



DATA-DRIVEN VOCABULARY SELECTION AND MASTERY: INSTRUCTIONAL PRINCIPLES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE MOROCCAN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract:

This study examined vocabulary instruction and learning in Moroccan secondary schools. The study highlighted the challenges students face and explored strategies for addressing them. It primarily identified and analyzed barriers to effective vocabulary acquisition. The research examined both instructional practices and learner behaviors. Surveys and interviews with teachers and students in Casablanca and Rabat revealed the main obstacles: lack of motivation, time constraints, first-language interference and difficulty applying new words in context. The study also evaluated and recommended proven instructional strategies. These included direct and indirect teaching methods, as well as promoting learner autonomy through group work, vocabulary notebooks, and digital tools. By systematically investigating these objectives, the study offered guidance to EFL teachers, textbook developers, and educational leaders on improving vocabulary teaching and learning in Moroccan secondary schools.

Keywords: learner autonomy, Moroccan secondary schools, teaching strategies, pedagogical technique, vocabulary acquisition

1. Introduction

Words shape lives, history, and daily life. Their impact is strong in Moroccan secondary schools. Vocabulary is key to success and confidence. Moroccan students need a strong vocabulary for learning and communication. Major studies, such as the 2000 National Reading Panel report, confirm the importance of vocabulary in reading and language learning. Experts have long recognized this.

Although vocabulary is essential for academic achievement, many Moroccan secondary students struggle to use vocabulary-learning strategies independently (Saif & Youness, 2019). This study examines two main issues: the challenges that hinder

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students' independent vocabulary development and the instructional methods that best address these difficulties.

The central research questions are:

- 1) What are the key obstacles to independent vocabulary learning in Moroccan secondary schools?
- 2) Which instructional approaches are most effective in overcoming these obstacles and fostering learner autonomy?

With this clear focus, the study aims to recommend strategies to support independent vocabulary learning for Moroccan EFL students (Outamgharte et al., 2025; Saksittanupab, 2024).

To address these focused research questions, this study investigates four targeted areas:

- 1) The criteria teachers use when selecting vocabulary,
- 2) Key elements included in effective vocabulary instruction,
- 3) How students use new vocabulary in context, and
- 4) How the textbook 'Insights into English' incorporates vocabulary instruction.

By concentrating on these areas, the study aligns directly with the research objectives and maintains a clear focus on improving vocabulary development and learner autonomy in Moroccan EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Types of Vocabulary

Research distinguishes between words students know and words they use. 'Expressive vocabulary' refers to the words students use in speaking and writing to communicate ideas. 'Receptive vocabulary' refers to words they understand when listening and reading, even if not used actively (Güngör & Önder, 2023). 'Oral vocabulary' includes words understood or used in listening and speaking. 'Literate vocabulary' concerns words encountered in reading and writing (Ricketts et al., 2020). Defining these terms clarifies the specific ways learners process language and interact with vocabulary.

2.2 Approaches to Vocabulary Learning

After identifying vocabulary types, it is important to review teaching methods in the literature. It is also necessary to examine their strengths, limitations, and the settings in which they operate. Krashen's Input Hypothesis highlights the role of comprehensible input in language acquisition. Critics note that it pays little attention to speaking, writing, and adapting words to context (Liu, 2015; White, 1987). These areas are important for vocabulary mastery in EFL classes. Frequency-based strategies, such as West's General Service List, help select words systematically (Chanasattru, S., & Tangkiengsirisin, 2016). However, these may focus on utility over deeper meaning or engagement. Recent research recommends integrated approaches. Some studies warn of challenges, including limited curricula, resources, and teacher readiness (Smith, 2025). These issues prevent full

adoption. The literature shows ongoing debates. It discusses balancing input-focused and output-focused instruction. It also emphasizes linking receptive knowledge to productive use through scaffolded, relevant activities (Storch, 2013). This review of models and critiques sets the stage for the study's questions and methods.

Effective vocabulary instruction needs a clear assessment (Baghit et al., 2024b; Nation, 2013). Teachers check receptive knowledge with quizzes (Schmitt, 2000) and design oral and written tasks for productive use (Webb & Nation, 2017). Techniques like fill-in-the-blank or dictation support recall (Graves, 2016). Educators select words by analyzing pairs, meanings, frequency, and structure (Coxhead, 2000). Repeated practice, group work, and independent activities also strengthen vocabulary learning (Folse, 2004).

Experts urge metacognitive awareness (Anderson & Nagy, 1992). Teachers have students share how they learned vocabulary and explain items in their own words (Nation, 2001). Prompts like 'It is used for ___ing' deepen learning (Graves, 2016). These methods help students use words in real conversations (Schmitt, 2000). Research emphasizes regular review for long-term retention, as studies on forgetting and retrieval show (Cepeda et al., 2006; Ebbinghaus, 1885). Together, these approaches highlight the value of theory, research, and flexibility in designing vocabulary lessons (Nation, 2013). Effective vocabulary instruction uses best practices (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2000). Teachers provide word lists or share stories and articles (Graves, 2016). Activities suit learning styles, such as seeing, doing, hearing, or moving (Oxford, 2003). Frequent, spaced repetition aids memory (Cepeda et al., 2006). Teachers group and repeat words to reinforce them (Folse, 2004). Reviewing words 5 to 20 times is most effective (Webb & Nation, 2017). Active practice outperforms passive review (Webb, 2007). Memory stabilizes after initial drops (Ebbinghaus, 1885). Teachers limit new words and help students set realistic goals (Nation, 2013). They provide tools and assign independent tasks (Schmitt, 2000). To address time or motivation gaps, teachers set small goals, break tasks into steps, pick enjoyable topics, encourage group work, and give feedback (Graves, 2016; Folse, 2004).

For independent vocabulary retention, students keep vocabulary notebooks. They include translations, diagrams, word webs, and sample sentences (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Notebooks should be updated often. Use digital or print dictionaries appropriate for the level and context, such as bilingual or visual aids for beginners (Nation, 2013). Flashcards, dictionary apps, and audio guides help with pronunciation (Webb & Nation, 2017). Training should cover formality, collocations, and grammar with relevant resources (Schmitt, 2000). Daily practice, such as labeling objects and recalling words, links digital and print steps in a strong vocabulary program (Oxford, 2003).

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

We obtained permission from ENS (Teachers' Training Center) Rabat before collecting data. We selected secondary schools, such as Mohammed VI in Casablanca and Echarif Idrissi in Rabat, to represent the urban Moroccan EFL context. These schools also include students from diverse demographics and instructional settings. Our sample was 4 teachers and 140 students. Teacher trainees from Dar Essalam, Malqi, and Casablanca distributed surveys to teachers and students. This ensured broad participation across selected schools.

3.2 Procedure

This section details our data collection. First, we got permission from ENS Rabat. We purposefully sampled secondary schools, like Mohammed VI (Casablanca) and Echarif Idrissi (Rabat). This represents the urban Moroccan EFL context and captures instructional variation. Teacher trainees from Dar Essalam, Malqi, and Casablanca distributed surveys during class. This improved participation. We received responses from 4 teachers and 140 students, ensuring broad coverage. After surveys, we interviewed a textbook writer for qualitative insights. Integrating these methods, we maximized diversity and data richness. These choices reduced bias and enhanced the analysis's credibility and reliability.

We used both surveys and an interview as data collection instruments to enhance methodological triangulation. This increases the depth and reliability of research findings. The teacher survey had 7 questions. One question had fixed-response options to enable standardized comparisons. The student survey had two sections. Part A required students to rate items, such as newspapers, on a 0–4 scale. Part B asked students to indicate YES or NO to show confidence in specific skills. This format allowed nuanced measurement and clear dichotomous response data. The interview offered qualitative perspectives on how vocabulary is taught, organized, and selected in the textbook 'Insights into English.' It supplemented the survey data with context-specific insights.

For data analysis, survey responses were entered into a spreadsheet and coded for each variable to support systematic and transparent processing. Quantitative analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages, to identify patterns and overall trends among both teachers and students. For the qualitative data, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted by systematically coding the transcripts to identify recurrent themes and subthemes reflecting instructional practices and attitudes toward vocabulary selection and organization. This mixed-methods approach and detailed data analysis procedure were chosen to increase the credibility and comprehensiveness of the research outcomes, thereby strengthening the study's methodological rigor.

4. Results and Discussion

This section summarizes the primary findings on vocabulary instruction methods in Moroccan secondary schools, providing a deeper analysis of the survey's quantitative results to elucidate prevailing instructional trends. The survey results reveal that 35% of teachers predominantly utilize the indirect approach, 25% combine direct and indirect methods, and 15% rely solely on direct instruction. This distribution indicates a notable trend toward context-based, implicit vocabulary teaching. Qualitative comments supplement this; for instance, one teacher stated, *"I prefer using authentic texts and student discussions rather than isolated word lists,"* reflecting the emphasis on indirect strategies in classroom practice. On closer examination, the preference for indirect and mixed approaches may be influenced by several factors. Teachers who selected indirect or combined approaches often reported that contextualized instruction enables more meaningful engagement and facilitates deeper vocabulary retention among students, especially when classroom time is limited. Conversely, the lower percentage of direct-only users suggests that isolated word instruction may be less favored due to perceived limitations in promoting sustained vocabulary acquisition. These data suggest not only alignment with the literature that highlights external constraints—such as time allocation, the demands of exam-focused curricula, and fluctuating student motivation—but also an adaptive teacher response to these challenges (see El Garras et al., 2025; Nation, 2011). Consequently, the survey's trends underscore both the influence of contextual realities on instructional approaches and the emerging prioritization of strategies that foster active, contextualized learning.

The implications of these findings indicate that, despite research advocating integrating vocabulary instruction with form, use, and pronunciation, actual classroom practice is shaped by systemic and contextual limitations. The tension between adhering to best pedagogical practices and managing practical constraints often leads teachers to prioritize vocabulary coverage over in-depth learning. Such practices may undermine long-term language development, particularly in supporting both receptive and productive vocabulary skills and fostering learner autonomy. As one teacher remarked, *"I try to integrate pronunciation and usage, but curriculum pace means I sometimes focus only on meaning."* Comparing these self-reports with persistent challenges, such as fostering learner autonomy within rigid assessment systems, further aligns with themes in recent scholarship on systemic barriers to effective implementation (Outamgharte et al., 2025). Overall, these findings both confirm and extend previous research, highlighting that effective reform in vocabulary instruction must consider the realities of the classroom and identify context-sensitive strategies that enable teachers to align evidence-based practices with the everyday constraints of the Moroccan EFL context.

4.1 What type of approach/approaches do you adopt while teaching vocabulary?

The indirect approach is preferred by most secondary school teachers (35%), followed by the combination of direct and indirect approaches (25%), and then the direct approach

alone (15%). This indicates a major trend toward context-based, implicit vocabulary instruction in secondary school settings (El Garras et al., 2025).

- Direct: 15%,
- Indirect: 35%,
- Both: 25%.

According to secondary school teachers, the indirect approach is the most commonly used in vocabulary instruction.

4.2 What techniques or strategies do you usually use to present vocabulary items?

Survey data indicate that secondary school teachers use a diverse set of techniques when presenting vocabulary, including frequent use of realia, visual aids, miming, and eliciting to introduce new words in meaningful contexts. For example, several teachers emphasized using real objects or images to help students visualize new vocabulary, while miming and eliciting responses were cited as means to foster active participation. The majority of teachers reported that they provide definitions and translations only as a last resort, prioritizing interactive strategies instead. Common exercises include gap-filling, multiple-choice, and matching activities; these are consistently identified as effective in engaging students and facilitating comprehension. Notably, a teacher from Rabat explained, "*In presenting a new vocabulary item, I either use gap filling, multiple choice, or filling the gap with the first letter of the missing words,*" illustrating the practical application of these methods. Taken together, these results reveal a preference for immersive and student-centered techniques, with teachers strategically selecting activities to promote deeper learning and minimize reliance on rote memorization.

4.3 Do you teach vocabulary separately or along with other elements such as form, use, and pronunciation?

When considering whether vocabulary is taught in isolation or integrated with other language elements, most teachers report a strong emphasis on its interconnectedness with aspects such as use, form, and pronunciation. This holistic perspective is particularly significant for beginners, as pronunciation is often prioritized. Teachers consistently stress the importance of developing learners' lexical range, which encompasses word-building, phrasal verbs, collocations, and word derivation. Such integration supports comprehensive language acquisition, as highlighted by the teacher from Casablanca who explicitly connects vocabulary instruction with these interrelated elements. Teaching vocabulary is related to other interrelated elements, such as use, form, and pronunciation, which are emphasized as the main elements to be taught, especially for beginners (Agrram, 2020). Most teachers agree that helping learners improve their lexical range through word and phrase building, phrasal verbs, collocations, and word derivation is important. For example, a teacher from Casablanca reports, "*I teach vocabulary along with other elements, such as use. I mean that great focus is placed on helping learners improve their lexical range in terms of word and phrase building, phrasal verbs, collocation, word derivation, etc.*" Overall, this alignment in teacher responses underscores a shared recognition that

integrating vocabulary with other linguistic components fosters a more robust and practical mastery of language, particularly for novice learners. This consensus suggests that teachers view holistic, interconnected instruction as essential for supporting students' functional and communicative competence.

4.4 What types of knowledge do you focus on while teaching vocabulary?

Approximately 65% of teachers report accommodating both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, recognizing that these types of knowledge are mutually reinforcing. Teachers emphasize that vocabulary acquisition is progressive: receptive knowledge, which involves comprehension, typically precedes productive use, requiring ongoing checking, reviewing, and recycling before students can actively use new vocabulary. Most teachers explain their approach by noting that two-thirds of vocabulary knowledge is receptive and one-third is productive, and they confirm that a dual focus enables students to understand and apply vocabulary across various contexts. Notably, none of the teachers focused solely on receptive knowledge, highlighting the inherent interrelatedness of receptive and productive knowledge in vocabulary instruction.

4.5 Do you teach students how to learn (learners' strategies)?

Teachers also report instructing students in learner strategies that facilitate vocabulary acquisition. For instance, some focus on writing strategies such as brainstorming and idea organization, while others teach practical vocabulary learning techniques, including dictionary use, vocabulary cards and games, contextual guessing, skimming, scanning, and effective note-taking. Additionally, some teachers tailor their strategy instruction to specific textbook sections, such as 'learn how to learn' activities and word-formation exercises, thereby equipping students with the skills necessary to become autonomous learners. Some teachers teach learners' writing strategies through the steps of writing, brainstorming, and organizing ideas. Others focus on vocabulary and confess that they teach learners how to use dictionaries, learn vocabulary using cards and games, guess words from context, skim and scan, and take notes. Another teacher relates the answer to the textbook used, saying, "*Yes, I have my students look at their textbooks: Ticket to English 'learn how to learn', forming words with suffixes, unit 7, etc., and classroom language, unit 3.*"

4.6 What kinds of problems do you usually face in teaching vocabulary?

Despite these varied strategies, high school teachers identify several persistent challenges in vocabulary instruction. These include students' difficulties with memorizing new words, limited classroom time, low student motivation, first-language (L1) interference, pronunciation issues, the overwhelming number of lexical items to be covered, and the unique challenges of teaching abstract vocabulary. Such problems are reported by teachers across different locations, indicating their widespread and systemic nature.

4.7 What solutions have you worked out to address these problems?

To address the aforementioned challenges, teachers implement a range of targeted solutions. To mitigate time constraints, they teach strategies for efficiently answering difficult questions and inferring word meanings. Motivational issues are tackled by actively engaging students in lessons and encouraging participation. Contextualization is enhanced by simplifying vocabulary through clear examples and constructing meaningful explanatory contexts. To address L1 interference, teachers highlight differences between English and students' native languages and draw attention to false cognates. Pronunciation improves through modeling correct pronunciation and engaging students in practice. Teachers also stress the importance of continuous vocabulary review and recycling, connecting new words to students' personal experiences, using pictorial representations, grouping words by collocation, and focusing on the effective use of a smaller set of vocabulary items. Abstract words are often contextualized through storytelling, thereby making them more accessible to learners.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are organized by priority and feasibility, drawing directly on the primary findings of this study and corroborating literature.

First, teachers should prioritize vocabulary selection based on word frequency and communicative relevance, as this approach ensures that instruction focuses on words that are both high-utility and contextually significant for students (Agram et al., 2023; Nation, 2011; Outamgharte et al., 2024). This strategy promotes immediate applicability across academic and daily contexts while increasing student engagement and retention.

Second, systematic cyclical reinforcement—through spaced practice and regular review—should be implemented to foster long-term retention and support the shift from receptive to productive vocabulary knowledge (Saavedra, 2015; Saksittanupab, 2024; Webb, 2008).

Third, interactive exercises tailored to diverse learning styles—including visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and collaborative activities—should be systematically integrated to counteract declines in student motivation and engagement. Classroom-based research supports the positive impact of such multimodal strategies on student participation and vocabulary mastery (El Garras et al., 2025; Sun & Park, 2023).

Fourth, promoting learner autonomy through the use of vocabulary notebooks, structured group work, and integration of digital tools should be encouraged, as studies have demonstrated that these strategies enable incremental vocabulary gains and foster independent learning behaviors (Alisoy & Sadigzade, 2025; Baghit et al., 2024a). These methods are adaptable across different instructional contexts and require minimal resources, thereby enhancing their feasibility.

Finally, embedding new vocabulary in meaningful, real-life contexts should be standardized across instructional practice. Empirical studies affirm that contextualized vocabulary instruction improves both comprehension and active use, addressing

documented difficulties with usage and transfer (Far-hat & Ouchoud, 2025; Webb, 2008). Such approaches may be implemented through context-driven tasks and authentic materials, thereby aligning with best-practice recommendations in the literature.

In sum, these hierarchical, evidence-based recommendations constitute this study's distinct contribution to the field by providing a targeted and practical framework that supports teachers and curriculum developers in enhancing vocabulary learning outcomes and addressing the persistent instructional challenges unique to Moroccan EFL classrooms.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, learning vocabulary remains the primary foundation for academic and broader success, influencing not only reading achievement but also social and economic advancement. This study sought to identify the principal factors that impede Moroccan high school students from independently developing and contextualizing effective vocabulary-learning strategies, and to offer evidence-based instructional recommendations. The findings indicate that wide reading is instrumental in promoting vocabulary growth and highlight the critical role of teachers in fostering student independence through strategies such as morphological analysis, dictionary use, and explicit connections between spelling and word knowledge. Based on these results, educators are advised to systematically incorporate opportunities for wide reading, explicitly teach metacognitive strategies, and provide regular, targeted practice with vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Implementing these evidence-based approaches will enable teachers to directly support students' vocabulary acquisition and transfer, thereby enhancing both immediate and long-term learning outcomes in Moroccan EFL classrooms.

7. Limitations

A critical appraisal of the study's methodological limitations is necessary to contextualize the conclusions. The main limitation is the reliance on self-reported data from teachers and students, which introduces risks of subjectivity, desirability bias, and recall inaccuracies. This can lead to a gap between reported and actual behavior. Additionally, the study sampled only selected urban schools, limiting the representativeness of the findings. Urban schools are often better resourced, while rural or underfunded schools face different instructional challenges. To improve rigor, future research should use mixed methods, combining self-reports with classroom observations and, when possible, objective measures of vocabulary gains. Broader sampling, including rural and underprivileged schools, will strengthen the findings and highlight context-specific issues across Morocco. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track changes in teaching, student engagement, and vocabulary proficiency over time, enabling the identification of causal relationships and the sustainability of interventions.

Future studies should also examine how broader factors, such as curriculum policy, teacher development, and resource availability, affect the adoption and effectiveness of instructional strategies. Research should examine how sociocultural factors, such as linguistic diversity and parental involvement, influence learner autonomy and vocabulary acquisition. This will help future research provide more precise and practical recommendations for Moroccan classrooms.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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