

**INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICE OF EFL
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS: THE CASE OF YABERUS
SECONDARY AND PREPARATORY SCHOOL GRADE ELEVEN IN FOCUS**

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.06.2026.p17410

<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.06.2026.p17410>

Paper Received Date: 12th April 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 16th May 2026

Paper Publication Date: 18th June 2026

JUNE 2026

ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt was made to investigate vocabulary teaching and learning practices of EFL high school teachers and students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory school Grade eleven in focus. Therefore, the study mainly tried to find out how vocabulary teaching and learning practice looks like in the classroom. To this end, the study employed a descriptive survey method. The required data for the study were collected using classroom observation, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Data was collected from six Grade 11 EFL teachers using purposive sampling technique. Ninety students were selected using systematic sampling technique. Classes were observed (two times for the sampled teachers) to see how EFL teachers and students practice vocabulary instruction. Six Grade 11 English teachers and 18 students were interviewed. To triangulate the information obtained by observation and interview, questionnaires were used. Accordingly, the result seemed to indicate that EFL teachers unlike students believe vocabulary is not a prominent component of language learning to be given more emphasis during teaching English compared to other aspects. It was also obtained that among a wide range of strategies of vocabulary lessons, teaching vocabulary through reading text, synonymy, antonyms, translation, and definition were most frequently used. Although students appeared to be relatively in learning vocabulary, practically they were less efficient in their effort as they could not use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. Among the major vocabulary learning strategies, cognitive strategies (recording and taking notes of new words on their notebook) and discovery strategy (guessing through context) strategies seemed to be used well than other vocabulary learning strategies. Social strategies (asking teachers and classmates) also promote regular practice to enhance the pace of vocabulary achievement. Many factors hindered the implementation of vocabulary teaching-learning practice in Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory schools. Among these, EFL teachers were not given necessary attention for vocabulary instruction, the lack of vocabulary instruction materials, the small number of teachers with good English language skills, and the way the curriculum is designed to have harmed teaching and learning practice. Based on the problems, the researcher forwarded the following recommendations. English teachers should pay more attention to vocabulary instruction. The government and other stakeholders should devote more time and resources to vocabulary instruction in the English curriculum so that EFL teachers and students understand the value of vocabulary teaching and learning.

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1.0. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Over the past two decades, language education has increasingly shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches, emphasizing active learner participation in the learning process (Tseng, 2005). Within this paradigm, vocabulary has become recognized as a fundamental component of language proficiency. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, vocabulary instruction plays a critical role in developing learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Nemati, 2009; Siriwan, 2007).

Vocabulary knowledge not only enhances language proficiency but also supports learners' comprehension of academic content and effective communication. Researchers argue that vocabulary serves as the link among the four language skills and is essential for successful language acquisition (Thanh Huyen & Thi Thu Nga, 2003; Horn, 1995). Consequently, both language teachers and researchers increasingly emphasize effective vocabulary teaching and learning strategies.

Effective vocabulary instruction requires more than memorization of word lists. According to Stahl (2005), learners need repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts. Similarly, Kamil (2004) stresses the importance of engaging learners in varied vocabulary-learning activities. However, observations at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School suggest that vocabulary teaching and learning remain challenging for both teachers and students. Factors such as ineffective teaching strategies, limited learner motivation, negative perceptions toward vocabulary learning, and inadequate instructional practices appear to contribute to these challenges.

This study, therefore, investigates the vocabulary teaching-learning practices of EFL teachers and students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School, with particular attention to perceptions, instructional strategies, and factors affecting vocabulary development.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Vocabulary is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of language learning and communication (Schmitt, 2000; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Despite its importance, vocabulary instruction has often received less attention than

grammar instruction in EFL classrooms. Gairns and Redman (1986) note that vocabulary has long been underestimated in language teaching.

In Ethiopia, English language instruction has traditionally emphasized grammar, which may have contributed to learners' limited language proficiency. Effective vocabulary learning involves discovering the meanings of unfamiliar words, retaining them, and expanding lexical knowledge (Intaraprasert, 2004). Achieving these goals requires appropriate teaching and learning strategies.

At Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School, vocabulary instruction appears to rely largely on traditional methods such as memorizing word lists and dictionary definitions. Preliminary observations and discussions with teachers and students indicated limited use of interactive and contextualized vocabulary-learning techniques. Although several Ethiopian studies have examined vocabulary learning, dictionary use, and contextual guessing strategies (Alemu, 1994; Ermias, 2010; Gashaw, 2008), no study has specifically investigated vocabulary teaching-learning practices in this school.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the extent to which vocabulary instruction is practiced, identify strategies employed by teachers and students, explore their perceptions, and determine factors that hinder effective vocabulary teaching and learning.

1.3 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do teachers and students perceive vocabulary teaching and learning practices in EFL classrooms?
2. To what extent do EFL teachers present vocabulary lessons effectively?
3. What strategies do teachers use to teach vocabulary?
4. What strategies do students use to learn vocabulary?
5. What factors hinder effective vocabulary teaching and learning practices?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To investigate the vocabulary teaching-learning practices of EFL teachers and Grade 11 students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School.

Specific Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine teachers' and students' perceptions of vocabulary teaching and learning.
2. Assess the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms.
3. Identify vocabulary teaching strategies employed by teachers.
4. Identify vocabulary learning strategies used by students.
5. Determine factors that hinder effective vocabulary teaching and learning practices.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to improved vocabulary instruction and learning practices in EFL classrooms. Specifically, the study may:

- Raise awareness among teachers and students about effective vocabulary teaching and learning strategies.
- Highlight the importance of vocabulary development in language learning.
- Encourage the use of appropriate instructional techniques for both receptive and productive vocabulary development.
- Promote learner autonomy in vocabulary acquisition.
- Provide insights for teachers, curriculum developers, textbook writers, and researchers seeking to enhance language teaching and learning.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study was limited to Grade 11 students and EFL teachers at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School. Due to time, resources, and COVID-19-related constraints, the study did not include other schools in the Gurage Zone.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The study involved a relatively small number of participants from a single school. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all secondary and preparatory schools in the Gurage Zone or other contexts. The results should therefore be interpreted within the specific setting of the study.

2.1 Literature Review

This part reviews relevant literature on vocabulary, its importance in language teaching and learning, vocabulary instruction practices, perceptions of vocabulary learning, language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategy taxonomy, characteristics of effective language teachers and learners, principles of vocabulary instruction, and challenges associated with vocabulary teaching and learning.

2.2 Definition of Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the stock of words known and used by an individual or within a language (Graves, cited in Taylor, 1990). It includes both receptive vocabulary (words recognized during listening and reading) and productive vocabulary (words used in speaking and writing). Vocabulary serves as the foundation for communication and plays a crucial role in language comprehension and expression (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998/99).

2.3 Importance of Vocabulary in Language Teaching and Learning

Vocabulary is a central component of language proficiency and communicative competence. Schmitt (2000) argues that lexical knowledge is fundamental to second language acquisition, while Nation (2001) emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use. Adequate vocabulary enables learners to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills effectively.

Research consistently shows that limited vocabulary hinders communication and comprehension, particularly in EFL contexts (Huckin, 1995). As Wilkins (1972) famously stated, “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” Consequently, vocabulary development has become a major focus of contemporary language instruction.

2.4 Teaching and Learning English Vocabulary

Vocabulary teaching is an essential aspect of language education because words form the basis of communication (Thornbury, 2002). However, many teachers lack confidence in selecting effective vocabulary instructional practices

(Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). The growing emphasis on vocabulary instruction emerged from three developments: dissatisfaction with grammar-focused instruction, the rise of communicative language teaching, and recognition of learners' limited vocabulary as a barrier to academic success.

Effective vocabulary teaching requires meaningful exposure, contextualized learning, and learner engagement. Teachers should employ appropriate instructional techniques that facilitate both vocabulary acquisition and retention.

2.5 Essential Components of Vocabulary Instruction

According to Graves (2006), effective vocabulary instruction consists of four key components:

1. Providing rich and varied language experiences;
2. Explicitly teaching individual words;
3. Teaching word-learning strategies; and
4. Developing word consciousness and interest in vocabulary.

Vocabulary can be learned both indirectly through reading and communication and directly through explicit instruction (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

2.6 Current Practices in Vocabulary Teaching

Contemporary vocabulary instruction emphasizes systematic and learner-centered approaches. Teachers focus on high-frequency and useful words, provide strategic instruction, and encourage learner autonomy. Vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing from context, dictionary use, semantic mapping, and contextualized language activities are widely recommended.

Current research discourages excessive reliance on rote memorization and isolated word lists. Instead, meaningful and contextualized vocabulary learning through reading, listening, speaking, and writing activities is considered more effective.

2.7 Perception and Vocabulary Teaching-Learning Practice

Perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to information received through their senses (Robbins, 2001; Leontief, 1981). In educational settings, perceptions influence attitudes, behaviors, and learning outcomes.

Studies indicate that teachers' and students' perceptions significantly affect vocabulary teaching and learning practices. Kebiel (2012) found that many EFL teachers and students lacked sufficient awareness of effective vocabulary instruction and often underestimated its importance. Positive perceptions toward vocabulary learning are therefore essential for successful vocabulary development.

2.8 Language Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are conscious actions and techniques used by learners to improve language acquisition. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) help learners discover, understand, store, and retrieve vocabulary effectively.

Schmitt (1997) proposed a widely accepted taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies consisting of:

- Determination strategies
- Social strategies
- Memory strategies
- Cognitive strategies
- Metacognitive strategies

These strategies can be grouped into discovery strategies, which help learners identify the meaning of unfamiliar words, and consolidation strategies, which facilitate retention and long-term use.

Discovery Strategies

Discovery strategies include:

- Guessing meaning from context;
- Using dictionaries and reference materials;
- Analyzing word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots; and
- Seeking assistance from teachers or peers.

Guessing from context and dictionary use are among the most frequently recommended vocabulary learning strategies.

Consolidation Strategies

Consolidation strategies assist learners in retaining newly acquired vocabulary. These include:

- Memory strategies such as imagery, semantic mapping, association, and mnemonic devices;
- Cognitive strategies such as repetition, note-taking, and vocabulary notebooks; and
- Metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring, self-testing, and spaced practice.

Research indicates that metacognitive strategies positively contribute to vocabulary growth and overall language proficiency.

2.9 Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Effective vocabulary teaching involves a variety of instructional techniques that promote meaningful learning and retention. Common strategies include:

- Using visual representations, pictures, gestures, and real objects;
- Teaching vocabulary in meaningful contexts;
- Teaching collocations;
- Employing word maps and semantic networks;
- Using concept sorts to categorize vocabulary;
- Applying the Frayer Model to deepen word understanding; and
- Encouraging learners to create possible sentences using target vocabulary.

These strategies help learners establish connections between words and their meanings while promoting active engagement.

2.10 Characteristics of Effective Language Teachers and Learners

Effective language teachers possess strong content knowledge, pedagogical competence, interpersonal skills, and positive personal qualities (Brown, 2004). They motivate learners, employ appropriate instructional strategies, and create supportive learning environments.

Similarly, successful language learners take responsibility for their learning, organize information effectively, seek opportunities to practice the language, tolerate ambiguity, use memory strategies, learn from errors, and apply contextual clues and intelligent guessing strategies (Rubin & Thompson, 1983).

2.11 Principles of Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

According to Wallace (1988), effective vocabulary instruction should be guided by several principles:

- Clear instructional objectives;
- Consideration of learners' needs and interests;
- Frequent exposure and repetition;
- Meaningful presentation of vocabulary;
- Appropriate quantity of words;
- Contextualized instruction; and
- Relevance to learners' communicative needs.

Furthermore, vocabulary learning requires knowledge of word meaning, form, usage, grammar, collocations, and word formation. Contextual clues and dictionary use can support learners in developing deeper word knowledge.

2.12 Challenges in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

Vocabulary teaching and learning present several challenges in EFL contexts. These include the large number of words learners must acquire, limited exposure to academic vocabulary, inadequate instructional strategies, limited reading habits, insufficient learning resources, and learners' varying vocabulary levels.

Additional challenges arise from the complexity of word knowledge, difficulties in applying vocabulary to communication, lack of authentic language use, and learners' limited opportunities to encounter new words outside the classroom. Addressing these challenges requires the use of effective vocabulary teaching and learning strategies that support vocabulary growth and communicative competence.

2.13 Summary of the Literature Review

The reviewed literature highlights the central role of vocabulary in language learning and communication. Effective vocabulary instruction requires systematic teaching, meaningful contexts, appropriate learning strategies, and positive perceptions from both teachers and learners. Research further indicates that vocabulary development is enhanced

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when learners employ a range of discovery and consolidation strategies and when teachers provide rich, contextualized, and learner-centered instruction. These theoretical and empirical insights provide the foundation for examining vocabulary teaching-learning practices among EFL teachers and students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) research design to investigate the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) vocabulary teaching and learning practices of Grade 11 teachers and students. This design facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the instructional techniques utilized in the classroom through the triangulation of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and direct classroom observations.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School, located in Wolkite Town, Gurage Zone, Ethiopia. The institution was selected due to its large student population, which enhanced study validity, and the researcher's institutional familiarity, which facilitated access to data.

The target population comprised Grade 11 EFL teachers and students. Purposive sampling was used to select all six Grade 11 English teachers to leverage their instructional experience. The student population totaled 900 individuals across 36 classrooms. A systematic sampling technique was used to select 10% of the population (students) from nine systematically selected sections (25% of the total sections), ensuring a representative sample size.

3.3 Data Gathering Instruments

Three primary instruments were deployed to collect data:

- **Classroom Observation:** Overt observations were conducted across six systematically chosen classrooms, with each class observed twice. The researcher used a structured 9-item checklist based on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always) alongside qualitative field notes to document real-time vocabulary instruction practices.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Parallel 9-item interview schedules were administered to the teachers and a subset of students to cross-examine questionnaire responses. Student interviews were conducted in Amharic to encourage clear communication and uninhibited expression.
- **Questionnaires:** Separate questionnaires featuring 21 closed-ended (5-point Likert scale) and 3 open-ended items were administered to both groups. The teacher questionnaire was adapted from Oxford and Crookall's (1990) vocabulary teaching paradigm to assess perceptions, delivery methods, and strategic practices. The student questionnaire was adapted from Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) framework to capture learner perceptions and strategic implementation.

3.4 Data Collection and Pilot Study

Administrative clearance was obtained from the school director and department head prior to data collection. The data collection sequence progressed from classroom observations to semi-structured interviews, concluding with questionnaire administration.

A pilot study was conducted at Upper Geraba Secondary School with three EFL teachers and 18 students (20% of the sample size) to evaluate instrument validity and reliability. Based on pilot feedback, the student questionnaire and interview guidelines were translated into Amharic to maximize response validity. Additionally, redundant questionnaire items were eliminated to optimize length and prevent respondent fatigue.

3.5 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Quantitative data derived from the closed-ended questionnaire items were processed via SPSS Version 20. Statistical measures, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated for descriptive analysis. Qualitative data from open-ended items, interviews, and observation field notes were analyzed textually using thematic analysis to supplement the quantitative findings.

Regarding ethical principles, formal permission letters were acquired from local educational authorities. Participants gave explicit verbal consent before involvement, and the academic nature of the study was fully disclosed. To protect participant anonymity, all data were anonymized, treated with strict confidentiality, and presented collectively rather than individually.

4 Results and Discussion

This section presents the data analysis concerning the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) vocabulary teaching and learning practices of Grade 11 teachers and students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School. The results are organized into four core thematic areas:

1. Teacher and student perceptions of foundational vocabulary instruction.
2. The implementation types and perceived effectiveness of classroom vocabulary practices.
3. Specific lexical learning strategies employed by participants.
4. Institutional and situational factors that hinder effective vocabulary development.

Data gathered via direct classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and self-report questionnaires were compiled and analyzed using descriptive statistics—specifically frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations —alongside descriptive thematic analysis.

4.1. Analysis of Direct Classroom Observations

To assess authentic classroom dynamics, the researcher conducted structured, overt observations across six systematically selected Grade 11 classrooms over two consecutive weeks. Each section was observed twice during explicit vocabulary units. The empirical findings from these sessions are detailed below.

Observational Data Analysis

No	Items	Scale	Freq.	mean	St. dev
1	EFL teachers tried to use definitions to convey the meaning of words during vocabulary lessons.	Always	1	4.00	0.632
		Usually	4		
		Sometimes	1		
		Total	6		
2	The teachers tell the students words that go together with the words that they are teaching.	Always	1	3.50	0.837
		Usually	1		
		Sometimes	4		
		Total	6		
3	When teachers present vocabulary to students, they present words that have the same meaning as vocabulary they use for teaching and encourage the students to	Always	4	4.50	0.837
		Usually	1		
		Sometimes	1		

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	comprehend the same meaning.	Total	6		
4	The teacher teaches the meaning of a word with related words with opposite (antonyms) meaning and they encourage the students to comprehend it.	Always	1	4.00	0.632
		Usually	4		
		Sometimes	1		
		Total	6		
5	During vocabulary lessons, EFL teachers and students' multi- relationship (word association) words forming a vocabulary network.	Rarely	1	1.17	0.408
		Never	5		
		Total	6		
6	Vocabulary lessons are done through reading, talking with each other and group working.	Usually	4	3.67	0.516
		Sometimes	2		
		Total	6		
7	During vocabulary lessons, teachers and students have to use different language features like meaning, pronunciation, spelling, words, grammar and usage.	Sometimes	1	2.00	0.632
		Rarely	4		
		Never	1		
		Total	6		
8	In teaching vocabulary, the teachers tell the students' equivalent translation of the word in Amharic.	Usually	2	3.00	1.095
		Sometimes	3		
		Never	1		
		Total	6		
9	EFL teachers use different vocabulary teaching strategies to explain the meaning of words, and they encourage students to comprehend the meaning of words.	Usually	2	3.33	0.516
		Sometimes	4		
		Total	6		

The observational data indicates a pronounced instructional reliance on traditional semantic presentation techniques. Step-by-step vocabulary presentation predominantly features explicit definitions (Item 1,) and synonym exploration (Item 3,). Instructors regularly asked students to verify target definitions using dictionaries after initial contextual guessing.

Synonymy and antonymy (Item 4,) were maintained through board work; teachers consistently drew three-column tables mapping target words to their corresponding equivalents and opposites to aid memory retention.

Conversely, multi-relational structural strategies, such as word association networks (Item 5,), were largely neglected. This omission stems partly from textbook design limitations, which rarely mandate vocabulary mapping, leaving such practices reliant on individual teacher creativity.

Furthermore, formal language integration was highly imbalanced (Item 7). Instruction focused almost exclusively on conceptual meaning, leaving core lexical sub-components—such as phonological pronunciation patterns, orthographic spelling structures, morphological changes, and syntactical collocations—largely unaddressed.

While teachers frequently integrated reading texts as primary hosts for vocabulary exposure (Item 6.), observations revealed that pedagogical implementation favored basic cognitive rote strategies (such as copying lists into notebooks) and simple social strategies (such as asking peers for definitions) over complex metacognitive planning.

Several situational factors hindered learning progress, including poor handwriting clarity on the blackboard, overly intricate or ambiguous sentence syntax within text passages, and rare technical jargon that disrupted student reading comprehension.

4.2. Analysis of Interview Data

To validate and enrich the observational metrics, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all six EFL instructors and eighteen systematically sampled students.

4.2.1. Vocabulary Teaching and Learning Practices

Although both sample groups explicitly affirmed the critical importance of regular vocabulary acquisition for achieving broader English proficiency during interviews, their self-reported habits showed clear inconsistencies when compared to actual classroom data.

When asked about strategy diversification (Item 6), participants praised the theoretical value of varied instruction, yet teachers acknowledged relying heavily on a narrow circuit of direct definitions, contextual guessing, synonyms, and occasional native-tongue (L1) translations. Instructors justified this narrow scope by citing severe institutional shortages of supplementary educational materials, training manuals, and specialized instructional modules.

Concerning strategic prioritization, Teacher's "A" and "C"—alongside the majority of the student interviewees—admitted favoring basic cognitive strategies (including continuous mechanical verbal and written repetition). They noted that these approaches were simple to execute within restricted class periods and provided familiar reference points within student notebooks.

In contrast, Teachers "B," "D," "F," and "E" advocated for discovery-driven contextual strategies. Teacher "B" explained:

"I encourage my students to guess the meanings of new words in the text from contextual clues in the passage and the meanings of unfamiliar words in the passage using their prior knowledge of word-building or word-formation processes."

Teachers "D" and "F" emphasized cooperative strategy modeling, while Teacher "E" utilized targeted structural reading items to help students isolate keywords before translating them in context. This reinforces established pedagogical literature (Nunan, 1991), which states that introducing vocabulary within meaningful communicative contexts is vital for maintaining learner engagement and generating natural target outputs.

4.2.2. Inhibiting Structural Factors

When interviewed about the primary obstacles preventing the systematic implementation of diverse vocabulary strategies, participants identified several major challenges:

- Pervasive negative learner attitudes and general instructional neglect toward systematic vocabulary development.
- Inadequate access to modern teaching-learning materials and resource texts.
- Variable levels of communicative English proficiency among instructional staff.
- Frequent student behavioral distractions and disengagement during explicit vocabulary blocks.

4.3. Analysis of Teacher Questionnaires

To comprehensively evaluate teacher perspectives, the first ten items of the diagnostic questionnaire were distributed to the six purposively selected EFL instructors. The unified dataset is presented in Table 4.3.1.

Table 4.3.1: Teacher Questionnaire Response Matrix

No	Survey Item Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	N (1)	Mean	St. Dev
1	Vocabulary practice is the most vital aspect to focus on compared to grammar, writing, and speaking.	3	1	2	0	0	4.17	0.983
2	Vocabulary teaching is always given prime, prioritized consideration during active classroom sessions.	2	2	2	0	0	4.00	0.894
3	Semantic meaning is the primary component concentrated on during vocabulary presentation.	1	4	1	0	0	4.00	0.632
4	Instruction consistently balances word meaning, pronunciation, spelling, parts of speech, and usage.	2	3	1	0	0	4.17	0.753
5	Explicit vocabulary teaching and learning constitutes a highly difficult aspect of foreign language instruction.	2	2	1	1	0	3.83	1.169
6	A deficit in vocabulary knowledge is the primary factor limiting students' communicative oral production.	1	2	2	1	0	3.50	1.049
7	Explicit formal definitions are actively utilized to clarify word meanings during lesson delivery.	2	2	2	0	0	4.00	0.894
8	Structural collocations and co-occurring word phrases are consistently highlighted for students.	1	3	1	1	0	3.67	1.033
9	Target lexical items are taught alongside groups of contextually matching synonyms.	4	1	1	0	0	4.50	0.837
10	Target words are taught by contrasting them with lexical antonyms.	2	2	2	0	0	4.00	0.894

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, N = Neutral.

Questionnaire Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis in Table 4.3.1 highlights clear conflicts between theoretical teacher beliefs and observed classroom practices. Items 1 and 2 show that most instructors theoretically view vocabulary as a core pillar of language acquisition that warrants high instructional priority. However, the minority who disagreed align with actual

observation data, which showed that vocabulary was frequently overshadowed by other language skills in daily practice.

Item 3 reinforces the finding that instructors focus heavily on conceptual meaning. Interestingly, on Item 4, most teachers claimed to maintain a balanced focus across pronunciation, spelling, and syntax (). This self-reported view directly contradicts the observation data, which showed a clear neglect of linguistic features beyond basic semantic meaning.

The data also points to underlying instructional challenges. On Item 5, the majority of teachers () reported facing significant difficulties during vocabulary delivery. Furthermore, the mixed responses to Item 6 indicate that half of the instructional staff do not fully recognize how heavily vocabulary deficits limit student oral production.

Finally, Items 7 through 10 evaluate specific instructional methods. Teachers reported a high reliance on synonyms (Item 9,), explicit definitions (Item 7,), and antonyms (Item 10,). While these metrics suggest a robust use of varied techniques, the observation data confirms that these methods are often applied mechanically, with an over-reliance on L1 translations (Amharic) to resolve classroom confusion rather than fostering deeper contextual understanding in English.

4.3.2. Student Questionnaire Analysis

To evaluate learner perspectives, a diagnostic questionnaire consisting of 21 items was administered to a sample of 90 systematically selected Grade 11 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The responses are compiled into a comprehensive matrix in Table 4.3.2.1, categorized into three operational domains:

- Learners' baseline perceptions of theoretical vocabulary importance (Items 1–6).
- Perceived frequency and efficiency of teacher-led vocabulary instruction (Items 7–10).
- Independent student utilization of specialized Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) (Items 11–21).

Table 4.3.2.1: Student Questionnaire Response Matrix

Learners' Baseline Perceptions of Theoretical Vocabulary Importance

No.	Survey Item Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	N (1)	Mean	St. Dev
1	Vocabulary is the most important language aspect compared to grammar, writing, and speaking.	44 (48.9%)	27 (30.0%)	13 (14.4%)	4 (4.4%)	2 (2.2%)	4.19	0.993
2	Vocabulary learning should be given prime, prioritized consideration within English classes.	48 (53.3%)	36 (40.0%)	3 (3.3%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	4.42	0.764
3	Semantic meaning is the primary component that the teacher concentrates on during lessons.	39 (43.3%)	39 (43.3%)	5 (5.6%)	4 (4.4%)	3 (3.3%)	4.19	0.970
4	During vocabulary study, I actively balance word meaning, pronunciation, spelling, and usage.	39 (43.3%)	42 (46.7%)	5 (5.6%)	4 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)	4.29	0.768
5	Explicit lexical acquisition is the most difficult aspect of foreign language learning.	30 (33.3%)	42 (46.7%)	14 (15.6%)	2 (2.2%)	2 (2.2%)	4.07	0.884
6	A deficit in vocabulary knowledge is my main barrier to oral communication inside and outside class.	45 (50.0%)	27 (30.0%)	15 (16.7%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	4.26	0.894

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, N = Neutral. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

The quantitative findings indicate that Grade 11 learners strongly value vocabulary within foreign language acquisition. A substantial majority of respondents (78.9%, Item 1,) view lexical development as more critical than comparative sub-skills like grammar or writing. This aligns with Cahyono and Widiati's (2008) assertion that structured instruction expands lexical competence and enhances real-world communicative utility.

Furthermore, 93.3% of the cohort (Item 2) believe vocabulary instruction deserves high priority in class. A strong consensus emerged regarding instructional focus; 86.6% of students (Item 3,) report that instructors prioritize semantic meaning over structural attributes.

While 90% of students state that they try to balance pronunciation, orthography, and usage during study (Item 4,), actual classroom observations revealed that structural features are rarely practiced. Additionally, 80% of respondents classify vocabulary as a highly challenging area of study (Item 5), while 80% explicitly identify lexical gaps as the primary cause of poor oral production inside and outside the classroom (Item 6,).

Perceived Frequency and Efficiency of Teacher-Led Vocabulary Instruction (Items 7–10)

No.	Survey Item Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	N (1)	Mean	St. Dev
7	The teacher effectively uses explicit semantic definitions to clarify unknown target terms.	12 (13.3%)	48 (53.3%)	27 (30.0%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	3.76	0.754
8	The teacher explicitly introduces collocations and phrases that structurally go together.	27 (30.0%)	21 (23.3%)	30 (33.3%)	4 (4.4%)	8 (8.9%)	3.61	1.215
9	The teacher presents matching synonym clusters for target words during lesson delivery.	27 (30.0%)	33 (36.7%)	18 (20.7%)	6 (6.7%)	6 (6.7%)	3.77	1.152
10	The teacher contrasts new target words with corresponding lexical antonyms.	36 (40.0%)	33 (36.7%)	18 (20.0%)	3 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)	4.13	

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, N = Neutral. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

Learners report that teachers rely heavily on traditional, direct semantic presentation methods. Over two-thirds of the students (66.6%, Item 7,) state that instructors use explicit definitions as their primary tool to clarify unknown terms, a trend supported by observation data.

Views on multi-word chunks and structural collocations were mixed; 37.7% of respondents (Item 8,) reported that these patterns were omitted during lessons. Conversely, cross-lexical presentation strategies were frequently reported; 66.7% of the sample group noted regular access to synonym mappings (Item 9,), and 76.7% confirmed the consistent use of antonym contrasts (Item 10,).

Observations showed that this cross-lexical mapping was maintained through three-column board tables. This method aligns with established pedagogical theory, which suggests that contrasting word meanings helps anchor semantic structures in learner memory and speeds up acquisition.

Independent Student Utilization of Specialized Vocabulary Learning Strategies

No.	Survey Item Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	N (1)	Mean	St. Dev
11	I build semantic word association networks to link new words to related target groups.	18 (20.0%)	15 (16.7%)	18 (20.0%)	15 (16.7%)	24 (26.7%)	2.87	1.486
12	I participate in varied contextual tasks (reading texts, dialogue, group work) to learn terms.	24 (26.7%)	18 (20.0%)	30 (33.3%)	9 (10.0%)	9 (10.0%)	3.43	1.264

No.	Survey Item Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	D (3)	SD (2)	N (1)	Mean	St. Dev
13	I actively verify guessed word meanings using a bilingual or monolingual dictionary.	42 (46.7%)	15 (16.7%)	12 (13.3%)	12 (13.3%)	9 (10.0%)	3.77	1.415
14	I rely on direct L1 (Amharic) translations to convey meanings.	18 (20.0%)	18 (20.0%)	36 (40.0%)	11 (12.2%)	7 (7.8%)	3.32	1.160
15	I require peer help to produce original sentences using newly taught vocabulary words.	15 (16.7%)	21 (23.3%)	24 (26.7%)	27 (30.0%)	3 (3.3%)	3.20	1.144
16	I use structural contextual clues within text passages to infer the meanings of unfamiliar terms.	36 (40.0%)	27 (30.0%)	21 (23.3%)	3 (3.3%)	3 (3.3%)	4.00	1.039
17	I prefer using an independent dictionary as my main reference tool for structural comprehension.	42 (46.7%)	27 (30.0%)	9 (10.0%)	7 (7.8%)	5 (5.6%)	4.04	1.180
18	I ask teachers or classmates for clarification when encountering unknown words.	33 (36.7%)	30 (33.3%)	15 (16.7%)	9 (10.0%)	3 (3.3%)	3.90	1.112
19	I combine multiple strategies (guessing, dictionaries, social queries) to decode words.	21 (23.3%)	27 (30.0%)	42 (46.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.77	0.808
20	I use written and verbal repetition mechanical strategies to store target words in long-term memory.	12 (13.3%)	33 (36.7%)	42 (46.7%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	3.59	0.792
21	I extract, list, and maintain written note records of new lexical terms within a notebook.	42 (46.7%)	27 (30.0%)	15 (16.7%)	4 (4.4%)	2 (2.2%)	4.14	1.001

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, N = Neutral. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

The data shows a clear divide between the use of simple discovery strategies and more complex structural frameworks. Relational vocabulary mapping, such as word association networks (Item 11), was largely neglected, with 36.7% of students actively disagreeing with its use and 26.7% remaining neutral due to an apparent unfamiliarity with the strategy.

Contextual task engagement was also limited; 43.3% of students (Item 12,) reported a lack of diverse reading, speaking, or group-work activities. However, independent discovery methods were popular; 63.4% of students regularly verified contextual guesses using dictionaries (Item 13,).

While 52.2% of the survey responses indicated that teachers avoided direct L1 (Amharic) translations (Item 14), classroom observations showed that instructors frequently used native-tongue translations to resolve student confusion.

Active contextual production was low; 56.7% of students (Item 15,) reported that they were rarely asked to create original sentences to demonstrate word mastery. This indicates an instructional emphasis on passive reception rather than active language output.

Independent learner habits favor direct discovery and social interaction. Seventy percent of the sample group (Item 16,) use contextual clues within reading passages to infer word meaning, a practice supported by Nation (2001), who notes that contextual guessing is a vital source of incidental vocabulary growth.

Dictionary usage remains a preferred strategy for 76.7% of students (Item 17,). Additionally, 70% of respondents rely on social strategies (Oxford, 1990), such as asking peers or teachers for direct assistance (Item 18,).

Students rarely combine these approaches; 46.7% of the cohort (Item 19) reported that they do not use multiple strategies together when decoding new terms. Mechanical repetition strategies (Item 20,) were also unpopular, with 48.9% rejecting their use. Instead, students strongly preferred basic cognitive study aids; 76.7% of respondents (Item 21,) rely on extracting target words and keeping written lists in their notebooks as their main method for vocabulary consolidation (Schmitt, 1997).

4.3.1.4 Factors that hinder the practice of vocabulary learning strategies in EFL classes

1. Regarding problems related to learning materials

According to the data collected from the respondents (students), the following learning material-related problems were found to have shown down the practice of vocabulary learning strategies in EFL class. Most of the selected respondents (students) were reported as almost the same idea. These are:

- “The shortages of textbooks and dictionary.”
- “The textbook is not prepared according to the level of learner understanding and knowledge. Some words are challenging teachers because we cannot find their meaning even in the dictionary.”
- “The learning material is not designed in a way to learn. In addition to this, the use of

electronics like plasma would have been better understood, not only was there a shortage but the school administrator did not seem to try to solve the problem.”

2. Regarding problems related to school

The respondents reported that the following problems related to the school were found to have held back the practice of vocabulary learning strategies during vocabulary lessons.

- “Even if, learning vocabulary is a significant thing in education to develop not only for us but it is vital for our teachers’ educational knowledge but, most students, some EFL teachers, and the school (concern) body does not give more attention to the issue.”
- “The shortage of teachers with sufficient knowledge and experience in English language teaching.”
- “During vocabulary lessons, some teachers did not encourage and motivated students to understand and remember the vocabulary.”
- “Most teachers simply teach us to live, not to acquired knowledge. As a result, it is not possible to produce qualified students. Moreover, our lack of knowledge of vocabulary in this school has harmed our English grades (result).”

3. Suggest for the practical promotion of vocabulary learning strategies at high school level to enhance students’ vocabulary knowledge

The student respondents suggested that the following practical promotion of vocabulary learning strategies at their school enhance students’ vocabulary knowledge:

- “Students should be given more attention for the vocabulary.”

- “Vocabulary practice is the key in the high school level because we are at high school level means we are to join the higher institution. So, we should be perfect or we should enrich ourselves with vocabulary to be successful on our achievement.”
- “The text has to be well organized considering the learners level of understandings and academic background.”
- “The concerned body especially EFL teachers should be encouraged and motive to learners.”

In general, the suggestions for the practical promotion of vocabulary learning strategies at the high school level to enhance students’ vocabulary knowledge, in terms of materials, most of the respondents suggested that concerned body should be facilitated sufficient learning materials like a textbook, plasma, and in terms of teachers, the concerned body must provide other teachers with sufficient knowledge and experience in English language teaching. It is also a good idea to identify and train teachers who lack knowledge.

5 Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study investigated English as a Foreign Language (EFL) vocabulary teaching and learning practices of Grade 11 teachers and students at Yaberus Secondary and Preparatory School. Five core research questions were formulated to examine participant perceptions, instructional efficiency, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), and pedagogical barriers. Data were collected from a purposive sample of six English language teachers and a systematic sample of 90 students using a triangulated mixed-methods approach comprising classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and diagnostic questionnaires. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were evaluated through thematic description.

The empirical findings revealed a critical misalignment between teacher and student perceptions of vocabulary instruction:

- **Teacher Perceptions:** Instructors demonstrated a lower appreciation for systematic vocabulary development, frequently prioritizing other macro language skills. They favored implicit or incidental acquisition models over explicit, intentional pedagogical interventions.
- **Student Perceptions:** Conversely, students viewed comprehensive vocabulary mastery as the foundation of foreign language proficiency. They expressed a strong preference for explicit, systematic vocabulary instruction over incidental approaches, noting that a lack of lexical knowledge was their primary barrier to oral communication.

Discrepancies were also observed between theoretical beliefs and actual classroom implementation. Although teachers theoretically endorsed metacognitive strategies (such as independent planning, recording, and self-evaluation), actual observations revealed a heavy reliance on basic cognitive strategies (rote notetaking and copying lists into notebooks), simple discovery mechanics (contextual guessing during reading tasks), and basic social strategies (asking peers or teachers for direct definitions).

Furthermore, while students emphasized that vocabulary lessons should integrate semantic meaning with phonology, orthography, collocation, and grammatical usage, classroom execution relied almost exclusively on passive semantic features. Instructors regularly used reading texts to prompt contextual guessing, definitions, synonyms, and antonyms, but higher-order structural strategies—such as word association networks, morphological analysis, and sentence-building exercises—were absent.

Regarding learner motivation, students reported high levels of internal drive, whereas teachers characterized student interest as low and their own instructional efficiency as average. Key institutional barriers hindering effective instruction included a lack of explicit vocabulary teaching materials, low English communicative proficiency among some staff members, restrictive curriculum design, and poorly structured or visually unclear reading texts that compromised student confidence and attitudes.

5.2. Conclusions

Based on the empirical findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. **Perceptual Divergence:** A major pedagogical mismatch exists between teachers and students regarding the value and delivery of vocabulary instruction. Teachers treat vocabulary development as a secondary skill best served through incidental exposure, whereas students demand explicit, systematic instruction. This division diminishes learner motivation and limits vocabulary achievement.
2. **Methodological Imbalance:** Instructional strategies at the school are largely ineffective due to a narrow focus on passive semantic meaning (definitions, synonyms, and antonyms). Vital memory-retention and contextual-production strategies—such as word association networks, pronunciation practice, orthographic analysis, collocation mapping, and sentence-building tasks—are practically non-existent, leaving students unable to use target words in real-world communication.
3. **Strategic Over-simplification:** Instruction heavily favors basic cognitive note-taking and simple contextual guessing. While contextual deduction is valuable for incidental growth (Nation, 2001), introducing new terms within rich communicative contexts before letting learners apply them independently (Nunan, 1991) remains unfulfilled due to a lack of active production tasks.
4. **Structural and Institutional Barriers:** Vocabulary development is severely restricted by systemic challenges, including inadequate instructional resources, variable teacher language proficiency, curriculum constraints, and poorly designed text materials. Resolving these issues requires systematic, targeted intervention from institutional stakeholders and government bodies.

5.3. Recommendations

To optimize vocabulary pedagogy and align instructional practices with international standards, the following recommendations are offered:

1. **Elevate Instructional Priority:** EFL instructors must recognize vocabulary as a core pillar of language acquisition and integrate explicit lexical units into daily lesson plans rather than treating them as secondary activities.

2. **Integrate Explicit and Implicit Approaches:** Teachers should adopt a balanced pedagogical framework that combines implicit contextual exposure with explicit strategic instruction. Intentional activities, such as building word association networks, mapping collocations, analyzing word parts, and composing sentences, should be explicitly scheduled.
3. **Expand the Components of Word Knowledge:** Vocabulary lessons must look beyond simple dictionary definitions. Instructions should systematically cover semantic meaning, orthographic spelling, phonological pronunciation, syntactic collocations, and grammatical usage patterns.
4. **Foster Learner Autonomy:** Instructors should train students to use varied vocabulary learning strategies independently. Learners should be encouraged to combine discovery methods (contextual guessing and dictionary research) with cognitive strategies (structured vocabulary notebooks) and social cooperation to accelerate word retention.
5. **Enhance Resource Provision:** School administrators and regional educational stakeholders must supply modern, specialized instructional resources, vocabulary training modules, and updated text materials to support diverse teaching practices.
6. **Provide Targeted Professional Development:** Institutional leaders should organize continuous on-the-job training, pedagogical workshops, and language proficiency opportunities to improve teachers' capacity to deliver modern vocabulary instruction.
7. **Optimize Curriculum and Institutional Support:** Educational authorities should revise the English curriculum to allocate dedicated time and resources for vocabulary development, ensuring that teachers, students, and materials are aligned on its value for communication.

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