Panamanian Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions and Reported Strategies for Instructed EFL Vocabulary Acquisition[1]

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Abstract

Vocabulary instruction is an important part of second language education. Research on vocabulary instruction points out the value and effectiveness of explicit instruction. Explicit vocabulary instruction should be dynamic and use a range of strategies to be most successful. Considering the importance of vocabulary instruction in second language acquisition, the current research was set to identify vocabulary teaching strategies used by elementary teachers in Panamanian public schools to increase vocabulary. Ninety-one Panamanian teachers of English as a foreign language at the elementary level participated in the research. A mixed-method approach was used in this study. The data were collected through a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used for analyzing the quantitative data, while inductive coding was used for analyzing the qualitative data. The quantitative data results showed that the participants primarily employed traditional teaching strategies. The conscious strategies that require a higher level of cognition turned out to be the least used. On the other hand, the results of the qualitative data revealed that most participants consider vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning relevant; especially, for communication, language development, and enrichment of ideas.

Resumen

La enseñanza de vocabulario es una parte importante de la enseñanza de un segundo idioma. Investigaciones sobre la instrucción de vocabulario destacan el valor y la eficacia de la instrucción explícita. La enseñanza explícita del vocabulario debe ser dinámica y debe utilizar una serie de estrategias para tener más éxito. Teniendo en cuenta la importancia de la instrucción de vocabulario en la adquisición de una segunda lengua, la presente investigación se estableció para identificar las estrategias de enseñanza de vocabulario utilizadas por los docentes de primaria en las escuelas públicas panameñas para aumentar el vocabulario. En la investigación participaron 91 profesores panameños de inglés como lengua extranjera en el nivel primario. En este estudio se utilizó un enfoque de método mixto. Los datos se recogieron mediante un cuestionario. Se utilizó estadística descriptiva para analizar los datos cuantitativos, mientras que se utilizó codificación inductiva para analizar los datos cualitativos. Los resultados de los datos cuantitativos mostraron que los participantes emplearon principalmente estrategias de enseñanza tradicionales. Las estrategias conscientes que requieren un mayor nivel de cognición resultaron ser las menos utilizadas. Por otro lado, los resultados de los datos cualitativos revelaron que la mayoría de los participantes consideran que la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de vocabulario son relevantes; especialmente, para la comunicación, el desarrollo del lenguaje y el enriquecimiento de las ideas.

Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is important in English language instruction because, with proper vocabulary knowledge, students can understand others and communicate their own ideas. In addition, word knowledge is significantly connected to academic achievement. Students with wide strong vocabulary may absorb new concepts more quickly than students with a weaker vocabulary. However, in actual teaching environments, teachers found that there are students with no knowledge of English, students with learning disabilities, students that do not practice the language at home or outside of the classroom, and students with limited vocabulary knowledge (Sedita, 2005). Consequently, more vocabulary instruction from all teachers is needed at all grade levels.

Vocabulary instruction facilitates the process of understanding and communicating in English. Planning to use teaching techniques contributes to achieving the required objectives to improve learners' language acquisition. The problem is that some teachers' knowledge does not affirm the value of preparing to use vocabulary learning strategies.

Al Bzour's (2016) research on English language teachers in private schools in Amman, Jordan found many reasons for not utilizing teaching techniques. Some teachers see these techniques as a collection of definitions, methods, and behavioral factors to offer lessons to their learners. This problem is seen among a plurality of teachers neglecting various strategies and techniques since they encounter difficulties in planning and application.

Taking into consideration the importance of acquiring vocabulary for learners of a second language and the critical role of teachers in the teaching process, this study aims to analyze and inform current vocabulary teaching perceptions in the context of elementary public schools in Panama.

Purpose of the Study

In order to have a better understanding of the work that English teachers do in the classroom in relation to the teaching of vocabulary and thus analyze the possible strengths or weaknesses in the educational system, the purpose of this study was to determine:

1. What were Panamanian English elementary school teachers' views regarding teaching vocabulary?
2. What vocabulary teaching strategies did Panamanian English elementary school teachers like to use to teach vocabulary and why?

Literature Review

Historical context

One of the driving factors behind the attention to the teaching of English as a second language is the development of the Panama Canal. For an excellent review of the historical factors see Pakozdi (2011) and Malcolm (2012).

In 2003, a law was approved in Panama that mandated the teaching of the English language in official and private primary and secondary schools to contribute to the modernization of Panamanian education. This law declared the learning and teaching of the English language to be of public interest. The Ministry of Education would be responsible for allocating the necessary financial resources to establish English language learning in official educational centers from the first level of education.

Based on Law No. 2 of 2003, between 2004 and 2009, the *English for Life Program* was implemented at the primary and secondary education levels. This implementation gave rise to the *After School* and *Kids Programs* for students and a teacher training strategy held between 2009 and 2014. Likewise, the Ministry would coordinate with the official universities to establish the pertinent plans, programs, methods, processes, and mechanisms so that English language learning would be effective in the official schools.

In 2017, the *Panamá Bilingüe* Program was created. The primary objective of the program was to implement the teaching of English as a second language in the official educational centers of the Republic of Panama in order to provide its students with the best competitive tools to facilitate their insertion in the labor market (Legislación de la República de Panamá, 2017). The document contemplates training in the English language for teachers, both in Panama and in universities of English-speaking countries, in addition to increasing the number of hours of English classes in public schools. Moreover, the law states that the Ministry of Education must establish a monitoring, certification, and recertification mechanism for teachers.

All the actions taken in recent years keep scholars waiting for tangible results that demonstrate significant progress in the development and improvement of Panamanian education, for example, improvements in the teaching processes of the teachers, and improvements in the students' linguistic skills. One way to assess improvement is through vocabulary knowledge since learners must master an extremely high number of words in order to operate in English.

Vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary refers to the knowledge of the words that make up a language. This knowledge transcends a mere definition and implies an understanding of how the words fit into the world. Vocabulary acquisition is crucial for effective foreign language use since it is used to create full spoken and written compositions. In other words, vocabulary is an essential component that supports all language skills.

In this regard, Susanto (2017) states that if students lack vocabulary skills, they will quickly realize that their capacity to understand or express themselves is limited. According to Alqahtani (2015), generating grammatical sentences is of little use if someone lacks the vocabulary necessary to explain what they want to say. Nation (2001) illustrates this point by giving the example of a traveler learning a language who arrives in a country with a dictionary and not with a grammar book. Additionally, Schmitt (2000) highlights the relevance of lexical knowledge in communicative competence and points out the value of vocabulary acquisition when learning a second language. These researchers have realized that learning vocabulary is crucial to the use of a second language.

When language learners want to communicate an opinion or a notion, they require a bank of words from which to choose to represent the meaning or concept. Alqahtani (2015) claims that successful foreign language use requires a large vocabulary. This statement was also supported by Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2000) and Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) argued that vocabulary knowledge is necessary to prioritize both

general vocabulary as part of education as well as specialized vocabulary, whether academic or technical, depending on the goals for which they want to use language.

Nevertheless, in the L2 context, the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary is limited due to the low frequency of inputs, and consequently, only a few words are learned. Vocabulary acquisition is often slow and uneven. Siyanova-Chanturia and Webb (2016), contrasting the vocabulary size of native English speakers and second language learners, stated that about 20,000 word-families are known by an educated native English speaker. By comparison, highly educated non-native English speakers have about 8,000–9,000 word-families.

This is due to a number of interrelated factors, such as insufficient input, lack of opportunities to use the language outside the classroom (insufficient output), teaching methods used (communicative language teaching vs. grammar-translation method), amount of time dedicated to the English language in general, amount of time dedicated to vocabulary learning in particular, and so on. (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016, p. 229)

Finally, language teachers and course designers are responsible for deciding which words students should learn and when. That is why, in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, English teachers need to pay special attention to their teaching strategies for vocabulary instruction.

Vocabulary instruction

Vocabulary instruction is an essential part of language education because languages are made up of words. The purpose of vocabulary instruction is to help students understand the meanings of numerous words from the target language, as a result, to facilitate communication and ensure academic success as well.

In that sense, effective vocabulary teaching demands teachers to provide students with multiple opportunities to learn vocabulary, related terms, and meanings. Significant instructional opportunities are required for students to develop a deep level of word knowledge, and a toolbox of strategies to improve their autonomous word acquisition. In other words, active vocabulary education should permeate the classroom and provide a wealth of useful knowledge.

According to Nation (2008), "teaching vocabulary is surprisingly the least important of a teacher's jobs" (p. 5). Here are some reasons: There are many words that learners need to know, and teaching could only handle a small portion of these. Studies have shown that much information about a particular word tends to be confusing; therefore, it is not possible to teach much about an individual word. Knowing a word well entails understanding various characteristics of the word, such as its meaning, form, and use. Such in-depth teaching takes time.

In addition to all these reasons, Susanto (2017) adds that many instructors are unsure of best practices for vocabulary teaching and sometimes do not know where to start focusing on word acquisition. They are struggling with instructing learners to get satisfactory outcomes. However, it is important to highlight at this point that the National Reading Panel (2000) is hesitant to recommend a particular approach to vocabulary learning. The National Reading Panel mentioned that vocabulary can be increased by reorganizing study material and instruction in different ways, particularly for underachieving or at-risk students.

Diamond and Gutlohn (2006) discuss the four components of the effective vocabulary program proposed by Graves (2000): "(1) wide or extensive independent reading to expand word knowledge; (2) instruction in specific words to enhance comprehension of texts containing those words; (3) instruction in independent word-learning strategies, and (4) word consciousness and word-play activities to motivate and enhance learning (p. 3)."

Given the importance of vocabulary instruction, it is essential to highlight the role of teachers in second language instruction. Teachers should have access to appropriate materials and be creative in presenting and explaining the material to students. Additionally, teachers must ensure that students learn, practice, and review the vocabulary learned to prevent it from being forgotten. In this way, teachers will be fostering meaningful learning and contributing to the development and enhancement of the learner's vocabulary.

Methodology

Setting and participants

The research was done at public elementary schools in Panamá Oeste, one of the ten provinces in Panama. The study was limited to this level since the context of middle and high school levels is different. That is,

strategies used by teachers to teach vocabulary differ at higher levels as teachers have opportunities to have older children analyze abstractly, use their knowledge of the world to guess unfamiliar words, and make useful comparisons between two languages (Pinter, 2006). The participants in the research included 91 Panamanian teachers (19 males, 70 females, and 2 others) of EFL at the elementary level who decided to participate in the research voluntarily and anonymously. In terms of academic degrees, 74 teachers had bachelor's degrees, 16 had master's degrees, and one had an associate degree in English. Regarding the years of experience as teachers of the English language, 18 had from 0 to 5 years of experience, 30 had from 6 to 10, 29 had from 11 to 15, and 14 had 16 to 20 years of experience.

Materials

The data were collected through a questionnaire that the researcher prepared. Based on research highlighting the importance of vocabulary instruction and well-known strategies for teaching vocabulary (Harmer & Thornbury, 2004; Ur, 2012), the questionnaire included several options that participants could select to indicate the strategies they used in class. The questionnaire was done in the Qualtrics platform, a web-based software that allows users to create surveys and reports. A survey link was created and shared with the participants by the instant message application *WhatsApp*. The questionnaire was previously piloted by an associate professor of English at Minnesota State University and two professors of English from the Ministry of Education in Panama to ensure content validity. Since the purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data on teachers' perceptions of vocabulary teaching practices and strategies applied in the classroom, different questions were asked to fulfill this objective. The online questionnaire included one item of a six-point rank order scale, 12 items of a five-point Likert scale, six closed-ended questions, and four open-ended questions that the participants had to complete.

Procedures

A letter explaining the purpose of the research and requesting permission to share the survey with the teachers was sent to the Ministry of Education. After obtaining approval, the educational authorities of the province in which the investigation was intended to be applied were notified to have their support in the distribution of the survey link.

The survey was distributed to the respondents by *WhatsApp*, an instant messaging platform commonly used in Panama. Participants opened the survey and first read a consent form where they would have the option to decide whether or not to participate. The English language teachers agreed to participate in the research voluntarily and anonymously. Ninety-one English language teachers from different elementary public schools in Panamá Oeste province completed the questionnaire.

Analysis

To collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data, a mixed-method approach was used in this study. The questionnaire was the only research instrument used to collect teachers' perceptions of vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary strategies applied in the classroom. The quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, namely, means and standard deviations. The qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis, namely, inductive coding. This ground-up approach helped derive codes (words and phrases) from the data. Words and phrases mostly used by respondents were manually identified and then summarized into categories (Vears & Gillam, 2022).

Results

The quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the participants' answers about vocabulary teaching were examined, and the findings are presented below.

Teachers' views regarding teaching vocabulary

The first part of the questionnaire included a rank order scale with six common language activities (grammar, listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary, and writing activities). The rank order scale sought to probe the type of language skills that 91 primary school teachers prefer to focus on and develop in their classrooms, and thus analyze where they would place the development of vocabulary skills.

A quantitative analysis was done in this section using descriptive statistics. Among the six teaching preferences, listening activities came first with a mean score of 4.6, followed by vocabulary activities with a mean of 4.5 in the second position.

Most Preferred Teaching Activities	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Listening	4.61	1.45	1
Vocabulary	4.50	1.55	2
Speaking	4.20	1.53	3
Reading	3.17	1.43	4
Grammar	2.48	1.39	5
Writing	2.23	1.53	6

Table 1: Rank of language skill activities preferred by elementary school teachers.

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants answered if they considered vocabulary words the most important part of learning a new language. On a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, most participants (82 in total) responded between somewhat agree and strongly agree with a mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation of 1.0. Figure 1 illustrates participants' beliefs concerning this point according to their answers.
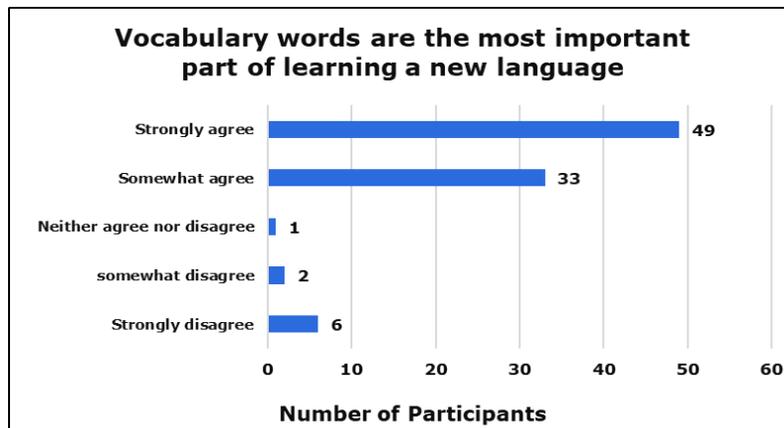

Figure 1: Participants' responses to whether vocabulary words are the most important part of learning a new language.

In addition, the participants were asked if they considered that they should receive more training based on vocabulary teaching strategies. Figure 2 shows how most respondents, 80 in total, agreed with the fact that they should receive more training. This indicates that the participants consider it important and have a need to learn more about vocabulary teaching techniques.
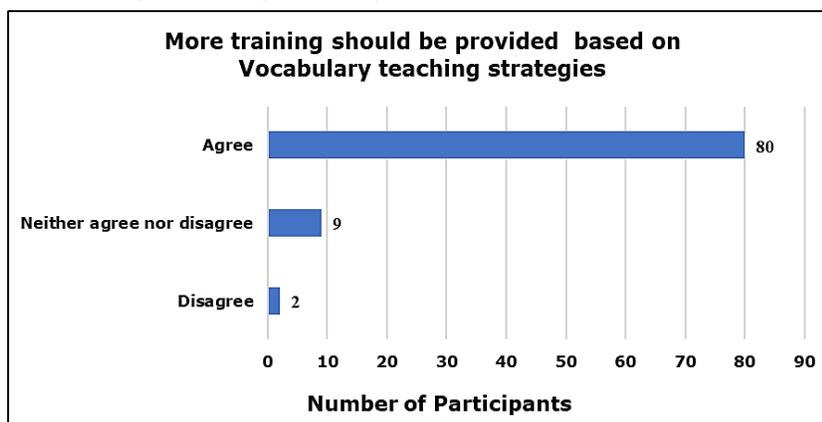

Figure 2: Participants' responses regarding the fact that more training should be provided.

Reasons in favor of teaching vocabulary

Open-ended questions were part of the questionnaire to make a qualitative analysis congruent with the quantitative data findings. The participants gave reasons they thought vocabulary words were the most

important part of learning a new language. There were three main ideas in common among most of the opinions of the participants.

<u>They facilitate communication</u>

Participants mentioned that vocabulary was important for interacting, speaking, and communicating. Participants also noted that vocabulary helped them to talk about different topics, gave them more confidence when expressing an idea, and helped in any kind of conversation.

Examples of some of the participants' opinions are below:

> *The more vocabulary one has, the more one can communicate.*

> *If we have a wide vocabulary, we will be able to speak or write down our ideas or thoughts.*

> *It is the first step in the path of communication. Even if I don't control grammar, I can be able to communicate what I want or need by using some basic words.*

<u>Language development/language acquisition</u>

In a broad sense, the term second language acquisition refers to the process of becoming proficient in a non-native language. Participants pointed out that in order to help students' language development, new words need to be introduced. As a result of building vocabulary, participants mentioned that L2 learners could learn more easily, comprehend concepts, and understand different types of messages (written or oral).

Comments of some of the participants are the following:

> *It is necessary to know the words to develop all the skills.*

> *The more words we learn, the easier it is to be able to use the language.*

> *Knowing new words helps students to understand what they are learning.*

<u>Enrichment of ideas</u>

Some participants mentioned that it was important to learn many words to enrich vocabulary and overall linguistic and communicative skills. Having ample management of words (vocabulary) enriches ideas. A person can get his or her points across more effectively.

Vocabulary teaching strategies used to teach vocabulary

Concerning the second research question, the participants answered a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire. Each statement went from 'not at all' to 'almost always'. Twelve explicit vocabulary teaching strategies were presented in order to identify those most applied in the Panamanian context.

Vocabulary Teaching Strategies	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pronunciation drills	4.32	0.73
Elicitation	4.29	0.87
Word cards	4.22	0.85
Games	4.16	0.81
Total Physical Response activities	4.16	0.72
Reading aloud	4.01	0.88
Mnemonics	3.64	1.05
Vocabulary notebooks	3.63	0.96
Collocations	3.40	0.94
Synonyms-antonyms	3.25	0.88
Translation	3.13	1.00
Prefixes-suffixes	2.69	0.90

Table 2: Rank of vocabulary teaching strategies applied by elementary school teachers.

The vocabulary teaching strategies most used/applied by the participants were pronunciation drills, elicitation, word cards, games, TPR activities, and reading aloud. All these strategies had a mean greater

than 4.0. On the other hand, the strategies less used/applied by the participants were the following: mnemonics, vocabulary notebooks, collocations, synonyms-antonyms, translation, and prefixes-suffixes.

Preferred strategies to teach vocabulary

In order to actually know the participants' preferences when teaching vocabulary, the participants answered an open-ended question in which they described their preferred strategy to teach vocabulary and explained why.

From the qualitative data analysis of the open-ended question, twenty participants preferred to teach words with flashcards being the most used strategy among the participants. The participants stated that through flashcards, the students could relate the image with the word's meaning, avoiding translation and achieving meaningful vocabulary learning. Besides, the participants mentioned that it was easy to recognize and memorize the word while also learning the correct pronunciation. It is important to mention that ten of the participants highlighted the importance of having the students repeat the words to improve pronunciation and avoid mispronunciation.

Nineteen participants liked to use games and playing in the classroom as a way to teach vocabulary. These participants commented that the students enjoyed, participated, had fun, and were motivated to learn new words through the games. Besides, students learned in a relaxed way and remembered the words easily.

Eighteen participants liked to teach vocabulary using visual aids by showing pictures or realia (real-life objects). These participants mentioned that this way of teaching helped the students figure out what the word meant without translation, and it also helped students remember words.

Other strategies were mentioned with little or almost no frequency among the participants. These strategies included videos, readings, semantic map/word maps, poems, collocations, vocabulary notebooks, miming, and a vocabulary log template.

Discussion

In terms of the first research question, the findings revealed that the participants had preferences for listening activities in the classroom. Teaching listening activities turned out to be the most preferred of the language activities with a mean of 4.61 and a standard deviation of 1.45. Since listening activities were not the focus of this research, studies on it should be carried out to have a better understanding of this result. The second most preferred language activity was vocabulary activities with a mean of 4.50 and a standard deviation of 1.55. This reveals that the participants were aware of the critical role of acquiring vocabulary. Most of the participants considered that the acquisition of vocabulary was necessary when learning a second language.

The participants felt vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning were relevant for different reason. First, for communication. It is noteworthy that in most cases, the participants' comments were specifically related to speaking communication, with very few comments related to written communication. The country's historical background may influence this conception of acquiring knowledge for communication. The English language has always been seen as the language of international communication, commerce, and business.

Second, participants pointed out that vocabulary helped learners to develop in the language. That is, acquiring vocabulary benefited all language skills. This is consistent with research done related to vocabulary acquisition. As noted by Wilkinson (2017), there is no doubt that vocabulary knowledge is crucial to a learner's ability to use foreign languages fluently. An increasing corpus of research shows favorable relationships between language skills and vocabulary knowledge. It also shows that without a sufficient vocabulary, it can be difficult to adequately express oneself orally or in writing (Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Rodríguez & Sadowki, 2000).

Finally, participants mentioned that acquiring vocabulary enriched ideas. Learning a foreign language is a great way to boost one's self-confidence. Speaking out loud demands self-assurance. Deciding when and how to use particular expressions and when and how not to use words and phrases promotes thinking and decision-making.

In terms of the second research question, the results of the study indicated that pronunciation drills, elicitation, word cards, games, TPR activities, and reading aloud were the most frequently used vocabulary teaching activities. Demonstrating in this way that the most used strategies were traditional teaching strategies. More conscious strategies, such as teaching prefixes-suffixes, collocations, and mnemonics, that require a higher level of cognition were the least used. A reason for this may be the understanding that children in the elementary school context are not as cognitively developed as adolescents and adults. That

is, children are still in the process of developing the ability to think and reason, moving from concrete thinking to more complex thinking processes.

A'lipour and Ketabi (2010) state that traditional memorization drills continue to be the most common method of vocabulary instruction. A statement confirmed by the descriptive analysis from the Likert scale where pronunciation drills turned out to be the number one strategy used by the participants. According to Balcı and Çakir (2012), traditional memory strategies such as bilingual word lists or other traditional vocabulary acquisition techniques should be abandoned as they can create feelings of reluctance in students. Teachers should be familiar with the latest vocabulary teaching strategies and implement them in the classroom.

When the participants described their preferred strategy, twenty of them answered flashcards. Flashcards are arguably the most extensively used visual aids in language education, according to Nugroho et al. (2012). Flashcards are cards that show learners a picture and a word to help them learn and memorize new terms. Although flashcards have many advantages, like being motivational and eye-catching, being successful with students of all levels, providing a visual link between L1 and the target language, and so on, it is necessary to consider the nature of the technique and its drawbacks when implemented in class.

Oxford and Crookall (1990) classified the flashcards technique as a decontextualizing technique. A decontextualization strategy is one that separates a word as completely as possible from any communicative context. Unless additional contextualizing embellishments are added to the typical, decontextualizing flashcard, the flashcard strategy is limited in utility for most learners. It is relevant then to be aware of the importance of adding context when working with flashcards.

In relation to the strategies least used by the participants, conscious strategies were among the least employed. Word consciousness is the foundation for an ongoing love of words and language that learners may keep with them when they finish school. Diamond and Gutlohn (2007) state that word-conscious learners are thrilled by language, enjoy playing with words and are keen to know about the origins and history of words. To achieve this, teachers should incorporate word awareness into their daily lessons. One way is to encourage a word-rich environment in the classroom.

A word-rich environment is characterized by having all kinds of word resources. For example, dictionaries, poetry books, word walls, and word games. The more learners know about how words are used and where they occur outside of the classroom, the more likely they will use and own the terms in their own speech and writing. Vocabulary acquisition becomes a less isolated classroom-based activity by fostering this relationship between school and the outside world.

The following are some of the ideas suggested by Diamond and Gutlohn (2007):

Word play: encourages learners' intrinsic curiosity and enthusiasm in language.

Word histories and origins: encourage greater consciousness and understanding of the history of words in learners.

Antonym scales: help learners recognize and communicate the degrees of meaning between pairs of gradable antonyms.

Word web: demonstrates the semantic relationships between target words and other words and concepts.

Vocabulary hotshot notebook: allows users to record target terms and maintain track of these new words when they meet them outside of the classroom.

In short, teachers should remember that they play a vital role in assisting learners in developing word consciousness by instilling a fundamental curiosity about words and their meanings.

Conclusion

Second language acquisition scholars openly state that a strong vocabulary is required at all stages of language learning (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Marzban & Firoozjahantigh, 2018; Mukoroli, 2011). Vocabulary acquisition influences students' abilities to listen, talk, read, write, and translate to a large extent. Because vocabulary growth is arguably essential to language acquisition and use, efficient vocabulary education methods are crucial. In that line, teachers are seen as primary resources in the language classroom because they guide their students' attention to particular material that helps develop their cognitive processes.

The fact that the importance of vocabulary is well known among teachers does not mean that teachers are aware of the numerous strategies for teaching vocabulary that is accessible in the literature. Teachers may be unaware of the varied approaches to vocabulary instruction. As the primary vocabulary resource in the EFL classroom, teachers should be asked about their perspectives on vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary teaching, and the strategies they employ.

Although some participants in the current research mentioned approaches that were not as traditional, the strategies used in primary schools resembled, in general, the conventional strategies. Teachers should consider current vocabulary instruction to support their students in learning to utilize language, particularly vocabulary, effectively and accurately in real-life circumstances.

There are some promising vocabulary teaching strategies that, in comparison to traditional vocabulary teaching techniques, benefit learners in acquiring a large number of vocabulary items linked to the language they are studying and should be utilized.

Pedagogical implications

Considering the advantages of acquiring vocabulary when learning a second language, it is essential to highlight the pedagogical value of learning and teaching vocabulary.

To support students' verbal and written communication, it is critical that they get explicit and extensive vocabulary instruction. Students' vocabulary growth can be considerably improved by explicit teaching of specific words and their meanings. Direct instruction is essential for learners who have minimal exposure to the vocabulary of the target language. Explicit vocabulary instruction should be dynamic and use a range of strategies to be most successful.

Diamond and Gutlohn (2007) suggest the following regarding specific word instruction:

> *For teaching word relationships, concept picture sort, semantic map, semantic feature analysis, and word map. For teaching basic vocabulary, introducing function words. For teaching vocabulary in context, text talk: read-aloud method (after a story has been read aloud to students, key vocabulary is widely presented.). For word-meaning recall, keyword method (mnemonic). For word-learning strategies, cognate awareness, contextual analysis, dictionary use, and morphemic analysis (root words and word families, compound words, prefixes and suffixes, Greek and Latin roots).* (pp. 11-14)

A teacher's careful consideration of vocabulary instruction is crucial to the academic accomplishment of learners who struggle to acquire, grasp, understand, and apply new vocabulary. Teachers and teacher trainers must understand word learning in order to implement effective teaching strategies. Learning more about word-related perceptions and practices might help them reconsider the type of vocabulary instruction they value and implement in their classrooms.

Limitations

There was no opportunity to do interviews. Because of time and distance, the study was limited to an online survey. Having interviewed participants would have helped to better understand the results. The limited scope is another limitation of this research. Since the study was done in one province of the country, a larger sample size would have shown more generalizable results and would have added to our understanding of teaching strategies that are applied in public elementary schools of the whole country.

It was not possible to include the middle and secondary contexts in the study to compare and contrast the strategies used at the different levels in public schools in the country. Classroom observations were not conducted to confirm the use and application of instructional practices and to identify areas of improvement in relation to vocabulary instruction. Because a questionnaire is a self-reported research approach, it may not fully reflect the participants' real teaching practices. Generalization should be used with caution since the results may not reflect reality in other regions.

Suggestions for further research

A broader study that involves the rest of the country's provinces and that allows a better perception of the strategies applied by English teachers at the primary level with respect to vocabulary teaching is recommended. The present study was limited to elementary school English teachers in public schools without considering high school teachers. A study at the secondary level is necessary to compare the differences or similarities with respect to elementary teachers. Since the present study only reported on the teaching practices of English teachers, a study that measures the effectiveness of said practices becomes evident in order to make necessary adjustments if necessary.

The inclusion of interviews and observations in future studies that corroborate the descriptive analysis would help for a better understanding of the strategies applied by teachers. English language teachers need to be aware of vocabulary teaching strategies for better teaching performance. In that sense, English language teachers should receive more training that can help them to update their knowledge related to teaching strategies, specifically, the ones related to teaching vocabulary teaching.

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Appendix

English Teaching Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed for Panamanian English teachers who work in public schools. It aims to identify teaching practices in English language classes. This questionnaire consists of five parts. Please read each instruction carefully and answer honestly based on your experience and preferences at this time, as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. This is not a test; so, there are no "right", or "wrong" answers and you do not even have to write your name on it. We are only interested in your personal opinion and preferences.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Part 1. Please rank order the following activities according to your teaching practices/preferences in the classroom with 1 being the most used/preferred activity and 6 being the least used/preferred activity.

Grammar activities

Listening activities

Reading activities

Speaking activities

Vocabulary activities

Writing activities

Part 2. Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statements and explain the reasoning for your answer.

(Strongly disagree; 2-Somewjat disagree; 3-Neither agree nor disagree; 4-Somewhat agree; 5-Strongly agree)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. The most important part of learning a new language is learning its grammar					

Reasoning for your answer:

	1	2	3	4	5
2. Vocabulary words are the most important part of learning a new language.					

Reasoning for your answer:

Part 3. Please select how often you use the following vocabulary teaching strategies as part of your lessons:

(1-Not at all; 2-Rarely; 3-Sometimes; 4-Frequently; 5-Almost always)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. I apply total physical response in my classes to teach vocabulary (e.g., Simon says, use of actions words like "stand up" and "sit down.")					
2. I use reading aloud as an approach to teach vocabulary. (e.g., stories, song lyrics, poems, and articles).					
3. I use word cards to teach vocabulary (e.g., English words in one side and picture, definition, or translation on the other.)					
4. I have students use vocabulary notebook as a strategy to teach vocabulary (e.g., small book where students record new words).					

	1	2	3	4	5
5. I teach prefixes and suffixes as a strategy for teaching vocabulary (e.g., prefixes un- and re-)					
6. I use translation as a strategy to teach vocabulary (e.g., translating words into the student's native language).					
7. I teach synonyms and antonyms as a strategy for teaching vocabulary.(e.g., synonym: old-ancient. Antonym: black-white).					
8. I use collocations, word combinations that commonly go together, as a strategy to teach vocabulary (e.g., take a taxi, get a promotion, keep a secret).					
9, I apply elicitation in my class to teach vocabulary (e.g., (Showing a picture) What's this?)					
10. I use games as a strategy to teach vocabulary (e.g., Pictionary, word race).					
11. I teach students Mnemonics as a technique to learn vocabulary (e.g., idea or image that helps you remember a vocabulary word or expression).					
12. If you apply any other specific vocabulary teaching strategies in your classroom, please describe them:					
13. Please describe your preferred strategies to teach vocabulary and explain why?					

Part 4. Please provide the following information by selecting the appropriate option or writing your response in the space.

	Yes	No
1. Have you ever participated in any kind of programs such as workshops, and/or special training programs devoted to Vocabulary teaching?		

Please select the option which most accurately reflects your agreement/disagreement about the following statement

	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
2. English language teachers should receive more training based on Vocabulary teaching strategies.			

3. If you have any additional comments related to this survey and vocabulary teaching strategies, please feel free to write them down.

Part 5. Please provide the following information by selecting the appropriate option or writing your response in the space.

1. Gender: Male _____   Female _____   Other _____   Prefer not to say _____

2. Highest academic degree:

   Associate Degree _____   Bachelor's Degree _____   Master's Degree _____   PhD Degree _____

3. Educational level currently working:

   Elementary School _____   High School _____

4. Years of experience as an English teacher:

   0 to 5 years _____   6 to 10 years _____   11 to 15 years _____   16 to 20 years _____   More than 21 years _____