanding new words will allow Libyan students to use their English vocabulary more effectively in speaking and writing. Acquiring a sufficient amount of vocabulary will help them succeed in the academic programs they study in English.

4. Research Questions

To achieve the research objectives, the following questions must be addressed:
1. Is there a correlation between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of academic texts?
2. What difficulties do Libyan students face in comprehending academic texts?

5. Literature Review

The previous studies the theoretical background and related literature, including discussions on vocabulary and text comprehension and the vital role of vocabulary knowledge in text comprehension. This research examines the effects of vocabulary knowledge on EFL reading comprehension, as reading has numerous beneficial effects on language acquisition and facilitates language development. The more a person reads, the more their vocabulary knowledge expands.

6. Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is a core component of language skills that enables language use [23, 21]. To honestly "know" a word, a learner must understand several key aspects, including:
1. **Form**: How the word is spoken (pronunciation) and written (spelling).
2. **Structure**: The root morpheme and how the word forms its most common derivations and inflections.
3. **Syntax**: How the word is used to construct phrases and sentences.
4. **Meaning**: Its multiple meanings, including situation-specific, symbolic, and additional connotations.
5. **Relationships**: Connections to other words, such as antonyms and synonyms.
6. **Collocations**: Words commonly used with the word being learned [14] this depth of knowledge is typically what native speakers possess. Additionally, the research shows that learners with English as a second language must acquire approximately 1,000 additional words each year, beyond an existing word gap of 2,000 to 3,000 words to keep pace with native speakers [18]. Simpson and Randall (2000) argue that "students with inadequate oral and written vocabularies may struggle when giving class presentations and writing essays," which will be further discussed in the next section.

7. Vocabulary and English Learning

Vocabulary learning is crucial in language acquisition, helping learners develop reading proficiency and improving reading comprehension [26]. Vocabulary learning involves four stages:

1. **Discrimination**: Distinguishing sounds and letters.
2. **Understanding meaning**: Grasping the meanings of words.
3. **Remembering**: Retaining words in memory.
4. **Consolidation and extension**: Extending the meanings of words and using them effectively.

Discrimination involves distinguishing sounds and letters, which help learners, improve their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

8. The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning is essential for people learning English as a foreign and second language. Tozcu and Coady (2004) argue that vocabulary acquisition is a critical aspect of language and academic achievement, closely linked to reading comprehension and proficiency. Heubener (1961) also highlights that learning vocabulary involves forming specific habits and associating symbols with meanings. Frequent repetition, along with enriching the meaning of words, is critical to successful vocabulary acquisition.

9. Types of Vocabulary

Hiebert and Kamil (2005) propose that vocabulary exists in two forms:

1. **Oral Vocabulary**: know the meanings of words when speaking or reading aloud.
2. **Print Vocabulary**: Words we know the meanings of when writing or reading silently.

They further distinguish between:

- **Productive Vocabulary**: An individual can use words when writing or speaking. These words are familiar, well-known, and frequently used.
- **Receptive or Recognition Vocabulary**: Words an individual can assign meanings to when listening or reading, though they may not know the full nuances of these words or use them spontaneously. These words are often less well-known and less frequently used.

10. The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Text Comprehension

Vocabulary knowledge is widely regarded as a crucial aspect of foreign language learning. It plays an essential role in text comprehension because understanding word meanings and accessing this knowledge effectively are critical factors in reading comprehension. Although some instructors may allow students to ask for clarification of unfamiliar terminology during exams, large class sizes and unfamiliarity with the instructor may discourage students from seeking help. Additionally, excessive movement and conversation during the exam to clarify terminology could create distractions, particularly for students struggling with the language.

Limited research has explored the effects of synonymy on vocabulary learning. Higa (1963) found that learning two synonyms simultaneously is more complex than learning two unrelated words. Synonymy has also been identified as a factor that can make words more challenging to learn [14]. It is generally believed that there is a direct connection between knowledge of word meanings and understanding what is being read and learned [17]. Many researchers have focused on the role of word recognition in second-language reading comprehension. Koda (1996) emphasizes the importance of vocabulary

knowledge in reading comprehension, particularly in recognizing written vocabulary to understand its meaning.

11. Vocabulary and Expository Texts

Iwai (2007) suggests strategies for developing a reader's vocabulary base and activating background knowledge for better comprehension of expository texts. These include:

- **Using Transition Words**: Readers should know key transition words such as "first," "second," and "third" to identify text structure. They should also recognize contradictory words like "however" and "but," which signal opposing information.
- **Organizing Text Information**: Readers can better understand expository texts by recognizing text structures such as comparison and contrast, which help categorize information.
- **Establishing Vocabulary Knowledge**: Since expository texts often contain complex vocabulary, readers must develop meaningful connections between new vocabulary and existing knowledge. Memorizing new words without context can lead to short-term retention only.

12. Vocabulary as Multi-Word Items

Many people think of vocabulary as individual words, but vocabulary also includes multi-word items such as set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, and idioms [27]. For example, Arab students may misinterpret phrasal verbs by focusing on individual words rather than the entire phrase. For instance, the phrase "look after" means "take care of," but students may mistakenly interpret it as "watch" if they ignore the preposition "after" [4].

13. Reading Comprehension

It is widely accepted that knowledge of word meanings is directly associated with understanding what is being read and learned [17]. Numerous researchers have focused on the significance of word recognition in second-language reading comprehension. Koda (1996) highlights the vital role of vocabulary recognition in comprehending written material in a second language.

14. Learning Experiences of Libyan Students

The limited English vocabulary of Libyan students is rooted in the history of English teaching in Libya. Until the 1980s, teaching focused on memorizing vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, primarily through spoken drills and reading aloud. Political tensions between the Libyan government and the West resulted in a ban on teaching English in schools and universities from the late 1980s until a new curriculum was introduced in 2000 [20]. This long-standing ban negatively impacted teachers' vocabulary. Abbasian and Khajari (2010) found a correlation between "lexical attrition" and the time teachers were not exposed to the English language, even in normal circumstances. Crystal (2003) also notes that a lack of government support decreases the quality of teaching.

Some scholars, such as Andrews (2009), suggest that Libyan students' exposure to Latin languages, such as French and Italian, should make academic words more manageable. However, this view is debatable, as Libya's colonial experience was brief, and no formal colonial education system has existed in recent years. Crystal (2003) emphasizes that "language exists only in the brains, mouths, ears, hands, and eyes of its users."

15. Research Methodology

A research design is a framework that specifies the methods and procedures for collecting and analyzing data to answer research questions and address research problems. This study is designed to examine and investigate the difficulties faced by English department students in learning vocabulary and the relationship between understanding vocabulary, grammar, word-by-word translation, and text comprehension. Therefore, this research is correlational, and a quantitative research design (using a questionnaire) was adopted to address the research questions. Data was collected from respondents through questionnaires, and the responses were analyzed to obtain meaningful insights.

16. Sample and Instruments

This section describes the sampling method and the actual sample size. This study's population consists of Libyan students studying in the English department at Aljufra University. It targeted at least 32 Libyan students. The sample was based on a representative percentage of the population.

This study employed a quantitative research method, the most appropriate approach for exploring participants' perspectives and perceptions in this type of research. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire designed by the researcher. This questionnaire aimed to evaluate the students' performance and identify the strategies Libyanstudents use to increase their vocabulary knowledge and comprehend academic texts effectively.

17. Data Collection

This study collected data through a questionnaire divided into three parts. The first part contained demographic data about the participants, including general questions about gender. The second part included specific questions about learning English vocabulary using a Likert scale format. The third part focused on the difficulties in learning English vocabulary, allowing students to express their beliefs, opinions, and perceptions about any problems they encountered that were not mentioned in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was distributed to at least 32 Libyan students. It was handed directly to the participants, and advice was provided to avoid misunderstandings about answering the questions. The data collection process spanned four days, during which the researcher divided the participants into three groups (ranging from the first semester to the eighth semester) to facilitate data collection and ensure higher validity and reliability.

18. Data Analysis Method

The researcher must identify and describe appropriate data analysis methods for the study. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are generally used, with data analyzed through descriptive or inferential statistics.

In this study, data gathered from the questionnaire was subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software to ensure accurate results. Various analytical procedures, such as descriptive analysis, goodness-of-data tests, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis, were conducted to determine the relationship between the independent variables (learning English vocabulary) and the dependent variable (understanding academic texts). Descriptive analysis was used to understand the characteristics of the respondents, including their gender.

19. Results and Discussion

The results of this study were obtained from 32 respondents of Libyan students of the English department at the Faculty of Arts and College of Education at Aljufra University regarding their language preferences and challenges, specifically related to their confidence in using English in everyday and academic situations. The survey covered various aspects of language usage, such as preferences for writing in their first language, confidence in academic vocabulary, difficulties memorizing words, understanding phrasal verbs, and using English for educational purposes. The findings based on the questionnaire responses are summarized below:
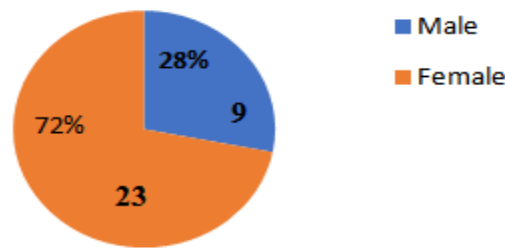
Fig1: Gender Distribution for the study samples

The gender distribution of participants shows a significantly higher proportion of females about 72% compared to males 28%. This means that the sample is predominantly female.
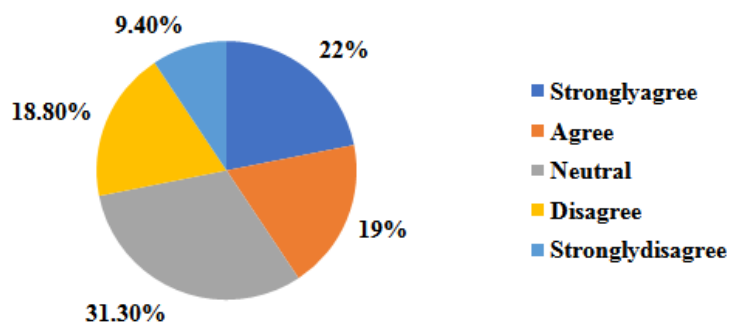
Fig 2: Preference for Composing in First Language

A substantial number of participants (31.30%) remained neutral regarding their preference for composing in their first language before writing in English. However, a significant portion (41%) agreed or strongly agreed with this preference, indicating that many participants feel more comfortable initially expressing their thoughts in their native language.
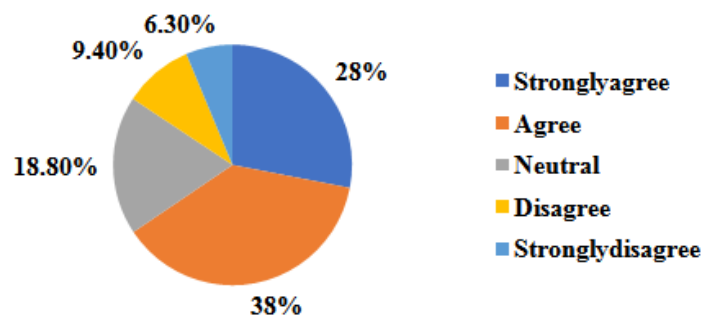

Fig 3: Confidence in Writing English in Everyday Situations

Most participants (66%) expressed confidence in writing in English in everyday situations, such as emails or messages. This highlights a general comfort with using English in informal contexts, with a smaller proportion (15.7%) expressing discomfort.
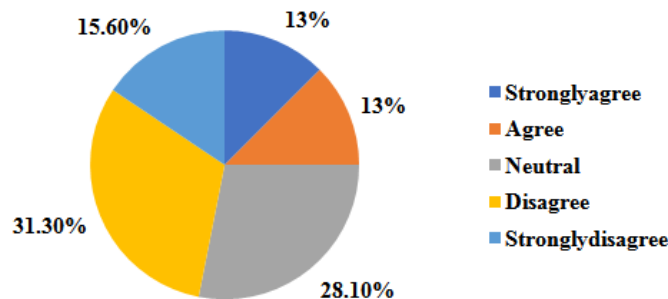

Fig 4: Confidence in Academic Vocabulary

Participants were divided regarding their confidence in possessing sufficient academic vocabulary. While 26% felt confident, a more significant proportion (46.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating a perceived gap in their academic vocabulary skills.
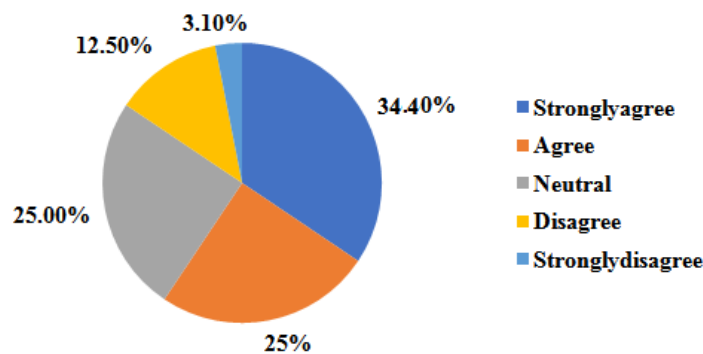
Fig 5: Equal Assessment of Written Work Regardless of English Level

Most participants (59.4%) believe that all written work should be assessed equally, regardless of a student's level of English proficiency. This reflects a strong sentiment for fairness in academic evaluation, supporting the idea that content should precede language ability.
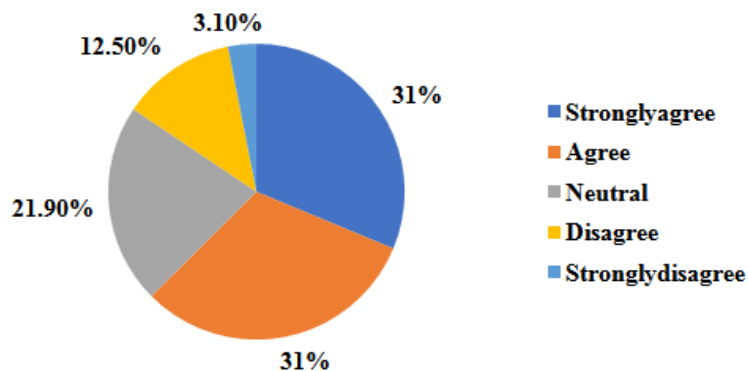

Fig 6: Need for More Help in Academic Writing

More than 60% of participants indicated that students need more help in academic writing than their schools or universities currently provide. This suggests a potential need for institutions to provide additi-

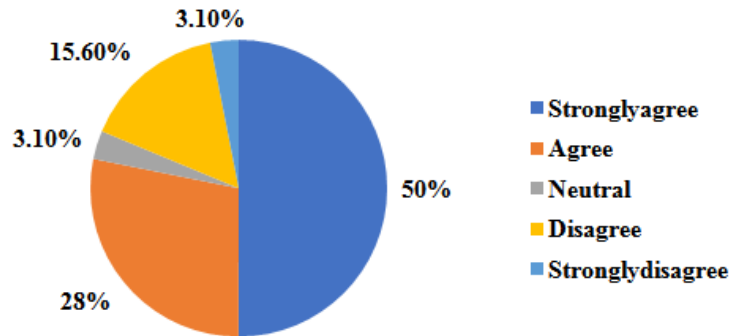onal support, especially in developing scholarly writing skills.

Fig 7: Learning Vocabulary through Reading Comprehension

Half of the participants (50%) strongly agreed that reading comprehension helps they learn new vocabulary, while 28% agreed. This underscores the importance of reading as a method for vocabulary acquisition.
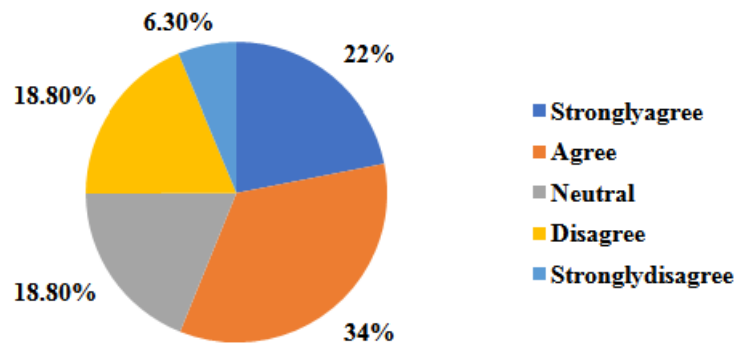

Fig 8: Use of Flashcards and Repetition for Memorization

The survey revealed that 56.3% of participants use flashcards to remember new words, while 75% rely on repetition (writing or saying the word repeatedly). These traditional methods remain popular strategies for learning vocabulary.
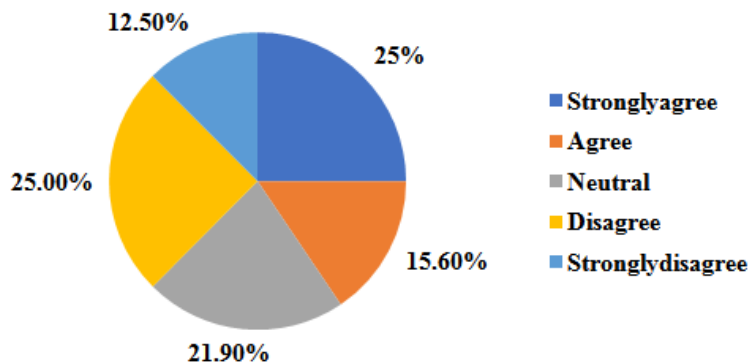

Fig 9: Challenges in Understanding Phrasal Verbs

Understanding phrasal verbs proved challenging for many participants, with 40.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they face difficulty in this area. This suggests that phrasal verbs are a standard stumbling block for non-native speakers.
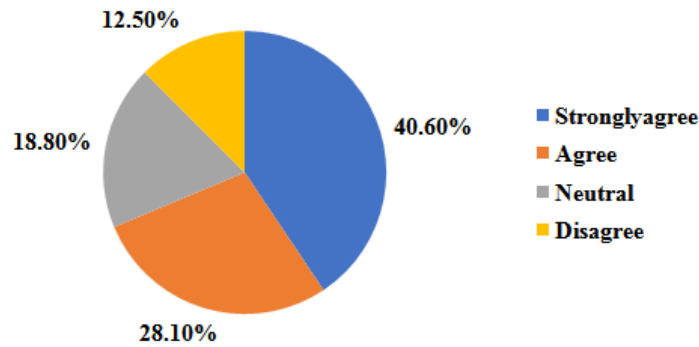
Fig 10: Consulting a Dictionary and Asking Teachers

Many participants rely on dictionaries (68.8%) and teachers or supervisors (68.7%) to understand unfamiliar words. This demonstrates a proactive approach to overcoming language challenges through available resources.
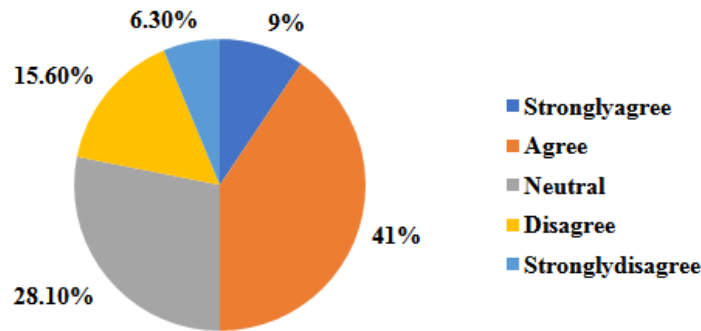

Fig 11: Difficulty in Expressing Ideas in Academic Writing

Over 46% of participants expressed difficulty using appropriate vocabulary for academic writing. This result highlights a significant challenge in transferring everyday language skills to more formal, academic contexts.

20. Conclusion

This research paper aimed to explore the challenges faced by Libyan students in learning English vocabulary and understanding academic texts. The findings revealed that limited vocabulary knowledge significantly impedes students' ability to comprehend academic texts and express themselves effectively in English. The main obstacles include expanding vocabulary, managing words with multiple meanings, and using academic vocabulary appropriately. These challenges are compounded by cultural and linguistic differences between Arabic and English, making it challenging for students to find equivalent meanings.

The study showed that many students rely on traditional learning methods, such as dictionaries, flashcards, and repetition, to overcome their vocabulary challenges. While these methods have proven somewhat effective, they may not be sufficient to fully address the complexities of learning English as a second language, especially in academic contexts. The reliance on these strategies also highlights a gap in the availability of modern, interactive vocabulary learning tools and a need for a more structured support system.

Additionally, the findings emphasize that many students require more support in academic writing. Over 60% of participants indicated a need for additional assistance from their educational institutions. This

suggests a clear need for universities to provide enhanced resources, such as workshops, dedicated tutoring, and targeted interventions, to help Libyan students build their vocabulary and improve their academic writing skills.

Another key issue identified understood phrasal verbs and complex vocabulary, a standard stumbling block for non-native speakers. Effective teaching methods focusing on these areas and culturally relevant examples could help bridge the gap and make learning more relatable for students.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to vocabulary learning, integrating both traditional methods and modern techniques. Educators need to focus on providing targeted vocabulary instruction, academic support, and culturally responsive teaching to address the specific needs of Libyan students. Through this, students will be better equipped to expand their vocabulary, enhance their comprehension of academic texts, and ultimately achieve tremendous academic success.

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