



## The Investigation of Vocabulary Learning Challenges and the Role of Anxiety in Learning Vocabulary: The Case of EFL Libyan Undergraduate Students

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دراسة تحديات تعلم المفردات ودور القلق في تعلم المفردات: حالة طلاب المرحلة الجامعية الليبية  
في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### Abstract:

Learning vocabulary is the cornerstone for learning a language. Learning vocabulary is remarkable task for EFL learners in EFL context where language would be only for practice, engagement, and use in class. As a result, EFL learners would face several challenges and obstacles to learning and mastering the language due to several factors. This study investigates the vocabulary learning challenges faced by Libyan EFL undergraduate students at Libyan University and the anxiety role in these challenges. An online structured questionnaire distributed among the participants. Total number of 97 valid simple random responses was obtained from the online questionnaire. The findings reveal that students encounter significant challenges in their learning English vocabulary such as pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, contextual usage, and memorization. Many of which are compounded by phonological differences between Arabic and English. Additionally, a moderate level of vocabulary anxiety was reported, particularly during listening and comprehension tasks involving unfamiliar words. Additionally, a strong positive correlation was found between vocabulary anxiety and vocabulary challenges [ $r = .746^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ], highlighting the impact of anxiety on vocabulary learning performance. Other notable correlations include the influence of academic semester and age regarding vocabulary learning on anxiety levels, suggesting that vocabulary learning should be adapted to learner's learning processes. The study recommends refining teaching and learning techniques and method moving from grammar translation method to students centered approaches implementing interactive, context-based teaching strategies and methods, integrating tangible and technology-enhanced tools to improve learner vocabulary and lower their anxiety. Such consideration would improve both learning vocabulary competence and learners' confidence. These insights contribute to the broader EFL education setting in Libyan higher education providing a foundation for future interventions aimed at enhancing learning vocabulary outcomes.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning challenges, Anxiety, English as a foreign Language [EFL].

### المخلص

يُعدّ تعلم المفردات حجر الزاوية في تعلم أي لغة. ويُمثّل تعلم المفردات مهمةً بالغة الأهمية لمتعلّمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، حيث تُستخدم اللغة في الغالب للممارسة والتفاعل والاستخدام داخل الصف. ونتيجةً لذلك، يواجه متعلّمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العديد من التحديات والعقبات في تعلم اللغة وإتقانها، وذلك لعدة أسباب. تتناول هذه الدراسة التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعة الليبية، ودور القلق في هذه التحديات. تمّ توزيع استبانة إلكترونية

مُنْتَظَمَةً على المشاركين، تم الحصول على 97 استجابة عشوائية صالحة. تُشير النتائج إلى أن الطلاب يواجهون عقبات كبيرة في تعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية، مثل النطق، والهجاء، وفهم معاني الكلمات، واستخدامها في السياق، والحفظ. وتتفاقم هذه العقبات بسبب الاختلافات الصوتية بين العربية والإنجليزية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سُجِّل مستوى متوسط إلى مرتفع من القلق بشأن المفردات، لا سيما أثناء مهام الاستماع والفهم التي تتضمن كلمات غير مألوفة. ووجدت الدراسة ارتباطاً إيجابياً قوياً بين القلق بشأن المفردات والتحديات التي تواجهها [ $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.746^{**}$ ]، مما يُبرز تأثير القلق على أداء تعلم اللغة. تشمل الارتباطات البارزة الأخرى تأثير الفصل الدراسي والعمر على مستويات القلق فيما يتعلق بتعلم المفردات، مما يشير إلى ضرورة تكييف عملية تعلم المفردات مع عمليات التعلم لدى المتعلمين. توصي الدراسة بتحسين أساليب وتقنيات وطرق التدريس والتعلم، والانتقال من أسلوب الترجمة النحوية إلى أساليب تركز على الطالب، وتطبيق استراتيجيات تدريس تفاعلية قائمة على السياق، ودمج أدوات ملموسة وأخرى مدعومة بالتكنولوجيا لتحسين وزيادة مفردات المتعلمين وتقليل قلقهم. من شأن هذا النهج أن يُحسِّن كفاءة المتعلمين في تعلم المفردات وثقتهم بأنفسهم. تُسهم هذه النتائج في تطوير بيئة تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في التعليم العالي الليبي، مما يوفر أساساً للأبحاث المستقبلية الرامية إلى تحسين نتائج تعلم المفردات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحديات تعلم المفردات، القلق، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية [EFL].

## Introduction

Vocabulary learning plays a central role in second language learning [L2] and it is widely recognized as a cornerstone of communicative competence. Vocabulary knowledge significantly influences all aspects of language use, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing Nation [2008]. Learners' lack of vocabulary leads to several challenges hindering them from their academic and communicative competence and success. This challenge is particularly reported among English as a Foreign Language [EFL] learners, who often face several linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and instructional barriers that impede effective vocabulary development. In Libyan higher education settings, many EFL students would experience significant difficulties in learning English vocabulary, which affects both their academic performance and language proficiency. These challenges are further compounded by several factors such as anxiety. Anxiety has been identified as a key barrier to successful language learning [Krashen, 1982]. Vocabulary-related anxiety can hinder learners' ability to process and retain new words. This problem attracted my researchers in EFL context; while previous studies have explored vocabulary learning challenges in various global contexts [e.g., Putri et al., 2024; Lutfiyah et al., 2022], limited empirical attention has been given to the specific experiences of EFL learners in Libyan educational setting. There is a need to understand more about how anxiety factors interact with linguistic and instructional constructs to shape vocabulary learning outcomes. Thus, this study addresses this gap by investigating the vocabulary learning challenges faced by undergraduate students at Libyan University and the role of vocabulary-related anxiety in these challenges.

## Literature Review

Learning vocabulary is a foundational linguistic element process in English language learning. Learning vocabulary plays an important role that enables learners to communicate effectively and comprehend academic content to achieve academic language learning success [Putri et al., 2024]. As noted by Richards and Renandya [2002], "vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write" [p. 255]. Zeng et al. [2025] further emphasizes that vocabulary learning involves both receptive and productive knowledge. Through intensive listening and reading comprehension, spontaneous speaking and writing vocabulary learning outcomes will be achieved. In other words, Nation [2008] who categorizes vocabulary to high frequency, low frequency, academic, and technical vocabulary, he distinguished between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Receptive knowledge refers to the ability to recognize a word's meaning in reading and listening contexts, including aspects such as word formation, collocations, synonyms, antonyms, and contextual usage. Productive knowledge, on the other hand, involves the ability to use words correctly in speaking and writing, considering pronunciation, spelling, and appropriate application in a context. Therefore, developing a strong vocabulary selection is essential for achieving communicative competence and academic success in English as a foreign language [EFL] context. Without intensive vocabulary foundation, learners are unable to fully engage and benefit from language-learning opportunities such as listening to spoken English or interacting with English speakers [Richards & Hui, 2022]. Therefore, the role of vocabulary knowledge and application as dimensions for effective communication cannot be neglected due to its role in mastering the language. Nation [2001] classified the vocabulary dimension into three main categories consisting of [a] comprehension of word meaning, [b] proficiency in word use, and [c] awareness of word form, including both spoken and written representations. This multidimensional view highlights the complexity of vocabulary learning and highlights the need for comprehensive instructional approaches that address each aspect. Moreover, as reported by Rashid et al. [2022] despite learners would master advanced grammatical skills, they face several obstacles in their language application due to their limited vocabulary. Several studies in second and foreign language education emphasize that a strong vocabulary base is

essential for non-native speakers to succeed in their language learning alongside grammar and pronunciation [Min, 2013; Read, 2013; Nation, 2008]. Thus, vocabulary acquisition and learning remain a central focus in linguistic research and pedagogical practice, especially for EFL learners who face remarkable challenges in mastering English vocabulary. However, despite its importance, vocabulary learning remains a persistent challenge for many EFL students. Numerous studies have shown that learners face several difficulties in building and effectively using the vocabulary correctly. These difficulties are comprised of several factors. Such as phonological, morphological differences and interference between learners' mother tongue in their second language such as pronunciation, spelling inconsistencies, and phonological complexity etc. These phonological, morphological differences and interference affect both receptive and productive knowledge and skills. For example, Putri et al. [2024] reported pronunciation difficulties as a major barrier, especially when phonological systems of the first language differ significantly from English. Lutfiyah et al. [2022] further report that spelling inconsistencies between orthography and phonology also hinder accurate word recognition and production. Additionally, silent letters or irregular spellings reported by [Susanto, 2021; Lutfiyah et al., 2022] create confusion and impede accurate word recognition and production due to the mismatches between written and spoken forms.

Additionally, when instructional methods emphasize rote memorization without contextual integration, learners struggle with mental fatigue, reduced comprehension, and poor retention due to cognitive overload. Cognitive overload in educational psychology occurs when learners are required to process more information than their working memory can effectively handle [Sweller, 1994]. In the context of vocabulary acquisition, this overload often arises from several factors such as teaching and learning method, the number of the word's students must learn in isolation without real exposure and practice, combined with insufficient strategies for organizing and internalizing them [Bhandari, 2023; Machfudi & Afidah, 2022]. The cognitive load is mainly rooted in grammar translation methods. The teacher is the center of learners learning through translation and memorization enhancing short-term recall using repetitive writing, flashcard drilling, rather than context-based learning and engaging in meaningful context failing to promote deep processing and long-term retention [Bhandari, 2023; Aida et al., 2024; Lutfiyah et al., 2022; Pun & Jin, 2021]. Considering EFL Libyan Educational system where the emphasis is yet more to grammar-translation method, students would expose to cognitive load in their language learning. As a result, learners face certain levels of anxiety while learning their language.

Therefore, external conditions such as teaching methods and learning environments play a crucial role in shaping vocabulary outcomes. Traditional grammar-translation method, which dominate many EFL classrooms, often neglect the integration of interactive and communicative activities that promote active vocabulary use resulting in poor retention and low proficiency levels [Alsalihi, 2020; Bhandari, 2023; Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Owen, Razali, Samad & Noordin., 2019; Owen, Razali & Elhaj., 2019]. Alsalihi [2020] highlights the lack of multimedia tools and authentic materials as a major limitation in current pedagogical practices, contributing to passive learning attitudes and disengagement. [Aida et al., 2024; Machfudi & Afidah, 2022]. Additionally, insufficient institutional support, lack of resources, and excessive reliance on L1 during instruction reduce students' exposure to meaningful target-language input [Bhandari, 2023; Susanto, 2021]. Therefore, without regular engagement with English inside/outside the classroom, learners struggle to develop lexical fluency and contextual awareness, both of which are essential for academic and professional success. For instance, Xiong & Bao [2023] found that Chinese EFL students struggled due to limited exposure to English outside class and a lack of authentic models from non-native teachers. This issue is especially noticeable among students who have limited access to authentic English materials or native speaker interaction [Surmanov & Azimova, 2020; Yuliana et al., 2024]. The study by Hasan [2024] further highlights how lack of reading habits negatively impacts vocabulary development and writing performance. Similarly, Putri et al [2024] emphasized that students in Indonesia struggled not only with pronunciation and spelling but also with selecting appropriate meanings and using words contextually.

Beyond cognitive demands, affective factors play an important role in vocabulary acquisition and learning. Several studies such as [Li, 2015; Halali et al., 2023; Hardacre & Güvendir, 2020] reported low motivation, language anxiety, lack of self-confidence were found due to learners' fear of being judged by peers, receiving criticism, or making mistakes. As a result, learners were discouraged from active participation, especially in speaking tasks. Krashen's [1982] Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a theoretical framework for understanding this reported result; the levels of anxiety act as a mental barrier, that can block acquisition processes, filtering out comprehensible input and preventing it from being fully internalized. Even when learners are exposed to understandable language. A high-anxiety learners due to limited practice and reinforcement performed very weak on vocabulary tasks, particularly under pressure during tests or oral presentations and participation [Yuliana et al., 2024; Hardacre and Güvendir., 2020].

Anxiety factor which reported by Halali et al. [2023] further confirm that Libyan learners fear of making mistakes and being judged by peers discourages spontaneous participation and engagement. As a result, anxiety negatively affects listening comprehension; when learners are anxious, their cognitive resources are distracted toward meaningful language processing, resulting in reducing comprehension, retention, and opportunities for meaningful interaction and vocabulary practice. Moreover, anxiety was reported to lead to frequent gaps in recalling vocabulary during speaking and writing tasks, resulting in undermining motivation confidence

[surmanov & azimova, 2020; Pun and Jin., 2021]. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate what are the English vocabulary learning challenges and its relationship with vocabulary-related anxiety faced by EFL learners in Libyan higher education.

## Methodology

This study was conducted using quantities descriptive [Creswell, 2018]. An online close ended questionnaire was distributed among Libyan EFL undergraduate students at Misurata University. The participating faculties were faculty of languages and Translation, Faculty of Art, and Faculty of Education. The questionnaire was distributed to investigate the anxiety and vocabulary learning challenges faced by Libyan EFL undergraduate students. The online questionnaire structured using 5-point Likert scale [strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree]. Vocabulary learning challenges questionnaire was adopted from [Lutfiyah et al., 2022]. And vocabulary learning anxiety was adopted from Donkaewbua, A. [2016]. After the data cleaning and data screening for 100 simple random sample responses using SPSS analysis, 97 valid responses were obtained to achieve the research objectives.

Prior to main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 31 participants from the targeted population to measure the validity and reliability of the instrument. Experts reviewed the questionnaire to ensure validity. For testing reliability, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis using SPSS has obtained from total items [42 items] consisting of [34] items to measure the vocabulary learning challenges and [8] items to measure vocabulary learning anxiety. Ethical considerations were achieved throughout the research processes, including getting permission to use the questionnaire from the owner, consent form from the participant, and institutional approval from the participated faculties in Misurata University. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The descriptive statistics were used to identify and describe the overall frequency for the demographic information of the participated participant, vocabulary learning challenges among participants and the anxiety. Inferential statistical analysis through Pearson correlation coefficient was obtained to check the assumptions for the correlation to test the relationship between vocabulary learning challenges and vocabulary anxiety and other factors.

## Material and methods

This section presents the reported the demographic information of the participants followed by the result of identifying the challenges encountered by Libyan EFL students in learning English vocabulary. It also reports vocabulary learning anxiety result and its relationship to these learning vocabulary challenges. The results are presented in descending order from highest to lowest frequency, based on the mode followed by the mean, providing a clear and structured overview of the key findings.

## The demographic information

Table 1 below provides an overview of the demographic profile of the participants, including their gender, age, and semester of study. This information provides an important overview about the participated Libyan EFL students.

**Table 1** The Demographic Information for the Participants

Description		Frequency [n]	Percentage [%]
Gender	Female	84	86.6%
	Male	13	13.4%
Age	17-19 years	33	34.0%
	20-22 years	48	49.5%
	23-25 years	16	16.5%
The Semester	1st Sem	9	9.3%
	2nd Sem	6	6.2%
	3rd Sem	25	25.8%
	4th Sem	6	6.2%
	5th Sem	7	7.2%
	6th Sem	10	10.3%
	7th Sem	15	15.5%
	8th Sem	19	19.6%

As presented in Table1, the domain participants were from the Faculty of Languages and Translation. The sample was predominantly composed of female students [86.6%], with only [13.4%] male respondents. In terms of academic level, the third semester had the highest representation, indicating the greatest participation among all semesters.

### Challenges Faced by EFL Undergraduate Students in Learning Vocabulary.

Table 2 below presents the challenges encountered by EFL in learning English vocabulary. It includes various challenges, along with the [S.D] standard deviation and frequency distribution of responses across different items.

**Table 2** Challenges Faced by EFL in Learning English Vocabulary

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	S.D	Mean	Mode
1. I have no interest in learning a new vocabulary in English.	8 8.2%	6 6.2%	1 1.0%	39 40.2%	43 44.3%	1.21	4.06	5
2. I'm having trouble distinguishing the type of word if it's a verb in English.	4 4.1%	15 15.5%	12 12.4%	53 54.6%	13 13.4%	1.04	3.58	4
3. My motivation to learn English vocabulary is low.	4 4.1%	15 15.5%	18 18.6%	43 44.3%	17 17.5%	1.08	3.56	4
4. I'm having trouble distinguishing the type of word if it's an adjective in English.	5 5.2%	17 17.5%	10 10.3%	55 56.7%	10 10.3%	1.06	3.49	4
5. I'm having trouble distinguishing the type of word if it's a noun in English.	4 4.1%	17 17.1%	20 20.6%	47 48.5%	9 9.3%	1.01	3.41	4
6. I'm having trouble distinguishing the type of word if it's an adverb in English.	6 6.2%	18 18.6%	23 23.7%	39 40.2%	11 11.3%	1.09	3.32	4
7. When I make a mistake in learning a new vocabulary in English, I don't receive feedback in class.	6 6.2%	24 24.7%	16 16.5%	39 40.2%	12 12.4%	1.15	3.28	4
8. When I make a mistake in employing the new vocabulary in English, I don't receive feedback in class.	7 7.2%	26 26.8%	13 13.4%	39 40.2%	12 12.4%	1.18	3.24	4
9. I don't have help using the dictionary to find the meaning of a new word in English.	10 10.3%	21 21.6%	18 18.6%	41 42.3%	7 7.2%	1.15	3.14	4
10. I find it difficult to learn English vocabulary because it differs from Arabic in the writing and reading system.	10 10.3%	27 27.8%	21 21.6%	30 30.9%	9 9.3%	1.17	3.01	4
11. I find it difficult to pronounce the new vocabulary in English.	7 7.2%	28 28.9%	26 26.8%	29 29.9%	7 7.2%	1.08	3.01	4
12. I find it difficult to learn vocabulary in English because there is a difference between spelling a word and pronouncing it.	10 10.3%	27 27.8%	26 26.8%	31 32.0%	3 3.1%	.96	2.90	4
13. I'm having trouble learning words with similar meanings in English.	12 12.4%	29 29.9%	18 18.6%	34 35.1%	4 4.1%	1.14	2.89	4
14. Failure to memorize vocabulary in English.	7 7.2%	28 28.9%	29 29.9%	26 26.8%	7 7.2%	1.07	2.98	3

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	S.D	Mean	Mode
15. I am having difficulty understanding the meanings of English vocabulary.	8 8.2%	31 32.2%	32 33.0%	22 22.7%	4 4.1%	1.01	2.82	3
16. My short-term memory does not retain new vocabulary in English when learned.	16 16.5%	27 27.8%	30 30.9%	19 19.6%	5 5.2%	1.12	2.69	3
17. I am having difficulty learning words that have different meanings in English.	6 6.2%	35 36.1%	22 22.7%	29 29.9%	5 5.2%	1.05	2.92	2
18. I find it difficult to understand the morphological structures of words in English.	6 6.2%	35 36.1%	27 27.8%	22 22.7%	7 7.2%	1.05	2.89	2
19. I find it difficult to understand vocabulary with similar letters with different meanings in English.	7 7.2%	36 37.1%	23 23.7%	24 24.7%	7 7.2%	1.09	2.88	2
20. The synonyms technique is not used in teaching new vocabulary in English.1	10 10.3%	32 33.0%	24 24.7%	27 27.8%	4 4.1%	1.08	2.82	2
21. I find it difficult to pronounce the new vocabulary in English in the classroom.	15 15.5%	27 27.8%	23 23.7%	26 26.8%	6 6.2%	1.17	2.80	2
22. The new vocabulary I have to learn in English is not clearly defined within the classroom.	14 14.4%	29 29.9%	24 24.7%	24 24.7%	6 6.2%	1.57	2.78	2
23. I find it difficult to understand the grammatical structures of words in English.	7 7.2%	38 39.2%	32 33.0%	16 16.5%	4 4.1%	.96	2.71	2
24. I don't have enough opportunity to work in pairs within the classroom to practice English.	13 13.4%	33 34.0%	30 30.9%	13 13.4%	8 8.2%	1.12	2.69	2
25. I find it difficult to understand the exact meaning of vocabulary in English that may carry a positive and negative meaning in the textual context.	11 11.3%	35 36.1%	28 28.9%	20 20.6%	3 3.1%	1.02	2.69	2
26. I don't have enough opportunity to work in group groups within the classroom to practice English.	16 16.5%	33 34.0%	21 21.6%	22 22.7%	5 5.2%	1.15	2.66	2
27. There is no use of English language teaching aids by hearing in class.	14 14.4%	33 34.0%	25 25.8%	23 23.7%	2 2.1%	1.06	2.65	2
28. I find it difficult to practice English vocabulary outside of the classroom.	14 14.4%	36 37.1%	21 21.6%	23 23.7%	3 3.1%	1.09	2.64	2

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	S.D	Mean	Mode
29. English vocabulary is not illustrated by various examples within the classroom.	19 19.6%	32 33.0%	20 20.6%	20 20.6%	6 6.2%	1.17	2.61	2
30. I don't find enough opportunity in the classroom to employ new vocabulary in English correctly.	18 18.6%	31 33.0%	27 27.8%	15 15.5%	5 5.2%	1.11	2.56	2
31. I find it difficult to employ some vocabulary in English correctly.	13 13.4%	39 40.2%	26 26.8%	16 16.5%	3 3.1%	1.02	2.56	2
32. There are no teaching aids in the classroom to motivate you to learn English vocabulary.	16 16.5%	38 39.2%	25 25.8%	16 16.5%	2 2.1%	1.02	2.48	2
33. Not using classroom activities prevents learning new vocabulary in English.	17 17.5%	41 42.3%	24 24.7%	12 12.4%	3 3.1%	1.08	2.41	2
34. The external environment does not motivate me to practice English outside the classroom.	29 29.9%	39 40.2%	15 15.5%	11 11.3%	3 3.1%	2.18	2.18	2

The descriptive statistics reported that although 85% of the participant showed great interest in learning English vocabulary. Yet 6.2% of the participants [6.2 agree and 8.2% strongly agree] reported having no interest in learning new vocabulary. Meanwhile, the descriptive statistics reports EFL student face seven major challenges consisted of pronunciation and phonological barriers; in which 36.1% of the participants [28.9% agree to 7.2% strongly agree] they find it difficult to pronounce new vocabulary in English. The result reported that students also struggled with identifying and using different parts of speech correctly in which 20.1% of the participants [15.5% agree to 4.1% strongly agree] they have difficulty distinguishing verbs. 22.7% of the participants [17.5% agree to 5.2% strongly agree] reported difficulty identifying adjectives. And 18.6% of the participants [17.1% agree to 4.1% strongly agree] indicated difficulty recognizing nouns. 43.3% of the participants [27.8% agree to 10.3% strongly agree] they face difficulties due to spelling-pronunciation mismatches. For grammatical and morphological challenges. Meanwhile, memorization and retention issues; the result reported 36.1% of the participants [28.9% agree to 7.2% strongly agree] they fail to memorize vocabulary effectively. 44.3% of the participants [27.8 agree to 16.5% strongly agree] they found short-term memory does not remember their new vocabulary. In the same regard, lack of feedback and dictionary use; consisted of feedback and autonomous learning tools were identified as areas of concern: 34% of the participants [26.8% agree to 7.2% strongly agree] they do not receive feedback when making vocabulary mistakes. 31.9% of the participants [21.6% agree to 10.3% strongly agree] they face lack of help using dictionaries to understand word meanings. Moreover, instructional and environmental limitations were also evident for student challenges in learning vocabulary in which 47.4% of the participants [34.0% agree to 13.4% strongly agree] reported that there are insufficient opportunities for pair work. 51.5% of the participants [37.1% agree to 14.4% strongly agree] for difficulty practicing vocabulary outside the classroom. 49.8% of the participants [42.3% agree to 17.5%] strongly agree] toward lack of classroom activities hinders vocabulary learning. Additionally, semantic and contextual understanding were also present; 44.3% of the participants [37.1% agree to 7.2% strongly agree] they have difficulty with words with similar letters but different meanings. 42.3% of the participants [29.9% agree to 12.4% strongly agree] face difficulty with words that have multiple meanings.

Lastly, significant number of students feel that there is the lack of multimedia tools and visual/audio teaching and learning aids; 48.4% of the participants [34.0% agree to 14.4% strongly agree] there is no use of English language teaching aids such as listening tools and equipment in the class. 52.6% of the participants [33.0% agree to 19.6% strongly agree] English vocabulary is not illustrated by various examples in the classroom. 55.7% of the participants [39.2% agree to 16.5% strongly agree] there are no teaching aids in the classroom to motivate them to learn English vocabulary. 59.8% of the participants [42.3% agree to 17.5%vstrongly agree] of not using classroom activities prevents them from learning new vocabulary in English.

### The impact of anxiety on vocabulary learning among Libyan university students

Table 3 below presents various anxiety aspects, along with the [S.D] standard deviation and frequency distribution of responses across different items. The findings related to vocabulary-related anxiety and its impact on the English vocabulary learning process among students at Libyan University. The data reflect students' feelings of worry, confusion, and uncertainty when learning new English words, shedding light on the psychological barriers that influence their language learning.

**Table 3** Vocabulary learning Anxiety among Libyan University Students

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	S.D	Mean	Mode
1. I'm worried about learning new words to understand English.	3 3.1%	20 20.6%	19 19.6%	49 50.5%	6 6.2%	.981	3.36	4
2. I feel anxious and confused when hearing new words in English.	9 9.3%	25 25.8%	18 18.6%	35 36.1%	10 10.3%	1.18	3.12	4
3. When I listen to English, I feel so anxious that I can't remember the words I hear.	12 12.4%	21 21.6%	23 23.7%	32 33.0%	9 9.3%	1.19	3.05	4
4. I get anxious listening to a text with new words in English.	17 17.5%	30 30.9%	12 12.6%	27 27.8%	2 2.1%	1.13	2.66	2
5. I worry when I have a little time to think about the new words I have heard in English.	13 13.4%	39 40.2%	22 22.7%	19 19.6%	4 4.1%	1.07	2.61	2
6. I worry when I'm not sure to hear new words in English.	18 18.6%	34 35.1%	25 25.8%	14 14.4%	6 6.2%	1.14	2.55	2
7. I worry about my lack of knowledge of the vocabulary of the subject I have to learn in English.	15 15.5%	38 39.2%	23 23.7%	19 19.6%	2 2.1%	1.04	2.54	2
8. I worry about the lack of time available to think about new words in English.	12 12.4%	47 48.5%	23 23.7%	10 10.3%	5 5.2%	1.01	2.47	2

The result reported that while 23.7% of the participants [20.6% agree to 3.1% strongly agree] they felt worried about learning new words to understand English, indicating a moderate level of anxiety toward vocabulary learning and acquisition. 57.% of the participants [50.5% disagree to 6.2 strongly disagree], suggesting that while a minority of students experience significant worry, a notable number still perceives some level of concern. Meanwhile, the result reported varieties of anxiety during dealing with vocabulary in different cases; 35.1% of the participants [25.8% agree to 9.3% strongly agree] that they feel anxious and confused when hearing new English words. 34.0% of the participants [21.6% agree to 12.4% strongly agree] that they feel so anxious while listening that they cannot remember the words they heard. 48.4% of the participants [30.9% agree to 17.5% strongly agree] that they feel anxious when exposed to texts containing new words. 53.6% of the participants [40.2% agree to 13.4% strongly agree] that they worry when they have limited time to process new vocabulary. 53.7% of the participants [35.1% agreed to 18.6% strongly agreed] that they feel anxious when unsure of what they have heard. 54.6% of the participants [39.2% agree to 15.5% strongly agree] that they worry about not knowing the necessary vocabulary for their academic subjects. 60.9% of the participants [48.5% agree to 12.4% strongly agree] that they worry about the lack of time to think about new words. Further result for the role of anxiety on challenges presented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4** Correlation Result between Anxiety, Learning Vocabulary Challenges and Other Reported Factors

	Anxiety	LVC	Gender	Age	Semester
Anxiety	1				
LVCs	.746**	1			
Gender	.151	.139	1		
Age	.210*	.244*	.232*	1	
Semester	.218*	.194	.073	.738**	1

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level [2-tailed].

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level [2-tailed].

LVCs=Learning Vocabulary Challenges

The correlation analysis presented in Table 4 above revealed significant relationships among vocabulary-related anxiety, learning vocabulary challenges, and various demographic variables such as gender, age, and semester. These findings provide valuable insights into how emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors interact in shaping the English vocabulary learning experiences of EFL undergraduate students.

The finding reported several statistically significant correlations among the variables. A strong positive significant statistical correlation was found between anxiety and vocabulary learning challenges [ $r = .746^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ], indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with greater difficulties in vocabulary learning and acquisition. Moderate positive significant statistical correlations were observed between anxiety and age [ $r = .210$ ,  $p < .05$ ], anxiety and semester [ $r = .218^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ], and vocabulary challenges and semester [ $r = .194$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. A similar moderate correlation emerged between vocabulary challenges and age [ $r = .244^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Additionally, a very strong positive correlation was found between semester and age [ $r = .738^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ], which is expected given that students' progress through semesters as they grow older. In terms of gender, the correlations were low and not statistically significant for both anxiety [ $r = .151$ ,  $p > .05$ ] and vocabulary challenges [ $r = .139$ ,  $p > .05$ ], indicating no relationship between gender and either anxiety or vocabulary learning difficulties in this sample.

## Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex challenges comprised of lexical phonological, morphological aspects among Libyan EFL learners. The findings reported 85% of the participant showed great interest in learning English vocabulary. Where only 6.2% of the participants [6.2 agree and 8.2% strongly agree] reported having no interest in learning new vocabulary, this great interest among the learners confirms learners' positive attitude toward their recognition of the important role for learning English language vocabulary to master the language. Meanwhile, the result reports EFL students face several major challenges consisted of pronunciation, phonological barriers, semantic and contextual understanding, lack of sufficient feedback, instructional and environmental limitations, lack of multimedia tools and visual/audio teaching and learning aids, and failure to memorize vocabulary effectively. As a result, learner found themselves in very complex learning vocabulary challenges situation. Therefore, external conditions such as teaching methods and learning environments play a crucial role in shaping vocabulary learning challenges. Traditional grammar-translation method, which dominate to Libyan EFL classrooms, clearly neglect the integration of interactive and communicative activities that promote active vocabulary use resulting in poor retention and low proficiency levels.

This reported result has been identified through several items where students face challenges to pronounce new vocabulary in English. Also struggle with identifying and using different parts of speech correctly. They have difficulty distinguishing verbs and identifying adjectives. This result indicated difficulty recognizing nouns, verbs, adjective etc., Additionally, they face difficulties due to spelling-pronunciation mismatches. Meanwhile, memorization and retention issues; they fail to memorize vocabulary effectively. Learners found themselves relying on short-term memory as a result they cannot remember their new vocabulary. Lack of feedback and dictionary use; they do not receive feedback when making vocabulary mistakes. They face lack of help using dictionaries to understand word meanings. Moreover, instructional and environmental limitations were also evident for students challenges in learning vocabulary in which there are insufficient opportunities for pair work. Moreover, difficulty in practicing vocabulary outside the classroom. Lack of classroom activities hinders learners' vocabulary learning. Additionally, semantic and contextual understanding were also presented, they have difficulty with words with similar letters but different meanings. Moreover, they face difficulty with words that have multiple meanings. Lastly, significant number of students feel that there is the lack of multimedia tools and visual/audio teaching and learning aids; there is no use of English language teaching aids such as listening tools and equipment in the class. English vocabulary is not illustrated by various examples in the classroom. There are no teaching aids in the classroom to motivate them to learn English vocabulary. Their lack of having classroom activities prevents them from learning new vocabulary in English.

These results indicate that, difficulties when its come to vocabulary learning challenges are not isolated but are deeply interconnected, across linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and instructional dimensions, each of which influences the others in shaping the learners' overall learning experience. The most dominant challenges include

pronunciation difficulties, confusion over word meanings, limited contextual understanding, and inadequate retention strategies issues that reported in various EFL contexts [Putri et al., 2024; Lutfiyah et al., 2022; Bhandari, 2023]. These findings would explain the complexity of vocabulary learning, which extends beyond rote memorization to include semantic depth, grammatical knowledge, and contextual flexibility [Elmodeer & Fares 2025; Nation, 2001; Zeng et al., 2025]. The EFL students result reported persistent difficulties in distinguishing word forms, such as verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which are essential for accurate and meaningful usage. These findings align with earlier studies [Afzal, 2019; Aida et al., 2024] that emphasize the role of grammatical competence in vocabulary application. The lack of recognizing and applying different parts of speech effectively suggests that students may not be receiving sufficient grammatical instruction or contextual practice, both of which are critical for developing lexical fluency. Moreover, pronunciation issues and the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation were frequently reported as obstacles, particularly for students whose native language Arabic, which is significantly differs in phonological and orthographic structure [Elmodeer & Fares 2025; Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023; Surmanov & Azimova, 2020]. These linguistic differences appear to hinder both receptive and productive skills, reinforcing the need for targeted phonics instruction and increased exposure to spoken English.

Moreover, Putri et al. [2024] identify pronunciation difficulties as a major barrier, especially when phonological systems of the first language differ significantly from English. This challenge is reported among Arabic-speaking learners, whose native language lacks certain phonemes present in English, leading to mispronunciation and reduced fluency. Lutfiyah et al. [2022] further report that spelling inconsistencies between orthography and phonology also hinder accurate word recognition and production. One of the most frequently reported issues across multiple studies is the phonological complexity of English vocabulary which leads to incorrect articulation [Putri et al., 2024; Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023]. These phonological, morphological differences and interference affect both receptive and productive knowledge and skills. Additionally, silent letters or irregular spellings create confusion and impede accurate word recognition and production due to the mismatches between written and spoken forms of words [Susanto, 2021; Lutfiyah et al., 2022].

Moreover, descriptive statistics for the dimension of vocabulary learning reported especially with anxiety as a significant affective barrier. While participants express moderate level of anxiety, the anxiety resulted in discomfort when encountering or exposing to unfamiliar vocabulary, especially in listening and comprehension tasks. This aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [1982], which suggests that emotional stress can act as a filter, impeding learners' ability to process and internalize new linguistic input. The result indicated that anxiety is not an isolated phenomenon but is closely tied to other learning difficulties, including pronunciation uncertainty, lack of contextual clarity, and low self-confidence. These findings are supported by Halali et al. [2023] and Lutfiyah et al. [2022], who stress the negative effects of anxiety on vocabulary learning, retention, and recall.

Apart from that, the most captivating insight from this study is the strong positive correlation between vocabulary learning challenges and anxiety [ $r = .746^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ], suggesting that emotional discomfort significantly increases perceived learning difficulties. This relationship appears to be mutually reinforcing, with anxiety not only resulting from but also contributing to vocabulary challenges. For instance, students who struggle with pronunciation or contextual understanding would experience anxiety, which in turn hinders their ability to process their new vocabulary [Hasan, 2024; Yuliana et al., 2024]. Furthermore, the moderate correlations between anxiety and variables such as age and gender suggest that vocabulary difficulties may become as students advance in their studies, possibly due to increased exposure to academic language and the pressure associated with vocabulary learning performance expectations [Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Bhandari, 2023].

In addition to cognitive and affective factors, the study highlights instructional and environmental constraints that further impede vocabulary development. A significant number of students indicated that vocabulary is often not clearly explained in class, and that insufficient classroom activities hinder meaningful engagement with new words. Over 50% of respondents agree to strongly agree that the lack of interactive learning opportunities impedes their ability to internalize vocabulary effectively. This aligns with Machfudi and Afidah [2022], who critique the dominance of teacher-centred instruction "grammar translation method" in EFL settings. Moreover, the limited integration of visual and auditory teaching and learning aids, contextual examples, and technology-enhanced tools further contributes to passive learning attitudes and reduced motivation [Alsalihi, 2020; Bhandari, 2023; Elmodeer & Fares 2025]. Therefore, these findings point to the urgent need for a shift toward interactive, communicative, and learner-centred methodologies that promote active vocabulary use and contextual understanding.

Moreover, students reported limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, with over 40% participants indicating that external environments do not support language use. This lack of real-world exposure provokes vocabulary gaps and reduces learners learning [Lutfiyah et al., 2022; Yuliana et al., 2024]. The absence of authentic materials, self-directed learning strategies, and peer interaction further limits the development of lexical fluency and confidence in real-life classroom settings [Halali et al., 2023]. Therefore, this study demonstrates that vocabulary learning among EFL undergraduates is shaped by a complex cognitive, affective, and instructional factors. The strong relationship between vocabulary-related anxiety and learning challenges

highlights the necessity of the transformation to more incorporate contextualized teaching methods, and interactive learning environments to support both lexical development and learner confidence as a result the anxiety will be lowering the affective filter reducing unblocking language learning. These insights contribute to strengthen the growing body of research on EFL learning higher education setting as a result will be a call for massive change in Libyan education setting moving from tradition language teaching and learning to more interactive engaged teaching and learning method environment.

## Conclusion

This study has showed that vocabulary acquisition among EFL undergraduate students is a complex, multi-dimensional process, significantly influenced by linguistic, cognitive, psychological, instructional, and environmental teaching method. The findings reveal that students encounter persistent difficulties in learning English vocabulary, with pronunciation issues being among the most frequently reported. These challenges are largely attributed to the phonological differences between Arabic and English, which hinder both spoken production and listening comprehension [Elmodeer & Fares 2025; Putri et al., 2024; Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023]. Moreover, further complicating the learning process, students struggle with semantic ambiguity, and difficulties in interpreting contextual meanings. Cognitive barriers were also evident, with many students relying heavily on rote memorization rather than engaging in meaningful, context-based learning strategies due to limited opportunity of interactive participation and activity. Resulted in short-term retention and narrow lexical knowledge. All these reported challenge was mainly due to the lack of meaningful learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom [Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Xiong & Bao, 2025]. Psychological factors; vocabulary-related anxiety, emerged as a significant barrier to effective learning. Many students expressed being worried and confusion when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, especially during listening and comprehension tasks justifying the strong positive correlation between anxiety and vocabulary challenges [ $r = .746^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Therefore, traditional, teacher-centred methods that emphasize grammar-translation over communicative competence were found to be frequent. The limited use of interactive activities, visual and auditory aids, and authentic materials contributes to passive learning attitudes and low engagement. Additionally, the lack of contextualized vocabulary instruction leaves students unprepared to use words appropriately in real-life situations, further negatively affecting their lexical confidence and communicative competence. Therefore, Libyan EFL teaching and learning environment and context need close reconsider by the ministry of education to be more immersive language environment both inside and outside the classroom. This reconsideration would reinforces positive attitudes toward enhancing vocabulary learning lowering learner anxiety and strengthening learners' self-confidence improving learners' vocabulary outcomes.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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