



WHAT WORKS (AND WHAT DOES NOT) IN EFL VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR TERTIARY-LEVEL TEACHING

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Abstract:

Vocabulary knowledge is a core component of second language proficiency and a strong predictor of academic success in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Despite extensive research, uncertainty persists regarding which instructional approaches most effectively support sustainable vocabulary development at the university level. This systematic review synthesizes empirical research on EFL vocabulary instruction to identify practices associated with positive learning outcomes, recurring limitations, and pedagogical implications for higher education. Following PRISMA-informed procedures, 44 empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025 were selected and thematically analyzed. The synthesis indicates that explicit, contextualized, and strategy-based instruction consistently supports vocabulary acquisition more effectively than decontextualized or incidental approaches, particularly in input-poor EFL contexts. The review further highlights the importance of addressing the depth of vocabulary knowledge and academic vocabulary demands in tertiary education. Based on the findings, the article outlines a research-informed framework for university-level EFL vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: vocabulary instruction, academic vocabulary, vocabulary knowledge, explicit instruction, EFL higher education

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized as a cornerstone of language competence, influencing learners' reading comprehension, writing quality, listening ability, and overall communicative effectiveness (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2000). In EFL

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contexts, where exposure to authentic language input is limited, vocabulary development becomes both a pedagogical priority and a persistent challenge. University EFL learners, in particular, are expected to engage with complex academic texts, disciplinary discourse, and specialized terminology, yet often lack sufficient lexical resources to meet these demands.

In the Moroccan EFL context, vocabulary knowledge has been shown to play a decisive role in learners' academic performance. Empirical studies conducted in Moroccan higher education reveal persistent gaps in learners' receptive and productive vocabulary size, even at advanced levels (Agrram, 2020; Agrram *et al.*, 2024). Research has also demonstrated that the language of instruction and prior multilingual exposure significantly influence vocabulary development among Moroccan EFL learners (Hamdanat *et al.*, 2025).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that incidental exposure alone is insufficient for substantial vocabulary growth in EFL environments (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010; Webb & Nation, 2017; Read, 2004). Consequently, vocabulary instruction has evolved from traditional rote memorization and L1 translation toward more sophisticated approaches emphasizing contextualization, explicit instruction, learner strategies, and technology integration.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of vocabulary instruction in higher education, existing research remains fragmented across instructional approaches, learner populations, and outcome measures. Moreover, relatively few studies have systematically compared what works and what does not across university-level EFL contexts. This lack of synthesis limits the ability of instructors and curriculum designers to make evidence-based pedagogical decisions. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by providing a systematic review of research on EFL vocabulary instruction, with a particular focus on instructional effectiveness and implications for tertiary education.

1.1 Conceptual Framework: Vocabulary Knowledge in EFL

Vocabulary knowledge is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing both breadth, defined as the number of lexical items a learner knows, and depth, which refers to the quality of knowledge associated with each word (Wesche & Paribakht, 2018), including its semantic range, morphological structure, syntactic behavior, and collocational patterns (Nation, 2013; Qian, 1996). Research consistently demonstrates that both dimensions play a crucial role in language proficiency, although they contribute in different ways to literacy development. Vocabulary breadth facilitates basic word recognition and text comprehension, while vocabulary depth enables learners to process nuanced meanings, infer implicit relations, and use words accurately in academic discourse (Tannenbaum *et al.*, 2006; Proctor *et al.*, 2009; Lawrence *et al.*, 2019).

A substantial body of research has established a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, whereby vocabulary supports comprehension processes and, simultaneously, reading experience contributes to further

vocabulary growth (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2011; Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Duff *et al.*, 2015). This bidirectional relationship aligns with the Matthew Effect in literacy development (Stanovich, 1986), according to which learners with stronger vocabulary resources benefit disproportionately from increased exposure to academic texts, leading to cumulative advantages over time. Studies conducted in both first-language and second-language contexts confirm that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension and functions as a mediating variable between decoding, inferencing, and higher-order comprehension processes (Protopapas *et al.*, 2013; Raudszus *et al.*, 2021).

Beyond reading, vocabulary knowledge has been shown to exert a significant influence on academic writing quality. Learners with greater lexical resources demonstrate improved coherence, precision, and stylistic appropriateness in written production, particularly when engaging with disciplinary genres and argumentative writing tasks (Durrant & Brenchley, 2019; Lavigne *et al.*, 2022). Importantly, research suggests that vocabulary depth, rather than sheer vocabulary size, is more closely associated with the ability to manipulate language across registers and adapt lexical choices to specific academic purposes (Proctor *et al.*, 2012; Allagui & Al Naqbi, 2024).

Within university EFL contexts, increasing attention has been devoted to academic vocabulary, defined as lexical items that occur frequently across academic disciplines but are relatively rare in everyday language use (Coxhead, 2000, 2012). Mastery of academic vocabulary is essential for engaging with scholarly texts, understanding lectures, and producing discipline-appropriate written and oral discourse. Empirical studies indicate that insufficient command of academic vocabulary constitutes a major barrier to academic literacy for EFL university students, even when general vocabulary knowledge appears adequate (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Logan & Kieffer, 2017).

These findings resonate with the Lexical Quality Hypothesis, which posits that reading comprehension depends on the precision, stability, and interconnectedness of lexical representations in the mental lexicon (Perfetti & Hart, 2002; Perfetti, 2007). From this perspective, vocabulary instruction should not be limited to expanding word lists but should aim to enhance the quality of lexical representations through repeated exposure, meaningful use, and strategic learning. Consequently, contemporary vocabulary pedagogy emphasizes the integration of explicit instruction, contextualized exposure, and strategic engagement with words in use.

Informed by this theoretical and empirical foundation, the present systematic review adopts an integrative framework drawing on:

- 1) Nation's (2013) four strands of vocabulary learning, meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development;
- 2) Schmitt and McCarthy's (1997) pedagogical taxonomy of vocabulary instruction;
- 3) Hunt and Beglar's (2002) model combining explicit instruction with incidental learning through meaningful exposure.

Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for evaluating the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction approaches in university-level EFL contexts and for identifying instructional practices that foster sustainable lexical development.

2. Literature Review: Major Trends in EFL Vocabulary Instruction

2.1 Explicit vs. Implicit Vocabulary Instruction

A substantial body of research converges on the conclusion that explicit vocabulary instruction plays a central role in EFL contexts, particularly where learners have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that direct instruction promotes stronger lexical form–meaning connections, deeper processing, and more durable retention than incidental exposure alone (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986; Elleman *et al.*, 2009; Beck *et al.* 2013; Winckler *et al.* 2021). At the university level, Sonbul and Schmitt (2010) provide robust experimental evidence showing that explicit teaching of target vocabulary following reading tasks results in significantly higher gains in form recall than reading-only conditions. Similar advantages of explicit instruction have been reported in EFL studies by Marzban& Kamalian (2013) and Ebrahimi, Azhideh, and Aslanabadi (2015), particularly for academically relevant vocabulary.

These international findings resonate with research conducted in the Moroccan EFL context, where explicit vocabulary instruction has received growing pedagogical support. Studies focusing on instructional practices in Moroccan universities emphasize the importance of deliberate attention to word meaning, form, and use. In particular, El Garras, El Hanafi, and Ait Hammou (2025) report that Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive perceptions of explicit vocabulary instruction, viewing it as an effective approach for addressing learners’ lexical limitations. Similarly, research on Moroccan university students indicates that explicit focus on word structure and morphological awareness contributes significantly to vocabulary development (Harraqi, 2017, 2019). Together, these findings suggest that explicit and form-focused vocabulary instruction is not only theoretically sound but also contextually relevant in Moroccan tertiary EFL settings.

Nevertheless, the literature does not dismiss implicit learning altogether. Research on extensive and narrow reading suggests that implicit vocabulary growth is possible under specific conditions, notably when learners possess sufficient proficiency, encounter repeated exposures to lexical items, and engage with rich, meaningful input (Nadarajan, 2009; Khamesipour, 2015). This aligns with broader literacy research indicating that vocabulary development benefits from a combination of explicit instruction and contextual exposure, rather than reliance on either approach in isolation (Hunt & Beglar, 2002; Nation, 2013).

While the evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts, particularly at the university level, its impact varies according to instructional design and outcome measures. Studies relying on short-term recall tests tend to report stronger effects than those examining productive or delayed outcomes. This suggests that explicit instruction is most effective when embedded within broader instructional frameworks that promote repeated use and meaningful engagement, a concern addressed in research on contextualized vocabulary instruction.

2.2 Contextualized Vocabulary Instruction

Across the reviewed studies, contextualized vocabulary instruction emerges as one of the most consistently supported approaches. Teaching vocabulary through meaningful linguistic, disciplinary, or communicative contexts facilitates inferencing, semantic integration, and long-term retention (Qian, 1996; Stahl & Nagy, 2005). Empirical studies in EFL settings demonstrate that contextualized instruction outperforms decontextualized methods, such as isolated word lists or L1-equivalent translations, in both immediate learning and delayed recall (Barjesteh & Omran, 2019; Godwin, 2018; Hawass, 2019; Hughes, 2020).

These findings resonate with literacy research emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension: encountering words in authentic contexts not only supports meaning construction but also strengthens learners' ability to apply vocabulary knowledge flexibly across tasks (Cain & Oakhill, 2014; Verhoeven *et al.*, 2011). For university EFL learners, contextualized instruction is particularly crucial, as academic texts demand engagement with polysemous words, abstract concepts, and discipline-specific meanings that cannot be mastered through memorization alone.

Although contextualized vocabulary instruction consistently supports deeper processing and retention, the reviewed studies indicate that contextual exposure alone rarely leads to productive mastery in EFL contexts. Without explicit guidance and systematic recycling, learners often develop receptive knowledge that does not transfer to academic use. This limitation has prompted increased attention to learner-mediated mechanisms, particularly vocabulary learning strategies.

2.3 Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Instruction

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have received sustained scholarly attention as a means of fostering learner autonomy and long-term lexical development. Seminal work by Ghazal (2007) proposed a comprehensive framework for training EFL learners in strategy use, emphasizing metacognitive awareness, inferencing, and consolidation strategies. Subsequent empirical studies have corroborated the pedagogical value of strategy instruction.

For instance, Ebrahimi *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that training learners to infer meaning from context yielded significantly higher vocabulary gains than traditional dictionary-based approaches. Similarly, Lai (2013) reported increased vocabulary acquisition and heightened learner engagement following explicit VLS instruction among EFL learners. Teacher perceptions studies, such as Ali *et al.* (2024), further indicate positive attitudes toward VLS instruction, although they also highlight implementation challenges in real classroom settings.

Notably, strategy-based instruction appears particularly effective at the university level, where learners are expected to process large volumes of academic texts and independently manage lexical learning. While strategy-based instruction demonstrates clear benefits for learner autonomy and long-term vocabulary development, its

effectiveness depends heavily on sustained implementation and teacher expertise. Several studies report positive outcomes in experimental settings, yet fewer address how strategies are integrated into regular curricula. This gap points to the need for instructional approaches that address not only strategy use, but also the quality of lexical knowledge learners develop.

2.4 Morphological and Lexical Depth-Oriented Instruction

Beyond vocabulary size, recent research underscores the importance of depth of vocabulary knowledge, including morphological awareness and collocational competence. Pookcharoen (2014) demonstrated that morphemic analysis instruction significantly enhanced Thai EFL students' vocabulary development, particularly in decoding unfamiliar academic words. Likewise, El-Dakhs (2015) found that explicit lexical collocation instruction led to measurable increases in vocabulary size among intermediate EFL learners.

Recent research increasingly emphasizes depth of vocabulary knowledge, particularly morphological awareness and collocational competence, as a critical dimension of effective instruction. Pookcharoen (2014) shows that morphemic analysis instruction significantly enhances learners' ability to decode unfamiliar academic vocabulary, enabling them to infer meanings across disciplines. Similarly, El-Dakhs (2015) report that explicit instruction in lexical collocations leads to measurable increases in vocabulary size and usage accuracy among intermediate EFL learners.

These findings align with broader research showing that EFL learners often experience difficulties not only with vocabulary breadth, but also with lexical depth, particularly when words exhibit polysemy or register-specific behavior (Proctor *et al.*, 2009; Lawrence *et al.*, 2019). From this perspective, developing morphological and collocational knowledge contributes to more precise, stable, and interconnected lexical representations, as proposed by the Lexical Quality Hypothesis (Perfetti, 2007). This theoretical account reinforces Nation and Gu's (2019) argument that effective vocabulary instruction must address not only how many words learners know, but how well they know them, an issue of particular relevance for academic vocabulary mastery.

Nevertheless, the reviewed literature also reveals important limitations. Many studies examining morphological awareness or collocational competence do so in isolation and over relatively short instructional periods, which restricts conclusions about their contribution to overall lexical competence and long-term academic language use. This fragmentation suggests that depth-oriented instruction is most effective when integrated within broader pedagogical frameworks that combine explicit teaching, contextualized exposure, and vocabulary learning strategies, rather than implemented as a standalone intervention.

2.5 Traditional vs. Contemporary Vocabulary Instruction Approaches

Traditional vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts has historically relied on rote memorization, word lists, and translation-based practices (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997).

While early studies acknowledged limited short-term benefits of rote learning (Rodríguez & Sadowki, 2000), more recent research overwhelmingly favors hybrid and meaning-oriented approaches.

Comparative studies demonstrate that keyword and context/keyword methods yield superior long-term retention compared to rote rehearsal (Ashoori Tootkaboni, 2012), while semantic mapping enhances memory, comprehension, and lexical organization (Zahedi *et al.* 2012). Additionally, visually supported and multimodal instruction has been shown to significantly improve vocabulary gains among beginner and lower-intermediate learners (Sadeghi & Farzizadeh, 2013). Collectively, these findings indicate that traditional vocabulary instruction methods are insufficient when used in isolation, particularly for academic vocabulary development. While such approaches may support short-term recall, they do not foster durable or transferable lexical knowledge. This recognition has contributed to growing interest in technology-enhanced and hybrid instructional models.

2.6 Technology-Enhanced Vocabulary Instruction

The integration of technology has emerged as a prominent trend in vocabulary instruction research. Studies on CALL-based instruction (Yunus *et al.*, 2010) and innovative concordance instruction (Karbalaee & KordAfshari, 2019) report significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition among university EFL learners. More recent work by Murugalakshmi *et al.* (2025) highlights the effectiveness of gamified, contextualized, and technology-supported approaches, emphasizing their role in increasing learner motivation and engagement.

However, the literature cautions against viewing technology as a panacea. Research consistently emphasizes that pedagogical alignment, rather than technological novelty, determines instructional effectiveness (Nation, 2013; Murugalakshmi *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, technology is most effective when integrated into principled instructional designs that promote contextualization, strategy use, and deep lexical processing.

2.7 Academic Vocabulary Instruction: A Growing Priority

Vocabulary instruction at the university level presents distinctive challenges, including increased lexical density, disciplinary specificity, and heightened demands for academic literacy. Hunt and Beglar (2002) and Nation (2013) argue that instruction at this level must balance explicit teaching, extensive reading, and strategic learning opportunities. However, studies conducted across diverse EFL contexts, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Arab region, reveal persistent structural constraints.

Teachers often possess theoretical awareness of effective vocabulary instruction but face curricular overload and limited institutional support (Almuhammadi, 2020). Vocabulary teaching remains fragmented (Stahl & Nagy, 2005; Beck *et al.*, 2013; Winkler *et al.*, 2021) and under-prioritized, and explicit academic vocabulary instruction is rarely institutionalized as a dedicated module (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). These findings

underscore the urgent need for systematic, research-informed vocabulary instruction models in higher education, particularly in EFL contexts where academic success is closely tied to lexical competence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Review Design

This study adopts a systematic review methodology informed by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Moher *et al.*, 2009). The aim of the review is to synthesize empirical evidence on EFL vocabulary instruction, identify effective and ineffective pedagogical practices, and derive context-sensitive implications for university-level instruction, with particular relevance to Moroccan higher education. Given the heterogeneity of research designs, instructional interventions, and outcome measures across studies, a qualitative thematic synthesis was deemed more appropriate than a statistical meta-analysis.

3.2 Research Questions

This systematic review is guided by the following main research question:

- What works in EFL vocabulary instruction at the university level, particularly in input-poor contexts such as Moroccan higher education?

This central question reflects the primary objective of the review: to identify empirically validated instructional principles that lead to sustained vocabulary development in university EFL contexts. To answer this central question in a systematic and analytically transparent manner, the review addresses the following overarching research questions, each of which examines a specific dimension of vocabulary instruction:

- 1) Which vocabulary instruction approaches have been empirically shown to be effective in university EFL contexts?
- 2) Which instructional practices consistently fail to produce sustained vocabulary gains, and why?
- 3) What recurring themes emerge across empirical studies regarding explicit instruction, contextualization, and vocabulary learning strategies?
- 4) How is academic vocabulary conceptualized and instructionalized in university EFL contexts?
- 5) What evidence-based instructional model best responds to the lexical demands of Moroccan university EFL programs?

Together, these overarching questions operationalize the central review question and structure the subsequent thematic synthesis.

3.3 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search strings combined key terms related to

vocabulary instruction, EFL contexts, and higher education using Boolean operators. The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025, reflecting contemporary developments in vocabulary pedagogy while capturing foundational studies.

Table 1: Search Strategy

Database	Search Strings	Time Span
Scopus	"EFL vocabulary instruction" OR "academic vocabulary" OR "explicit vocabulary teaching"	2000–2025
ERIC	"vocabulary learning strategies" AND "EFL"	2000–2025
Web of Science	"contextualized vocabulary instruction"	2000–2025
Google Scholar	"EFL university vocabulary instruction"	2000–2025

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they focused on vocabulary instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reported empirical findings or systematic reviews, involved university-level learners or presented clear pedagogical implications for higher education, were published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and were written in English. Conversely, studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, addressed vocabulary only incidentally without a clearly defined instructional intervention, lacked sufficient methodological transparency, or consisted of non-academic publications such as opinion pieces or informal reports.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

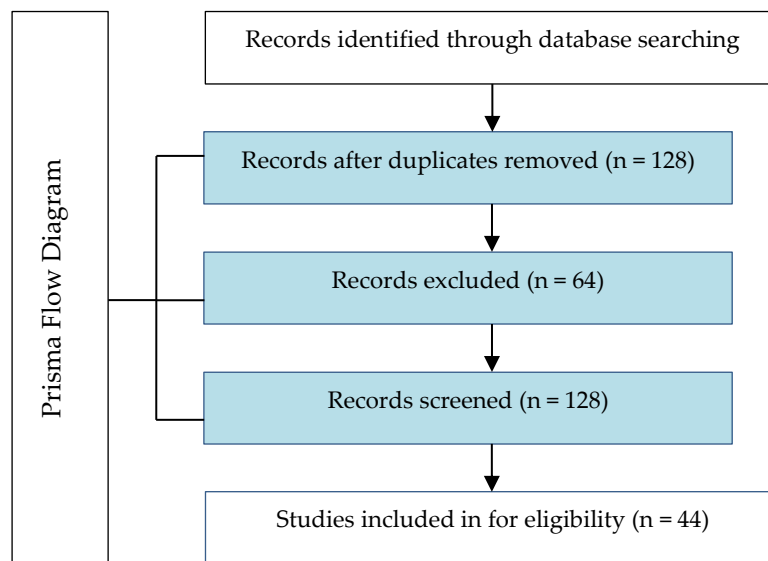
Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses, blogs, conference abstracts
Focus	EFL vocabulary instruction	ESL or general language studies
Participants	University-level learners	Primary/secondary only
Study design	Empirical or systematic review	Opinion papers
Language	English	Other languages

3.5 Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. An initial pool of 152 records was identified. After removing duplicates, 128 records were screened based on titles and abstracts. Following full-text evaluation, 44 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for qualitative synthesis.

The selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram below:

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow DIAGRAM



3.6 Thematic Analysis of Findings

Following systematic coding and cross-study comparison of the 44 included empirical studies, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring instructional patterns, areas of convergence, and pedagogical limitations. Four dominant themes emerged across the reviewed literature:

- 1) Explicit instruction is consistently effective, especially in input-poor contexts;
- 2) Contextualization enhances retention and depth of knowledge;
- 3) Strategy instruction promotes autonomy and long-term learning;
- 4) Technology enhances learning when pedagogically grounded.

Collectively, the themes provide a coherent, evidence-based answer to the central review question of what works in university-level EFL vocabulary instruction.

- **Theme 1: Effectiveness of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction**

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed literature is the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts, particularly at the university level. Empirical studies consistently show that instructional approaches which deliberately focus learners' attention on lexical form, meaning, and use result in significantly greater vocabulary gains than approaches relying on incidental exposure alone (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010; Marzban & Kamalian, 2013; Nation, 2013). Experimental and quasi-experimental research further indicates that explicit instruction facilitates stronger form–meaning mappings, accelerates initial vocabulary acquisition, and supports retention over time (Hunt & Beglar, 2002; Huang, 2014).

These effects appear especially pronounced in input-poor EFL environments, where learners have limited opportunities for exposure to English beyond the classroom. In such contexts, explicit instruction functions as a compensatory mechanism by making lexical features salient and reducing the learning burden associated with unguided

exposure. However, the thematic synthesis also reveals an important qualification. Explicit instruction is not uniformly effective across all implementations. Studies in which explicit teaching is operationalized as isolated word lists or direct translation equivalents report weaker outcomes, particularly with respect to productive vocabulary use and long-term retention (Qian, 1996; Wilkins, 1972).

Taken together, these findings suggest that explicitness alone does not guarantee instructional effectiveness. Rather, the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction depends on its pedagogical realization. When integrated into meaning-focused academic tasks that promote repeated use, contextualization, and deeper processing, explicit instruction consistently supports both receptive and productive vocabulary development. Conversely, when applied mechanically and without meaningful engagement, its impact remains limited. This pattern underscores the need to conceptualize explicit instruction not as an isolated technique, but as a core component within integrated vocabulary teaching frameworks.

- **Theme 2:** Contextualization and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

A second dominant theme concerns the role of contextualization in vocabulary instruction. Across a wide range of contexts, studies consistently report that vocabulary learned through meaningful linguistic contexts, such as academic texts, reading tasks, and discourse-based activities, is retained more effectively and processed more deeply than vocabulary learned through decontextualized techniques (Barjesteh & Omran, 2019; Godwin, 2018; Hawass, 2019; Hughes, 2020).

Contextualized instruction facilitates the development of lexical depth, enabling learners to acquire not only word meanings but also information about collocations, grammatical behavior, and pragmatic use (Nation, 2013; El-Dakhs, 2015). This dimension of vocabulary knowledge is particularly critical in higher education, where students must engage with complex academic discourse.

Nevertheless, the thematic synthesis indicates that contextualization alone does not guarantee sustained vocabulary development in EFL settings. Several studies report that unguided exposure, even within rich contexts, tends to favor receptive recognition rather than productive mastery (Nadarajan, 2009; Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010). This finding highlights the need for contextualized input to be systematically supported by explicit explanation, recycling, and focused practice.

- **Theme 3:** Vocabulary Learning Strategy Instruction and Learner Autonomy

A third recurring theme across the reviewed literature is the pedagogical value of vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) instruction. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that learners who receive explicit training in strategies such as inferencing, morphological analysis, semantic mapping, and strategic dictionary use achieve greater and more durable vocabulary gains than those who do not (Ghazal, 2007; Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2015; Lai, 2013).

Strategy-based instruction appears particularly salient at the university level, where learners are expected to process large volumes of academic input and manage vocabulary learning with increasing independence. Across contexts, learners who develop strategic awareness demonstrate stronger long-term retention and greater flexibility in vocabulary use, whereas those without explicit strategy training tend to revert to surface-level memorization practices that limit transfer and productive mastery (Schmitt, 2000; Nation & Gu, 2019).

However, the reviewed evidence also indicates that the effectiveness of strategy instruction depends on its systematic implementation and the extent to which it is supported by metacognitive guidance. Short-term or isolated strategy training interventions yield more modest outcomes, particularly when learners are not guided in when and how to apply strategies across tasks. In Moroccan and comparable EFL contexts, several studies report limited metacognitive awareness among learners, further underscoring the need for structured and sustained strategy instruction within university curricula (Seffar, 2014; El Ghouati, 2014).

Overall, vocabulary learning strategies emerge not as optional enhancements but as integral components of effective vocabulary pedagogy, particularly in contexts where learners must assume greater responsibility for managing academic vocabulary demands.

- **Theme 4: Ineffective and Limited Instructional Practices**

In parallel with effective practices, the thematic analysis identifies instructional approaches that consistently fail to produce sustained vocabulary gains. These include exclusive reliance on incidental learning, decontextualized rote memorization, excessive dependence on L1 translation, and fragmented treatment of academic vocabulary.

Although such practices may yield short-term test gains, they do not support lexical depth, productive use, or long-term retention (Rodríguez & Sadowki, 2000; Qian, 1996). This pattern is particularly evident in higher education EFL contexts, where lexical demands exceed the capacity of surface-level learning strategies.

Technology-based instruction also appears in this category when implemented without pedagogical integration. Studies caution that digital tools and CALL applications produce inconsistent outcomes when used as add-ons rather than as components of a coherent instructional design (Yunus *et al.*, 2010).

- **Theme 5: Academic Vocabulary Instruction in University EFL Contexts**

A final theme concerns the conceptualization and instructionalization of academic vocabulary. The reviewed literature converges on the recognition that academic vocabulary plays a decisive role in academic literacy, reading comprehension, and writing quality (Coxhead, 2000; Nation & Gu, 2019). However, empirical evidence suggests that academic vocabulary instruction remains pedagogically underdeveloped in many university EFL programs.

Academic vocabulary is frequently treated as a list-based or receptive component, with limited attention to collocations, word families, morphological awareness, and disciplinary usage. This fragmentation limits learners' ability to transfer lexical knowledge across academic tasks and disciplines.

- **The Central Theme:** What works in EFL vocabulary instruction at the university level?

The purpose of this systematic review was to answer a central question: *What works in EFL vocabulary instruction at the university level?* The thematic synthesis of 44 empirical studies provides converging evidence that vocabulary instruction in university-level EFL contexts is most effective when it is explicit, contextualized, and strategically scaffolded. Across the reviewed studies, instructional approaches that deliberately target form–meaning relationships, depth of lexical knowledge, and learner strategy use consistently outperform approaches relying on incidental exposure or decontextualized memorization.

Explicit vocabulary instruction emerges as a strong predictor of vocabulary gains, especially when integrated into meaningful academic tasks. Studies by Sonbul and Schmitt (2010), Marzban & Kamalian (2013), and Huang (2014) demonstrate that direct instruction enhances form recall, lexical precision, and retention more effectively than incidental learning alone. However, the effectiveness of explicit instruction is contingent upon how it is implemented. When explicit teaching is reduced to isolated word lists or translation equivalents, its impact on long-term retention and productive use remains limited, echoing earlier concerns raised by Qian (1996) and Wilkins (1972).

Contextualized vocabulary instruction, particularly through reading-based and task-based activities, has been shown to facilitate deeper lexical processing and stronger retention. Empirical evidence from Godwin (2018), Barjesteh and Omran (2019), Hughes (2020), and Hawass (2019) indicates that learning vocabulary in context allows learners to establish semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic connections, which are essential for academic language use. Nevertheless, the review also confirms that contextual exposure alone is insufficient in EFL settings. Without explicit guidance and systematic recycling, contextualized instruction risks producing superficial gains restricted to receptive knowledge.

Vocabulary learning strategy instruction constitutes another central finding of this review. Strategy-based approaches, such as inferencing, semantic mapping, morphemic analysis, and strategic dictionary use, consistently promote learner autonomy and long-term vocabulary development (Ghazal, 2007; Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2015; Lai, 2013). Importantly, Moroccan and regional studies suggest that while learners frequently employ basic memory strategies, metacognitive and deep-processing strategies remain underdeveloped (Seffar, 2014; El Ghouati, 2014). This gap underscores the need for structured and sustained strategy training within university curricula.

Conversely, several approaches appear to be less effective when used in isolation. Rote memorization, excessive reliance on L1 equivalents, and unguided incidental

learning repeatedly show limited impact on lexical depth and productive use. Similarly, technology-enhanced instruction, while promising, yields inconsistent outcomes when not embedded within a coherent pedagogical framework, as highlighted by Yunus *et al.* (2010) and Murugalakshmi *et al.* (2025). These findings collectively suggest that effectiveness lies not in the method itself, but in its integration within a principled instructional design.

3.7 What Does Not Work (or Works Poorly) in EFL Vocabulary Instruction

Equally important in answering the review question is identifying what does not work effectively, particularly in university EFL contexts:

- **Exclusive reliance on incidental learning.** Studies (e.g., Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010; Nadarajan, 2009) indicate that incidental exposure alone results in limited vocabulary growth in input-poor EFL environments.
- **Decontextualized memorization without recycling.** Although rote techniques may yield immediate test gains, long-term retention and productive use remain weak.
- **Technology without pedagogy.** CALL and digital tools show inconsistent results when used as add-ons rather than pedagogically integrated components (Yunus *et al.*, 2010).
- **Fragmented academic vocabulary instruction.** Teaching academic vocabulary as isolated lists, without disciplinary or contextual grounding, fails to meet university-level lexical demands.

3.8 Strengths and Limitations of Vocabulary Instruction Approaches

One of the major contributions of this systematic review lies in its comparative synthesis of instructional approaches across diverse EFL contexts. Despite its comprehensive scope, this review is not without limitations. The reliance on published studies may introduce publication bias, as null or negative findings are less likely to be reported. Additionally, the heterogeneity of research designs, participant profiles, and assessment instruments complicates direct comparison across studies. The limited number of empirical studies conducted specifically in Moroccan universities further constrains contextual generalizability, underscoring the need for locally grounded research. Table 4 summarizes the pedagogical strengths and limitations of the dominant vocabulary instruction methods identified in the reviewed studies.

Table 4: Strengths and Limitations of Major EFL Vocabulary Instruction Approaches

Instructional Approach	Strengths	Limitations
Rote memorization / word lists	Efficient for short-term recall; low cognitive demand	Poor retention; minimal depth; ineffective for academic vocabulary
L1 equivalents	Quick access to meaning; reduces cognitive load	Limits contextualization and productive use
Contextualized instruction	Enhances retention and depth; supports inferencing	Requires careful text selection and scaffolding
Explicit instruction	Strong gains in form–meaning mapping; effective in EFL contexts	Time-consuming; may reduce learner autonomy if overused
Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)	Promotes autonomy; transferable skills	Requires teacher training and sustained practice
Morphological instruction	Supports decoding academic vocabulary	Limited impact if isolated from context
Collocation instruction	Improves fluency and accuracy	Often neglected in curricula
Technology-enhanced instruction	Increases motivation and exposure	Effectiveness depends on pedagogical design

This synthesis confirms that no single approach is sufficient in isolation, reinforcing calls for integrated instructional models (Nation & Gu, 2019; Hunt & Beglar, 2002).

4. Implications for Moroccan University EFL Instruction

4.1 Academic Vocabulary as a Full-Fledged Module

A significant contribution of this review lies in foregrounding academic vocabulary as a central concern in university-level EFL instruction. Academic vocabulary, encompassing high-frequency academic words, collocations, and discipline-specific lexis, plays a decisive role in students' academic literacy and success. Nation and Gu (2019) emphasizes that academic vocabulary requires instructional treatment distinct from general vocabulary, given its abstract nature, lower frequency, and restricted contextual transparency.

In the Moroccan higher education context, the recent introduction of academic vocabulary as a standalone module represents an important institutional shift. However, the reviewed literature cautions against treating academic vocabulary as a list-based or purely receptive component. Effective academic vocabulary instruction must target lexical depth, including word families, collocations, grammatical behavior, and disciplinary usage (El-Dakhs, 2015). Furthermore, academic vocabulary learning is most effective when integrated into reading, writing, and speaking tasks that mirror authentic academic practices.

The systematic review reveals that few empirical studies explicitly examine academic vocabulary instruction at the university level in EFL contexts, highlighting a significant research gap. This scarcity is particularly evident in Moroccan research, where academic vocabulary instruction remains under-theorized and under-investigated. Consequently, there is a pressing need for context-sensitive, empirically validated models that address academic lexical demands in higher education.

4.2 Toward an Integrated Model of Vocabulary Instruction for Moroccan Universities

Based on the synthesized findings, this review proposes an integrated model of vocabulary instruction tailored to the Moroccan university EFL context. This model is grounded in the principle that vocabulary learning is cumulative, multidimensional, and strategy-dependent. Rather than privileging a single method, the model combines explicit instruction, contextualized exposure, strategy training, and technology-supported reinforcement within a coherent pedagogical framework.

At its core, the model emphasizes explicit teaching of academic and general vocabulary, ensuring that learners acquire accurate form–meaning mappings and awareness of word usage. This explicit component is complemented by contextualized input through academic texts, disciplinary readings, and task-based activities, which facilitate deeper processing and meaningful use. Strategy instruction constitutes a central pillar of the model, equipping learners with transferable skills such as inferencing, morphological analysis, and lexical organization. Finally, technology-enhanced tools, including concordancers and CALL applications, serve as supportive mechanisms for practice, recycling, and learner engagement rather than as substitutes for instruction.

Such a model directly addresses the instructional challenges identified in Moroccan universities, including limited exposure, curriculum constraints, and uneven learner strategy use. Importantly, it aligns with international best practices while remaining sensitive to local institutional realities.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review addressed a critical yet long-neglected question in university-level EFL instruction: what works, and what does not, in vocabulary teaching? By synthesizing evidence from forty-four empirical studies, the review demonstrates that vocabulary instruction is most effective when it is explicitly taught, meaningfully contextualized, strategy-oriented, and oriented toward depth of lexical knowledge rather than surface-level expansion alone. These findings challenge traditional practices in which vocabulary has been treated as an ancillary component of language instruction, implicitly assumed to develop through exposure rather than systematic pedagogy.

The evidence reviewed clearly indicates that decontextualized, transmissive approaches, such as rote memorization and isolated word lists, are insufficient for supporting sustained vocabulary development at the university level. While such approaches may yield short-term gains in vocabulary size, they fail to promote retention, productive use, and academic transfer. In contrast, instructional models that integrate explicit instruction with contextualized practice, strategic training, and repeated engagement across modalities foster deeper lexical representations and greater learner autonomy. Vocabulary learning, therefore, emerges not as a peripheral skill but as a foundational dimension of academic literacy that directly underpins reading comprehension, disciplinary writing, and oral participation in higher education.

Importantly, this review highlights academic vocabulary as a domain requiring explicit institutional recognition. Despite its centrality to academic success, academic vocabulary has historically remained under-theorized and under-taught in many EFL university contexts. The findings strongly support the formal integration of academic vocabulary instruction as a dedicated curricular component, particularly in contexts such as Moroccan higher education, where students often face substantial lexical gaps that hinder academic performance. The recent introduction of academic vocabulary modules in Moroccan universities represents a promising pedagogical shift; however, their effectiveness will depend on the adoption of coherent, research-informed instructional models rather than fragmented or ad hoc practices.

At the policy level, the results of this review call for a reconsideration of curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment practices. Vocabulary instruction should no longer be subsumed under reading or writing courses, nor left to incidental learning. Instead, it must be explicitly planned, systematically assessed, and pedagogically aligned with learners' academic and disciplinary needs. Such a shift requires institutional support, professional development for instructors, and curriculum frameworks that recognize vocabulary knowledge as a core learning outcome in its own right. For Moroccan universities, the findings strongly support the institutionalization of academic vocabulary instruction through an integrated, research-informed model. Such an approach holds the potential to significantly enhance students' academic literacy, autonomy, and overall proficiency in English.

In conclusion, this systematic review provides robust empirical evidence that effective university-level EFL vocabulary instruction is neither incidental nor optional. It is a pedagogical imperative. By repositioning vocabulary at the center of language education policy and instructional practice, higher education institutions can move beyond superficial lexical gains toward sustained academic literacy, learner autonomy, and long-term proficiency development. This synthesis thus not only clarifies what works in vocabulary instruction, but also provides a principled foundation for meaningful instructional and policy reform in EFL higher education.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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