



## CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN THE PROCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on the role of vocabulary in second language learning with reference to the teaching of English language to learners at tertiary level in Saudi Arabia. As we are well aware that English language is the demand of the contemporary times, a large number of people around the world are rather bound to learn English for different reasons. The learning of any second language hugely relies on vocabulary. Keeping the relevance of English in view, the Saudi government implemented English language courses in almost all the levels and domains of education. Therefore, it is expected from the language instructors that they will provide an environment within the classrooms in which learners can acquire the targeted language easily. Therefore, this paper also explores the perception and role of English teachers in the attainment process of Vocabulary learning goals in English language classrooms. The study is exploratory in nature, and it utilizes qualitative analysis. The finding will lead to improvement on the curriculum design, contents selection and teaching styles.

**Keywords:** vocabulary, second language learning, communication, teaching styles, curriculum

### **1. Introduction**

A language is nothing but the most impressive means of communication. There is a systematic arrangement of words because these are the driving force of the language. They are the blocks on which the building of a language rests. Vocabulary is perhaps

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the most crucial element of a language that can be utilized for appropriate communication at different levels. On the other hand, L2 learning is the ultimate target for academic, professional and technical purposes.

It is quite known that words play a crucial role in an individual's language proficiency in both his and her first, second or even foreign language. With reference to teaching English language at all the academic levels in Saudi Arabia, it's indeed important for an instructor to make learners familiar with the actual meanings of the target words, and it is only possible if the teacher is well equipped with the latest technology and techniques of teaching. In order to communicate the target meaning, and achieve the target of expression, a teacher uses various approaches (even bilingualism) to interact with people.

### **1.1. Importance of Vocabulary in Second Language Learning**

Vocabulary is inevitable in the process of communication, teaching or learning. Therefore, teachers and concerned educators are responsible for making their target learners understand the relevance of vocabulary and the ways to learn the words. Wilkins (1972, P.111) asserts that it is a fact that without grammar very little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. However, strangely enough most traditional teachers focus on grammar and unintentionally ignore the crucial element of vocabulary.

Most modern researchers recently realized the linguistic and pedagogic importance of vocabulary, and initiated writing in this context. Krashen (1982) stressed, *"in order to progress in a foreign language, learners need to be able to understand what they are hearing and reading, but if learners do not understand some part of the target vocabulary that they are reading or hearing, then this language is not comprehensible and therefore cannot be useful for acquisition."*

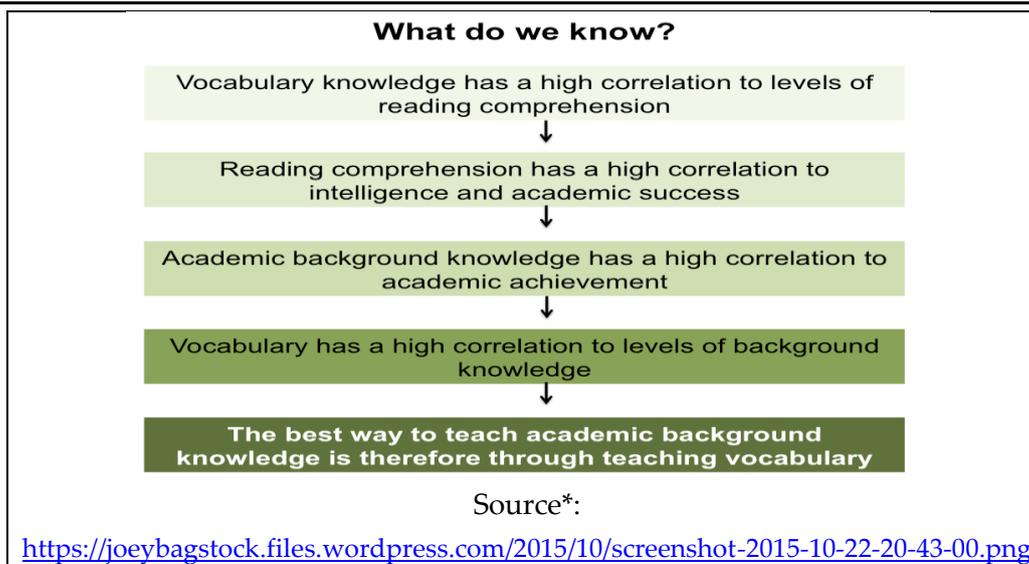
According to Kamil and Heibert (2005), 'vocabulary can be conceived as collection of words and awareness of word meanings. They feel that vocabulary learning is the basis of language learning, and without vocabulary, one cannot learn a language. Ahmadi (2012) also confirms that vocabulary is knowledge of words. Many other linguists and researchers including Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) also believe that rich vocabulary not only provides the exact words but also their sounds, spelling, meanings, contexts, appropriateness, word formation, derivations etc.

*“Research has shown that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge because lack of the knowledge of words and their uses is one of the main obstacle for L2 readers.”*

(Huckin, T. & Bloch, J. (1993).

With the reference of English language learning, it is not wrong to say that in most of the lessons, vocabulary is almost ignored by instructors. They focus on four skills of English language and grammar, instead of developing learners' vocabulary, although vocabulary is a part of each lesson. It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication between human beings is based on words. The teachers and students should keep in their minds that four skills of English language depend on vocabulary. It is one of the most important components of language. Zhang and Anual (2008) and Anderson and Freebody (1981) found that there is a significant and strong relationship between foreign language learning and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, if learners read more, they will enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary learning not only develops learners' spelling but also their writing proficiency. According to Harmer (2007) the learners will face difficulties in recognizing the content if they do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge. A large vocabulary of course provides more opportunities to learners in the field of language to express them well.

Regarding the crucial role of reading skill in the learning of vocabulary, Horst (2005) opines that one of the main sources of new vocabulary is reading of English texts. *“Reading plays a key role in increasing learners' vocabulary, and that is according to comparisons of large corpora which showed that written texts are richer in lexis than spoken ones”.* *“It has been suggested that vocabulary learning and reading if occur simultaneously will create a ‘pedagogically efficient’ approach”* (Huckin & Coady (1999). The activity would facilitate learners achieve autonomy, motivation and interest by providing them contextual vocabulary. (Thornbury, 2002).



## 1.2. Kinds of Vocabulary

Vocabulary has roughly been divided into two types: active and passive vocabulary. Harmer (1991) differentiates between these two types of vocabulary. The first type of vocabulary is one that the students have learnt and that they use in day to day life. On the other hand, the second one refers to the words which the students will recognize when they meet them, but which they will probably not be able to pronounce. Haycraft, quoted by Hatch and Brown (1995) indicated two kinds of vocabulary: receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. This category includes active and passive types also to a great extent.

### 1.2.1. Receptive Vocabulary

Receptive vocabulary is those words which are recognized and understood when they are used in context, but the learners cannot produce them. In other words, it is the vocabulary that learners recognize when they see or encounter in reading text but do not use it in speaking and writing (Stuart W., 2009).

### 1.2.2. Productive Vocabulary

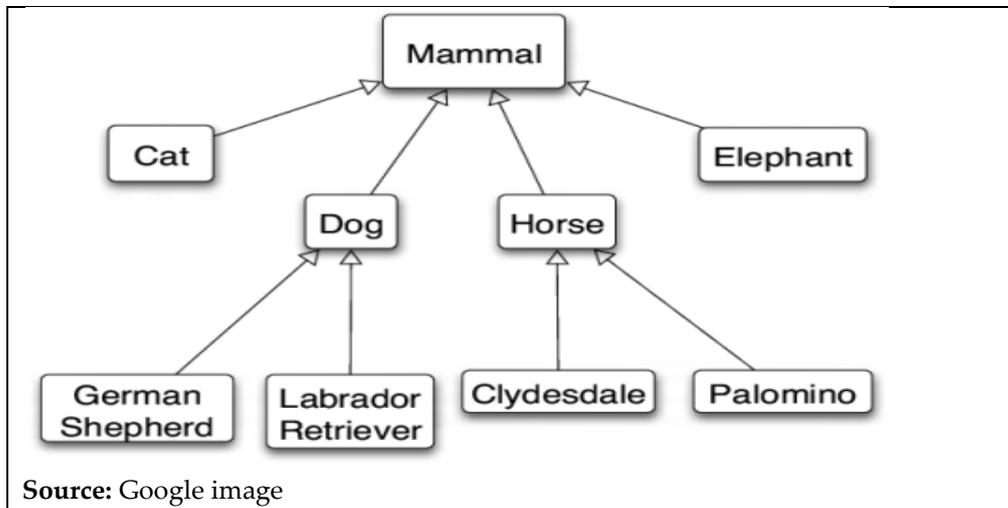
Productive vocabulary is the words that the learners understand and can pronounce correctly and use constructively in speaking and writing. It involves what is needed for receptive vocabulary plus the ability to speak or write at the appropriate time. Therefore, productive vocabulary can be addressed as an active process, because the learners can produce the words to express their thoughts to others (Stuart W., 2005).

## 2. Teaching of Vocabulary: Need of Innovation

Gunning (2003, p. 236) suggests that a certain amount of time be set aside each week for vocabulary instruction, and contends that a planned approach ensures that vocabulary instruction is given the attention it deserves. Important words and techniques for learning words are taught systematically and in depth. Vacca et al. (2003, p. 308) stresses on the need that teachers provide explicit and direct vocabulary instruction for all students *“Vocabulary is the tip of the iceberg: Words reflect concepts and content that students need to know.”*

### 2.1. Development of Understanding

Keeping the above mentioned concepts, the mentor should initially make learners aware of the form, meaning and use of words. To know the words properly for effective use, students need to see it in context and learn how its meaning relates to the words and context around it. We as teachers can use different techniques to develop understanding such as the following. The image is presented in a simple web form interconnected to some concepts at various levels.



### 2.2. Knowing a word and aspects involved in an EFL classroom

Based on the types of vocabulary and relevance in pedagogic perspective, the following components are quite important that an English teacher should know and use in his classrooms.

Aspect	Component	Receptive Knowledge	Productive knowledge
Form/ structure	Spoken      Written Word parts	What does the word sound like? What does the word look like? What parts are recognizable in this word?	How is the word pronounced? How is the word written and spelled? What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	Form and meaning Concept              and referent associations	What meaning does this word form signal? What is included in this concept? What other words does this make people think of.	What word form can be used to express this meaning? What items can the concept refer to? What other words could people use instead of this one?
Use	Grammatical functions Collocations Constraints on use (register, frequency . ..)	In what patterns does the word occur? What words or types of words occur with this one? Where, when, and how often would people expect to meet this word?	In what patterns must people use this word? What words or types of words must people use with this man. Where, when, and how often can people use this word?

\*Source: Adapted from Nation (2001, p. 27).

### 2.3. Types of teaching-learning Activities

As it is has already been discussed that vocabulary is the most important aspect of the second language acquisition in a classroom, where learners are anxious and uncomfortable with L2. Therefore, it is relevant for the mentors to prepare activities according to the types of learners and during lessons they should create an interactive and easy atmosphere so that all types of learners may participate and get motivate for the further learning. These lections of teaching materials according to the mental and academic level of learners are another significant factor.

#### 2.3.1 Use of Dictionaries

Teachers should emphasis the use of both manual and online dictionaries as an important and inevitable source of knowing and learning words especially in the process of second language learning. A dictionary not only offers the meaning of a word, it explains the complete history of it, its origin, etymology, correct pronunciation and connotations. By using the dictionary, a learner may get optimum information about a word and its family.

#### 2.3.2 Dialogue

This strategy assists the learners to grasp new words with great confidence. The art of dialogue delivery inspires the learners to enhance their vocabulary in different languages. Boudreault (2010) claims, *“As an English teacher, I have often been amazed at how effective drama is to capture the attention of the students in the ESL/EFL classroom. Easy*

*dialogues can be incorporated in dramas and plays to enrich collection of active words*". Haley & Duff (1978) categorically mentioned some of the benefits of drama for vocabulary learning include: integration of language skills in a natural way, verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication and cognitive and affective domains.

### **2.3.3. Note-Taking Strategies**

Taking good notes always plays an important role in second language learning acquisition. Instructors should not try to translate every single word, pick up the main points instead.

### **2.3.4 Dictation**

Though many teachers don't usually practice dictation strategies in classroom due to many reasons, it can prove to be an outstanding measure towards facilitation thinking, writing and memorizing through dictation.

### **2.3.5 Writing on different topics**

Many teachers may not agree that writing may lead to vocabulary learning. On the other hand, they feel that vocabulary is important for writing skills. Hence it remains a crucial fact that writing leads to actually effective learning of vocabulary because it provides chances to practice the target words.

## **2.4 Strategies of teaching vocabulary**

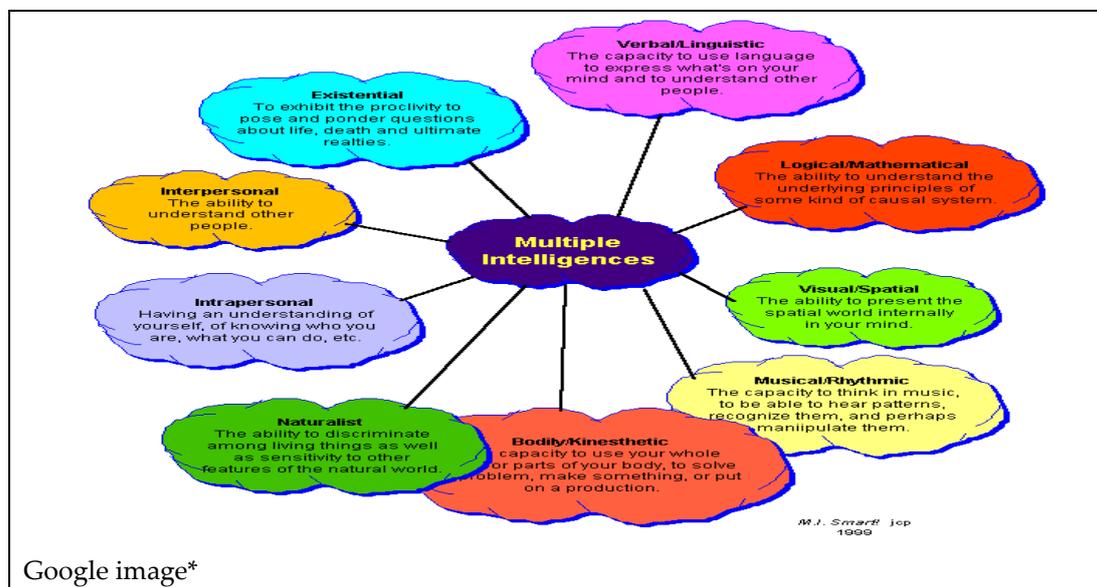
Teachers having different background use their qualification, experience and training etc to make use of appropriate teaching strategy for vocabulary. The following can also be considered as a strategy:

### **2.4.1 Teaching Words through below steps**

1. The teacher explains a new word, going beyond telling only definition. There is a need to check previous knowledge too.
2. Ask students to restate or explain the new word in their own words.
3. Ask students to create a non-linguistic representation of the word (a picture, or a diagram if applicable)
4. Engage them in activities to deepen their knowledge of the new word (compare words, classify terms, write their expressions).
5. Students discuss the new word (peer learning/group task).
6. Students play games to practice vocabulary.

### 2.4.2 Multiple intelligence and language learning

No one can strongly deny that there are different theories, and theory of multiple intelligence is perhaps the most important one. Needless to say as to how many researches have so far been conducted in various domains.



Google image\*

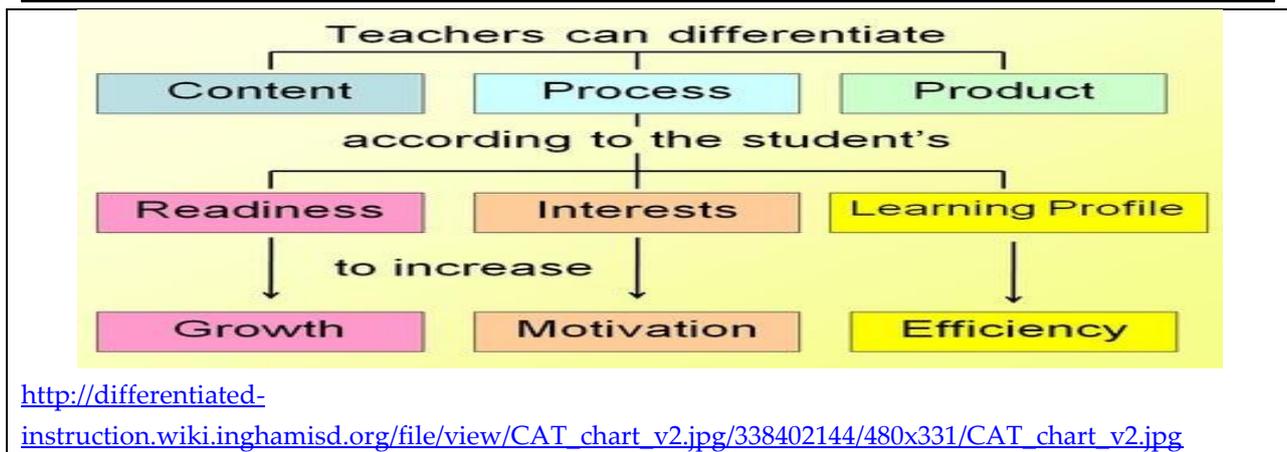
Differentiated approaches have always been followed due to the reason that teachers and pedagogues believe in different theories: intelligence, individual difference, learning, teaching, personality etc. Based on the same principle and approach, recently, the concept of Differentiated instruction emerged as a principle of teaching leading to appropriate teaching strategies.

### 2.4.3 Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction (DI) can operationally be defined as a teaching principle that is based on different ability students in a single class. DI can be considered as a method of designing and delivering instruction to best reach each student. DI may mean teaching the same material to all students using a variety of instructional strategies, or it may require the teacher to deliver lessons at varying levels of difficulty based on the ability of each student.

Teachers who practice differentiation in the classroom may be required to:

- Design lessons based on students' learning styles.
- Group students by shared interest, topic or ability for assignments.
- Assess students' learning using formative assessment.
- Manage the classroom to create a safe and supportive environment.
- Continually assess and adjust lesson content to meet students' needs.



### 3. Method of the present study

The study is basically descriptive-exploratory in nature. Questionnaire was used to further substantiate the theoretical data through literature review and personal teaching experience.

#### 3.1. Participants

For this study, 50 English teachers in KSA filled in the questionnaire asking them to give their feedback on the importance of vocabulary and its teaching in Saudi classrooms.

#### 3.2. Instruments

A self-developed questionnaire was used to elicit data from experienced teachers of English working in different parts of KSA.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items (15 statement based and open ended).

#### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires was administered and collected back after an agreed time frame. The authors distributed the instrument online through professional and social sites especially to those who have been in touch for quite some time on *LinkedIn*.

For collecting data from the teachers, the researchers circulated the instrument to the teachers and explained the purpose of the study to them. After the collection of data, they were tabulated for data analysis.

#### 4. Analysis of the questionnaire: Perception of teachers (N= 50)

Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	35	7	8
2	39	6	5
3	39	5	8
4	41	4	5
5	32	9	9
6	27	11	12
7	40	10	-
8	39	9	2
9	41	6	3
10	38	7	5
11	43	5	2
12	42	6	2
13	37	8	5
14	36	9	5
15	32	12	6
16. Any other comments you want to add:			

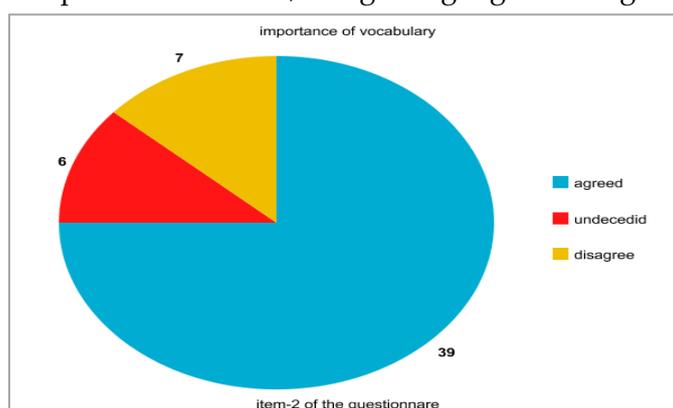
##### 4.1. Item wise analysis

1. 70% teachers feel that Vocabulary is the most important aspect of language learning.
2. 78% respondents perceive that Language learning relies mainly on vocabulary only.
3. 78% teachers confirm that vocabulary is key to learning grammar, meaning, sound system and over all expression.
4. 82 % teachers think that if they teach vocabulary they teach reading.
5. Only 44% respondents assert that teaching vocabulary is teaching language itself.
6. 54 % respondents believe that contextual vocabulary is the ultimate target of language learning.
7. 80% teachers are of the opinion that Students lack vocabulary due to lack of reading and listening.
8. 78% respondents opine that teaching in a different way leads to lack of syllabus coverage.
9. 82% teachers asserted that there is a need to teach students based on their levels.
10. Only 76% are of the opinion that most students don't understand the majority of the words while reading texts or listening.

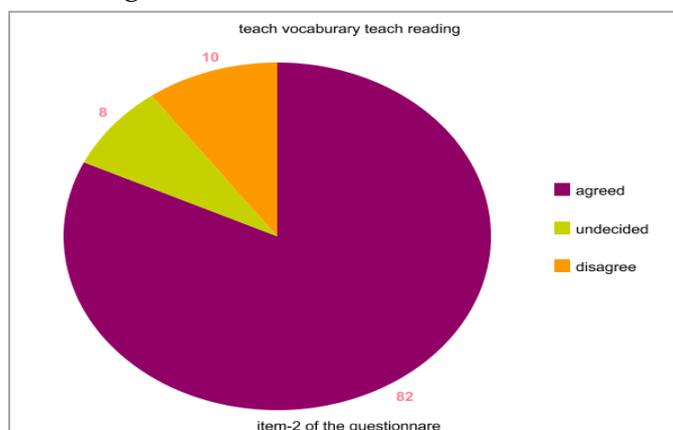
11. 86% teachers confirm that the level of students within the group is varied despite placement testing.
12. 84% agreed on the point that the students consult words in a bilingual dictionary.
13. 74% respondents confirm that the students sometimes failed to guess the meaning from context.
14. 72% teachers feel that the students must learn lots of new words to improve their English.
15. One to one teaching is helpful but hard to practice, affirm 64% teachers from the sample.

#### 4.2. Analysis of key items

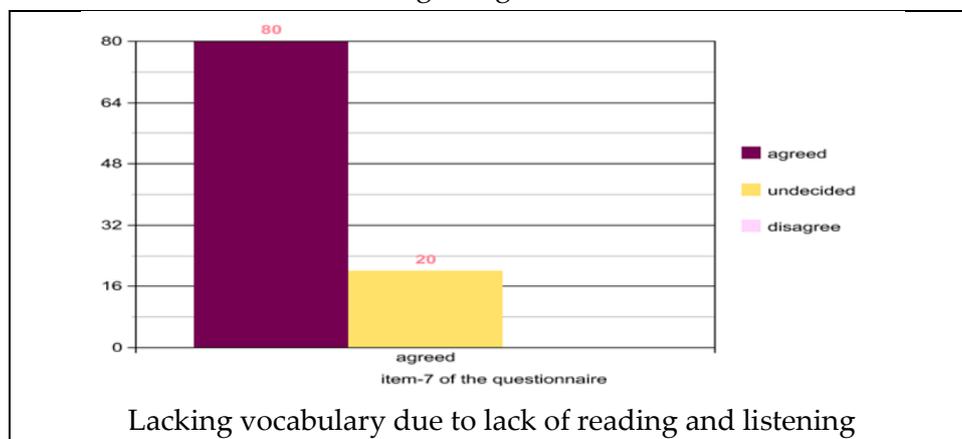
**Item 2:** Data show that 39/50(78%) teachers stress that vocabulary is extremely important in the process of second/foreign language learning



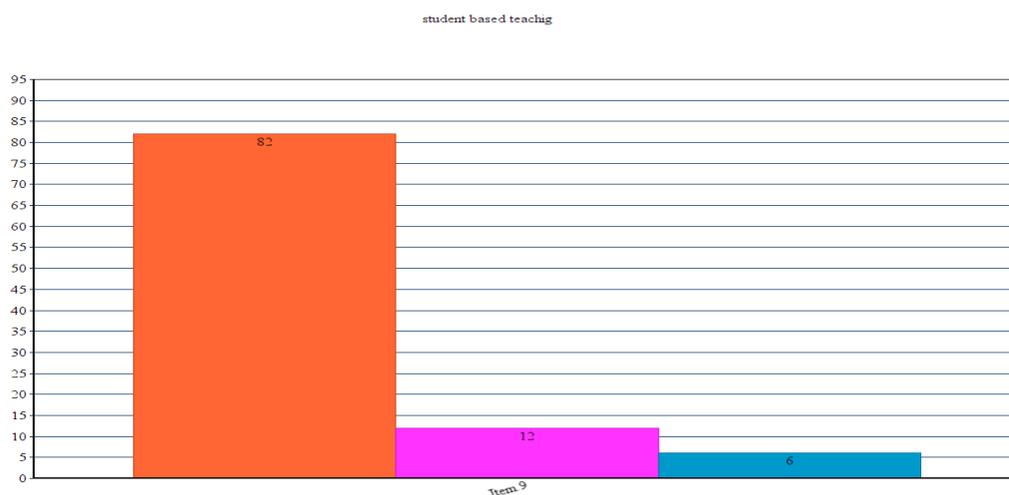
**Item 4:** Responses show that 82% teachers feel that teaching of vocabulary only ensures teaching of reading as a whole. This confirms the role of vocabulary



**Item 7:** Data show that vocabulary can be better learnt if the learners practice reading and writing to a great extent



**Item 9:** Data reveal that 82% teachers are in agreement with the idea that teaching should be based on the level of the students.



## 5. Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1. Findings

Some of the important findings are: vocabulary is the most important aspect of language learning. In other words, it is the key to start with. Though reading is the most important skill for EFL students to begin with learning skills, it becomes a failure unless one learns vocabulary. It can also be said that if vocabulary is properly learnt, one can attain the overall goals of learning a language. Vocabulary enriches all other aspects of language and skills, however, learning of vocabulary is also negatively affected by lack of reading and listening. It was also found that one can teach vocabulary in many ways

using strategies and innovative methods, but it is not an easy task due to work pressure, syllabus coverage etc.

## 5.2. Conclusions

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that vocabulary teaching is quite crucial because it is related to almost all the skills and aspects of the target language. There are many factors that negatively affect the learning process, and vocabulary is one of them. It has also been found that vocabulary learning is not achieved due to the lack of practice in reading and listening. Levels of difficulties in vocabulary may differ from students to students, so a differentiated approach/instruction is important to tackle such issue when persist.

## 5.3. Recommendations

Important recommendations are:

1. Due emphasis should be laid on the teaching/learning of vocabulary,
2. One should identify the areas and causes of such difficulties,
3. Teachers must develop innovative approach especially differentiated instruction to cater to the need of the learners who don't maintain the pace of normal students.

## 5.4. Suggestion of future research

Some studies of experimental type should be carried out to find the effectiveness of strategies of teaching vocabulary. Effectiveness of Differentiated instruction will be one of them.

## About the authors

**Birjees Fatima** is currently teaching English at English Language Centre, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. Her majors are both English language and literature. She has been interested in research and publication since she joined teaching. She recently published a few papers in some international/local journals.

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honorary chief editor/associate editor/asst. editor of many online educational journals published worldwide.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaires

Teachers' opinion about the importance of vocabulary

S.N.	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Vocabulary is the most important aspect of language learning.			
2	Language learning relies mainly on vocabulary only.			
3	Vocabulary is key to learning grammar, meaning, sound and over all expression.			
4	If we teach vocabulary, we teach reading.			
5	Teaching vocabulary is teaching language itself.			
6	Contextual vocabulary is the ultimate target of language learning.			
7	Students lack vocabulary due to lack of reading and listening.			
8	Teaching in a different way leads to lack of syllabus coverage.			
9	There is a need to teach students based on their levels.			
10	Most students don't understand the majority of the words while reading texts or listening.			
11	The level of students within the group is varied despite			

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	placement testing.			
12	I study the word in a bilingual dictionary.			
13	The students sometimes failed to guess the meaning from context.			
14	I believe I must learn lots of new words to improve my English.			
15	One to one teaching is helpful but hard to practice.			
16	Any other comments you want to add:			

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