

Vocabulary Knowledge in ELT: Dimensions, Learning Strategies and Implications for EFL Textbooks

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المعرفة بالمفردات في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية: أبعادها، واستراتيجيات تعلمها، وانعكاساتها على كتب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

This article aims to provide a comprehensive critical review of recent literature on vocabulary knowledge in the field of English language teaching by analyzing and synthesizing the findings of empirical and theoretical studies published in the domain of vocabulary learning and teaching. The review seeks to identify major research trends and theoretical models addressing the concept of vocabulary knowledge and its dimensions, learning strategies, and role in developing language proficiency among English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. The findings reveal that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental pillar of linguistic competence, extending beyond the formal knowledge of words to encompass receptive and productive knowledge, breadth and depth of lexical knowledge, as well as the appropriate use of vocabulary in various linguistic contexts. Furthermore, the literature highlights the significance of vocabulary learning strategies particularly intentional learning in enhancing lexical acquisition and long-term retention. The article also discusses the pedagogical implications of these findings concerning the design and evaluation of EFL textbooks prescribed for learners in Libya, focusing on the extent to which they incorporate vocabulary dimensions and learning strategies. Additionally, it emphasizes the pivotal role of the teacher in fostering learners' vocabulary growth through evidence-based instructional practices. The review concludes with a set of recommendations directed at curriculum developers, textbook designers, educators, and researchers, stressing the necessity of adopting a comprehensive perspective on vocabulary knowledge in English language curricula and conducting further studies to explore the representation of vocabulary dimensions and learning strategies in EFL textbooks within the Libyan context.

Keywords: vocabulary breadth; vocabulary depth; vocabulary knowledge; vocabulary strategies; Libyan EFL textbooks; Libyan EFL learners.

المخلص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى مراجعة نقدية شاملة للأدبيات الحديثة المتعلقة بمعرفة المفردات في مجال تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال تحليل وتركيب نتائج الدراسات التجريبية والنظرية المنشورة في ميدان تعلم المفردات وتعليمها. وتسعى المراجعة إلى تحديد أبرز الاتجاهات البحثية والنماذج النظرية التي تناولت مفهوم معرفة المفردات وأبعادها، واستراتيجيات تعلمها، ودورها في تنمية الكفاءة اللغوية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية

كلغة أجنبية. وتكشف نتائج المراجعة أن معرفة المفردات تُعد من الركائز الأساسية للكفاءة اللغوية، وأنها تتجاوز المعرفة الشكلية للكلمات لتشمل المعرفة الاستقبالية والإنتاجية، والعمق والاتساع في المعرفة المعجمية، فضلاً عن الاستخدام الملائم للمفردات في السياقات اللغوية المختلفة. كما تُبرز الأدبيات أهمية استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات، ولا سيما التعلم المقصود في تعزيز اكتساب المفردات والاحتفاظ بها على المدى الطويل وتناقش المقالة كذلك الآثار التربوية لهذه النتائج فيما يتعلق بتصميم وتقويم كتب اللغة الإنجليزية المقررة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا، مع التركيز على مدى تضمينها لأبعاد معرفة المفردات واستراتيجيات تعلمها. كما تؤكد على الدور المحوري للمعلم في تنمية الحصيلة اللغوية للمتعلمين من خلال توظيف ممارسات تدريسية قائمة على الأدلة. وتختتم المراجعة بمجموعة من التوصيات الموجهة إلى مؤلفي المناهج، ومصممي الكتب الدراسية، والمعلمين، والباحثين، تؤكد ضرورة تبني منظور شامل لمعرفة المفردات في مناهج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، وإجراء مزيد من الدراسات التي تستكشف مدى تمثيل أبعاد معرفة المفردات واستراتيجيات تعلمها في كتب اللغة الإنجليزية المقررة في السياق الليبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اتساع المعرفة بالمفردات؛ عمق المعرفة بالمفردات؛ أبعاد المعرفة بالمفردات؛ استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات؛ كتب اللغة الإنجليزية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

1. Introduction

Limited vocabulary knowledge constitutes a major constraint on second language (L2) learners' comprehension and communication. This lack of vocabulary knowledge may affect their communication skills. The practical importance of lexical knowledge is reflected in learners' frequent reliance on dictionaries (Krashen, 1989). In addition, EFL learners cannot be efficient learners unless they have a comprehensive lexicon to master these skills.

Based upon the long experience in teaching English as a foreign language since 1985 in secondary schools and at University of Benghazi the author was motivated to explore, highlight and gain further understanding of vocabulary knowledge as treated in research.

This review synthesises research on vocabulary knowledge in ELT by addressing the following questions:

1. What are the vocabulary knowledge dimensions and their aspects?
2. What are the receptive and productive of word knowledge?
3. Why is deliberate L2 vocabulary learning necessary?
4. What are the learning strategies, the teacher's role and the author's perspectives?
5. Do EFL textbooks provide a limited number of encounters words?

Thus, there is a need to assess vocabulary knowledge in EFL textbooks as well. The Libyan EFL textbooks are almost the only focus in the Libyan context as English is not used beyond the classroom setting.

Meara (1980) stated that the academic study of vocabulary has been neglected as it was beyond the researchers' interest in ELT. Milton (2009) explains that lexicons in language learning, teaching as well as testing are put aside because of the structural language teaching; learners' need to learn limited vocabulary; and the belief that few words are retained despite time spent in explicit vocabulary teaching. In fact, to engage with a language like a native speaker needs thousands of words and knowing more about word form, meaning and use.

2. Dimensions and Aspects of Vocabulary Knowledge

Anderson and Freebody (1981) suggest vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth. The former deals with the amount of lexis a learner understands, whereas the latter implies what the learner recognises about these vocabularies.

Vocabulary breadth deals with the learning of vocabulary stages, whereas vocabulary depth is concerned with word mastery of the various aspects of lexical items knowledge (Read, 1998). A learner has to know more than the surface level of word meaning understanding. According to Qian (2002), vocabulary depth includes features like pronunciation, spelling, meaning, word morphology and syntax and word collocation.

Milton and Fitzpatrick (2013) support the idea that word knowledge breadth appears to include word form receptively and productively, they question whether word breadth includes the knowledge of word parts. However, Nation (2013) disagreed with them and included word parts as a category of word forms classification.

Schmitt (2010) states that research work prior to the scholars Richards (1976) and Nation (1990, 2001) could not produce a clear wholistic theory because of the complexity of studying vocabulary. Reducing complexity can be attained by separating word knowledge and understanding its components, for example associations and collocations.

Recent evidence also indicates that deeper academic vocabulary knowledge is positively associated with academic success among 50 fourth-year Saudi university EFL students (Alsahafi, 2023).

Nation (2013) argued that learning vocabulary involves 9 vocabulary aspects. They come from three levels - form, meaning and use - at both reception and production levels.

Word form is classified into 3 sections: *spoken*, *written* and *word* parts. A learner can receive a word when it is heard and produces it when it is pronounced. They recognise the written form and reproduce its spelling accurately. They begin to understand and produce the word parts which are divided into 2 different concepts: a lemma and a word family. The former consists of a headword and its all-inflectional forms. Inflections never change word category (Bauer & Nation, 1993). As shown in the tables below:

Table 1. Inflectional Forms of English Verbs within a Lemma

lemma	dictionary word	present	past	past participle	present participle
predict	predict	predict(s)	predicted	predicted	predicting
go	go	go(es)	went	gone	going

Table 2. Inflectional Forms of English Adjectives within a Lemma

lemma	positive	comparative	superlative
beautiful	beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful
good	good	better	best

Table 3. Inflectional Forms of English Nouns within a Lemma

lemma	singular	plural	possessive
boy	boy	boys	boy's /boys'
child	child	children	child's /children's

However, the word family is a broader concept than lemma. A word family adds transparent derived forms, which may change word class (Milton's 2009). Derivational affixes are divided into prefixes which may change the meaning but not the word category. As shown in the tables below:

Table 4. Examples of Prefixation in Word Formation

lemma	prefix	Derivational word / a new lemma
happy	un	unhappy
agree	dis	disagree

On the other hand, suffixes may change the meaning and the word class. Lemmas (headwords) can be added to derivational suffixes and may create another new lemma. As shown in the table below:

Table 5. Examples of Suffixation in Word Formation

lemma	suffix	Derivational word / new lemma
arrive	-al	arrival
require	-ment	requirement

Thus, the addition of a lemma and an inflection do not result in a new lemma. lemmatisation is determined and identified by adding inflections, whereas word family formation is recognised and acknowledged by derivations. Recent findings suggest that knowledge of derivational morphology is related to but distinct from breadth (Leontjev et al., 2023).

Word meaning is classified into form and meaning, concept and referents; and associations. Regarding the first part, a learner can understand and express the meaning. In relation to the learning of a foreign language, this involves forming a link between a foreign language word and its translation in first language (L1). The concepts and references indicate that a word in one language might require several translations or carry different meanings in another language. Also, a language vocabulary learner must be capable of thinking and associating other alternatives to the word. EFL language learners must know this information if they want to avoid being confused or risk causing offence through the wrong choice of words.

Knowledge of word use is also divided into three parts. In terms of use, the learner should be able to realise and use the appropriate word pattern. Grammatical functions are concerned with knowing what category of a part of speech a word is and how it will link with other words in consequence. For example, because the word *beautiful* functions as an adjective, it should, in English, be placed before the noun it qualifies and not after *a beautiful girl* is correct. However, **a girl beautiful* is not. Libyan EFL learners must learn to enforce this rule because adjectives commonly come after the noun in their first language Arabic. Furthermore, the learner can then grasp and employ other words which can collocate with it. Another aspect is that a student can expect where, when and how to meet the word and use its register.

According to Schmitt (2010), these components of vocabulary knowledge are important both when teaching and researching vocabulary. Firstly, some of their aspects suit intentional learning, such as word form, word meaning, and word parts. However, collocations and register are much more difficult to teach. Secondly, some aspects of word form and word meaning are easier to evaluate and assess than register and collocations. Although all the vocabulary knowledge elements are learnt simultaneously, they differ from one another when learners want to master them. Schmitt (2014) states that the understanding of word knowledge can be known to different mastery levels. They also have different correlations with word breadth.

Likewise, lack of vocabulary knowledge could affect how well the learners perform in writing. For example, Suwaed (2011) has observed that although writing textbooks which instruct how to write seem to be very interesting to teachers and their students, there is still a need for

teachers to stop and explain the vocabulary used in the book. Thus, the Libyan learners' immediate obstacle is lack of vocabulary, which is beyond the learners' level, not the writing tasks. This shows how EFL learners' insufficient vocabulary knowledge could delay them understanding other topics as well.

3. Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

Receptive word knowledge is the ability to recognise a word to understand its meaning in the receptive skills: listening or reading while productive word knowledge is to retrieve and use word appropriately in the productive skills: speaking or writing (Nation, 2001; Milton, 2009). Productive knowledge is more difficult to measure and assess than receptive knowledge. Learners do not perceive both the receptive and productive knowledge equally due to the difficulty and complexity of their nature. Researchers do not agree upon one method of measuring productive vocabulary knowledge as they find it a problematic issue. There is no one single measurement to assess productive knowledge (Schmitt, 2000, 2010). There is a terminology mess as researchers use the terms in different processes (Melka, 1997; Pignot-Shahov, 2012).

Consequently, the majority of research studies of vocabulary knowledge focus on the receptive knowledge (Waring & Takaki, 2003). For example, learners can be asked to select the correct item from a multiple-choice response or give a translation or a synonym. However; the productive knowledge left unanswered (Milton, 2009).

4. Deliberate L2 Vocabulary Learning

Milton (2009) supports the distinctions between incidental learning and intentional/deliberate learning. Firstly, incidental learning describes an unplanned or unintended learning without direct teaching; it occurs unintentionally. Unlike formal teaching it is a result of activities commenced for other tasks. Secondly, intentional learning is concerned with the practice deliberate purpose. That is to decide aims and plan to achieve them. There is a plan of what is intended of informal teaching. Explicit instruction is the direct and teaching approach. Intentional learning and explicit instruction are related to each other. Both are structured and systematic.

A recent meta-analysis confirms that deliberate vocabulary learning activities can create considerable learning outcomes, although their effectiveness differs across activities (Webb et al., 2020). Schimtt (2000) argues that explicit instruction is a necessity for second language learning. A considerable amount of direct teaching is needed for second language learners to reach lexicon benchmark to allow the unintentional acquisition of words from reading. Nation and Waring (1997) estimate that three to five thousand-word families assist access to authentic texts. School-level Libyan learners who are far below this threshold need selection and deliberate learning.

5. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Due to their significant role in L2 vocabulary learning and instruction, approaches for lexical development can show a substantial function in enhancing word learning. Teachers could achieve this by supporting students in changing and developing as autonomous learners as well as teaching them to apply vocabulary learning strategies as efficiently as possible. It has been recommended that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of specific words but also aim at arming learners with strategies essential to enlarging their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstijn, 1993).

According to Graves (2016), when students want to recognise unfamiliar vocabulary items as they read a reading passage, they need to acquire knowledge of vocabulary, not only learn new words. Vocabulary learning includes a variety of content words, how the words are formed such

as derivation and the meaning of prefixes and suffixes. Overall, independent vocabulary learning approaches are processes that teachers can use explicitly to teach their students how to know the meanings of vocabulary items not known to them. Additionally, instruction in vocabulary learning strategies can directly help students develop more effectively as independent vocabulary learners.

Different learners have different views about the benefits of different methods of vocabulary learning. Schmitt (1997) views learning strategy as a process for acquiring, recalling, and communicating information. Thus, he has developed a vocabulary learning strategies' taxonomy and divided them into two groups: discovery and consolidation.

Firstly, discovery strategies in which learners use their knowledge or ask someone else are classified into two subgroups: *determination* strategies and *social* strategies. The former can be used by learners to realise a new meaning of a word without resorting to other people's knowledge, such as analysing a part of speech or analysing affixes and roots, and the latter can employ communication with other people, for example; asking someone for their first language translation meaning.

Secondly, consolidation strategies are categorised into four subgroups: social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive. Social strategies are used to enhance interaction, such as communication with native speakers. Memory strategies relate new knowledge to existing information, for example, affixes and roots (remembering) and part of speech (remembering). Cognitive strategies show the transformation of information in an immediate task, such as verbal and written repetition. Metacognitive strategies are involved in the practices of language use to centre, arrange, plan and evaluate learning. Recent research also shows that vocabulary-learning strategies differ in their relationships with vocabulary breadth and depth (Fan, 2020). Vocabulary learning strategies might enhance using words in various learning contexts. Schmitt (2014) remarks that using them can enhance word breadth and depth. Word lists may support short-term form-meaning learning, but isolated study alone is unlikely to develop the fuller contextual and collocational knowledge associated with vocabulary depth. For example, if students learn the equivalent Arabic meaning of some English words from a word list, they may be able to use them in a quiz the next day. Although learning words in isolation increases L2 learners' vocabulary size, it might limit their deep understanding of vocabulary knowledge. On the other hand, using consolidation would raise their vocabulary knowledge depth.

By approaching vocabulary learning strategies which distinguish between aspects of vocabulary knowledge, sources of vocabulary knowledge, and the learning process, Nation (2013) has suggested three learning strategies: planning, sources, and processes. Planning strategies require learners' attention to unknown words. In other words, planning strategies deal with learners' decisions on when and how to focus their attention on lexical items. The sources category, on the other hand, requires learners' ability to obtain some information gained from the word itself, by analysing its form, from the context in which that word is used, or from reference sources such as using a dictionary. The processes category involves strategies dealing with one's means of remembering a lexical item and make it ready for use.

6. Discussion Pedagogical Implications for Libyan EFL Learners

According to Nation (1993b), the most important aspect of the teacher's role in vocabulary growth is to decide what vocabulary to focus on at a learner's level along with how to concentrate on it. If the objective of vocabulary teaching is not identified in advance, the outcomes of this process will not produce satisfactory learning results. Teachers need to know about the approaches their learners use to acquire vocabulary. Taking the above-mentioned aspects into consideration, the end result can encourage Libyan EFL teachers to exploit this knowledge in their teaching. They can also give Libyan EFL learners the confidence to use appropriate strategies (Alahirsh, 2006). Nation (1990) argues that the learning burden, which

is the amount of effort required to learn vocabulary, is influenced and changed by the approach of teaching used.

In practice, word parts might be equally included in both the breadth and depth dimensions. For example, there is an implied connection between the lexical depth and breadth of word parts, since any increase of the possible number of knowing word parts in words will also increase the breadth (number) of words a learner knows. (Melka, 1997).

Unfortunately, employing easy spelling/pronunciation words as a language learning strategy is not a helpful technique for Libyan EFL learners. Firstly, easy pronunciation or spelling words cannot help Libyan EFL much since Arabic has quite different phonological and spelling rules. To some extent, although there are phonetic similarities, spelling is the more striking difference. Indeed, it uses a cognate writing system, but there is little immediate sense of relatedness between Arabic and Roman scripts. Secondly, most of the studies show that Libyan EFL learners have a greater problem with English spelling compared to any other EFL learner group, which consequently affects their word recognition (Al-Saqqaf and Al-Busaidi, 2015). Libyan EFL learners might be strongly influenced by their L1 Arabic spelling. Therefore, Libyan EFL learners, whose native language, Arabic, employs a different script from the Roman script, would not find the so-called easy spelling or pronunciation words strategy useful for them: or not, at least, until they have some grounding in the English system.

In terms of loan words, cognate words and words learned in outstanding and prominent situations, many speakers of western European languages would be more likely to achieve success compared to Libyan EFL learners. Their first language could hardly contain any loan words or cognate words from their L1 Arabic, as a non-cognate language. Therefore, Alahirsh (2006, p. 42) finds that the least used vocabulary learning strategy reported by the Libyan EFL learners, is “think about cognate words [in English] to find out unknown words’ meaning”, commenting that “this is not a surprising finding since there is a paucity of cognates in the Arabic language” in relation to English.

Alahirsh (2006) has discovered that 90% of Libyan EFL learners prefer using a bilingual dictionary as their best strategy for discovering new words. About 86% of the subjects focus on word spelling as their strategy for consolidating words. This could be due to the following reasons: L2 learners believe that a bilingual dictionary is less complicated than guessing a word meaning from the context, or alternatively, L2 teachers have not introduced new strategies. Bilingual dictionary use may be successful if it is accompanied by consideration affixes, roots, word class and contextual use (Porte, 1988).

7. Assessing Vocabulary Knowledge of EFL Textbooks

Harwood (2013) has pointed out that textbook content research reflects on the areas of language that are addressed and to what extent they are emphasised. Sheldon (1988) contends that the selection and presentation of vocabulary tend to be treated unsystematically in some textbooks, despite the relevant studies and sources of information to which reference could be made. For instance, the General Service List (GSL) is a set of the most important 2,000 words for L2 English learners issued by Michael West in 1953 is an example of such a system. Frequency was one of the features considered when compiling the list. Each word in the list is a root signifying a word family. This list has for many years had considerable influence (Nation, 1990; Carter and McCarthy, 1988). Corpus-based textbook analysis can reveal whether vocabulary is appropriately selected, distributed and repeated across proficiency levels (Yang & Coxhead, 2022).

Assally (2025) concludes in a study concerned with the main obstacles that face and impede Libyan EFL learners’ oral performance is due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. This view is supported by Boubakar (2026) who writes that the Libyan EFL learners encounter great challenges in regard with learning vocabulary due to vocabulary deficiency, spelling and

pronunciation. The vocabulary knowledge activities are not carried regularly and consistently which result in that Libyan EFL learners are unable to use lexical items properly.

Discussing this topic by referring also to other situations tied to the Libyan setting. For example, Alsaif and Milton (2012), however, explain that lack of vocabulary knowledge for Saudi EFL learners is due to lack and unsuitable vocabulary presentation in Saudi EFL School learners' textbooks. This vocabulary shortage is because these books do not follow the General Service List. This might explain the reasons behind learners frequently scoring very low marks in vocabulary breadth tests.

Learning frequent lexical items of vocabulary and using the different aspects of vocabulary knowledge might result in automatic processing (Nation, 2013). This requires many encounters with a word.

Conversely, textbooks usually provide a limited number of encounters with almost all the words they include (Nation, 1990). Therefore, approaching the different vocabulary aspects tends to provide a systematic way to recycle and repeat vocabulary items which learners need (Brown, 2010).

Since learning vocabulary in an L2 is an incremental process, teachers must focus on introducing new words to encourage and enrich learners to reinforce previous words (Schmitt, 2000). When developing EFL textbooks and materials, writers should take into consideration the specific problems and pitfalls of L2 and L1 learners.

After a very brief overview related to evaluating the vocabulary component in the contemporary coursebooks, Hedge (2000) introduces an evaluation checklist including the following questions:

1. Does the textbook give details of vocabulary selection?
 - Is selection made with a criterion?
 - Are there any appendices in the student or teacher's book?
 - Is vocabulary given regularly in each unit and how it is listed?
2. How does the coursebook present vocabulary?
 - Is vocabulary drawn from texts?
 - Does the coursebook cover the aspects of vocabulary knowledge?
 - Which aspects are more often used?
3. Does the book focus on how lexis is retained?
 - Are students encouraged to use learning vocabulary strategies?
4. To what extent does a teacher's book give guidance for learning and teaching vocabulary?

Teaching vocabulary explicitly through a range of task types in the EFL textbooks can be useful (ibid). Allothman (2014) adheres to the idea that explicit teaching is required for form-related aspects of word knowledge such as word parts affixation morphology, pronunciation and stress. Teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks in many cases: this is certainly true in Libya, for example. Because Libyan learners and teachers rely on textbooks, the selection and presentation of vocabulary in those materials can heavily influence the learning process.

Although there are many ways to define a corpus, all definitions agree that a corpus is a collection of machine-readable, authentic texts, acting as a sample of representative language or a language variety (McEnery et al., 2006). Likewise, a corpus is a group of texts, written or spoken, which can be stored on a computer. Another characteristic of a corpus is that it is a principled collection of texts available for qualitative and quantitative analysis (Biber et al., 1998). Corpora can also function as a provider because corpora data verified language use. They can provide practical examples and frequency information that helps classify high-priority vocabulary for learners. Corpora may provide frequency data to identify the most useful words for learners to know. High frequency words are related to how often the word occurs in the normal use of the language. These highly frequent and wide-range words are learned before

low-frequency words. There are also academic vocabulary lists which have been compiled from corpora.

Corpus-based studies have also changed and converted the approaches by which researchers view vocabulary studies. Corpora have been used widely to provide descriptions of language use; many academics have also used corpus data directly to look critically at existing EFL teaching materials (McEnery et al., 2006). Frequency (how often words occur in a text) can contribute to making learning more effective. Teachers and researchers can use corpus as evidence to produce teaching materials that better replicate models of language use and also support learners' needs (Milton, 2009; Xue and Nation, 1984).

8. Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence reviewed in this article indicates that vocabulary knowledge comprises knowledge of form, meaning and use, breadth and depth, and receptive and productive knowledge. Effective vocabulary teaching should address more than isolated word meanings. Vocabulary teaching should also integrate word parts, contextual use, learning strategies, and the systematic selection and presentation of vocabulary. These considerations are mainly related to the design and use of EFL textbooks in the Libyan setting. In conclusion, for developing a learners' overall English language proficiency, adopting an effective, holistic approach to vocabulary knowledge in teaching, learning, assessment and textbook design is imperative to the overall progress of learners' progression, especially in the Libyan EFL contexts.

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