

# An Assessment of Iraqi EFL College Students' Achievement in Vocabulary

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## Abstract

One of the most important aspects of studying English as a foreign language is vocabulary, mainly at a low level of communicating meanings. Though vocabulary is of high importance, EFL learners face great difficulties in acquiring it. One of the significant issues is that EFL students have no clue on how to learn vocabulary effectively. The other issue is that instructional methods can be insufficient to such a degree that they can be due to their uselessness in encouraging learners to practice language, as they should be. Pedagogically, the study is expected to be useful for syllabus designers as it concentrates on a vital aspect of language, i.e. vocabulary. This study may also be of some significance to language examiners who assess learners' vocabulary mastery in an appropriate context. Since context-free and context-dependent vocabulary is essential in EFL, the current research aims to evaluate the EFL College students' ability to use context-free and context-dependent vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Assessment, TEFL, Context-Free and Context-Dependent, Vocabulary.

## INTRODUCTION

Learners of a foreign language are introduced to the language in written or spoken form. Language exposure or feedback could be understandable or nonsensical to the learners. As language is also an essential aspect of the learning experience, learners at all stages will face instances in which they can grasp only a portion of the written text or a sentence when they do not know all of the words. Unfamiliar words do not impede general comprehension of the language, but if too many essential words are unknown, comprehension will be negatively affected. Improving students' strategies for dealing with unfamiliar words has always been one of the most challenging English reading courses. The traditional solution to this problem is to make learners read-only passages in which every word is understood or to encourage them to check a

bilingual dictionary or the instructor for the meaning of any new words in the text. The disadvantages of this strategy are self-evident. Excessive dictionary work will suppress reading excitement and also compete with understanding when readers become more involved with individual words and less mindful of the sense that brings them meaning. It also leads to a sluggish and inefficient reading (Ying, 2001: 5). Assigning homework designed by teacher to increase student-parent interactions, holding workshops for families, and communicating with parents about their children's education and their strength and weaknesses in the learning process and reports them back to their parents for more investigation were the specific practices that could forecast the level of parental engagements (Abbood, H.M., & Dakhil, T.A. 2021). The most common approach to figure

out the meaning of new words is to predict vocabulary from context. Honeyfield (1977:18) highlight the significance of meaning by claiming that even with a functional vocabulary of the 3,000 most commonly occurring words in English, students will be unfamiliar with nearly 20% of the words they might find in a complex text.

Learning words in context rather than isolation is a crucial strategy of learning vocabulary (Kruse 1979; Nation 1980; Grains and Redman 1986; Oxford and Crookall 1988:18). A term can have various meanings depending on the context; therefore, merely understanding the meanings of a word without explanations of when and where the word appears would not aid learners properly comprehend its meaning. Learning a list of terms without meaning is simply a memorization practice, making it impossible for students to employ the newly learned words in spoken and written form. Looking into the meaning in which the word occurs happens to be the most effective method of acquiring vocabulary.

The term 'vocabulary' refers to the "stock of words which are at the disposal of a speaker or writer. It may be used to refer to all words in the whole language, or the words and phrases manipulated in a particular variety of languages such as dialect, → register, or →terminology" (Hartmann and Stock, 1972:250). Much emphasis was guided on elements of instruction like grammar, reading, and speaking, while learning and teaching vocabulary received limited focus in foreign language studies. Lately, there has been a resurgence of interest in the essence of vocabulary and its importance in learning and teaching among scholars. Decarric (2001:285) and Coady (1997) have affirmed the latter (cited in Wa-Mbaleka 2002:1-2 ), who consider vocabulary the 'centre' and the heart to language acquisition and communicative competence. Therefore, much research exploring vocabulary issues have been conducted.

Though vocabulary constitutes an essential part of foreign language skills, learning vocabulary is not easy. In fact, it is a highly complex process since it requires accurate mastery of

form, meaning and usage. It also requires frequent use of vocabulary in different types of contexts. Word learning and teaching are crucial in the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The development in vocabulary requires constant practice on the part of learners and continuous assessment on the part of the teachers.

#### I. Vocabulary Classification and Types

A distinction between two types of vocabulary is sometimes made: The previous one refers to vocabulary items that people often use, while the latter refers to vocabulary that they recognize but do not employ in their speech. In this regard, Al- Hamash and Younis (1985:67 ) maintains that:

to make a word part of active vocabulary, much practice is

needed. A word usually has to be introduced into the passive

Vocabulary before becoming part of the active. One sign of

progress in learning the vocabulary of a language is the

transference of words from the passive vocabulary into the

active.

Expressed in another way, learning vocabulary involves two levels: recognition (passive level ) and production(operational level ). When someone comes across a word, he may recognize it by looking it up in a dictionary and then knowing its meaning or sometimes having the meaning by the teacher. Learning Vocabulary cannot be achieved fully without using this word in a context ( speech or writing ).

A word first exists in the passive vocabulary level; then, it would be integrated into the active one when used in ordinary speech or writing.

Ignoring vocabulary at the first stage of learning may be owing to the specialists' belief that :

Language is not a collection of words but a system, i.e. set of

patterns. Words are comparatively unimportant in the early

stages of learning so that teachers and textbook writers are

faced with the task of minimizing their use until the learners

have mastered the sound system and the grammatical system

of the language or the notions or language functions. (Ibid: 71)

Thus, the teacher's task in this respect is to bring words from the unknown to the recognition level and give learners a chance to practise those new words helping them to transfer these words from the recognition (passive level) to the production (active level).

Al-Mutawa and Kailani (1989:50) have adopted a somewhat different five-dimensional classification of vocabulary that the F.L. teacher has to distinguish. They add that the relationships overlap among them. These groups are:

#### a - E.S.P.

As E.S.P. is synonymous with specific interests (professional or technical), its terminology assists students in focusing on using content words. This sort of language is best acquired following the work or career at hand. Students are expected to study the terms and grasp the meanings behind the terms away from a real-life setting in the classroom.

#### b - Productive (or Active) Vocabulary

Active vocabulary is used in daily contexts to conduct speech acts; thus, active words must be addressed, emphasizing pronunciation, accurate structure, appropriate collocation, and meaning. Henceforth, students could quickly remember them.

#### c- Passive (or Receptive Vocabulary)

Recognition and comprehension require passive vocabulary (not for production in speaking and writing). Students are not expected to employ it in daily conversation but rather understand it as it appears in context. Here, the teacher is required to focus on the most valuable and common items for the learners to help improve their recognition and understanding.

Active and passive vocabulary is often called 'content words' since they carry lexical meaning in themselves.

#### d- Content Vocabulary

Content words are words that are linked to one's daily routines and experiences. They have lexical (or dictionary) meanings, and their meanings can be predicated from or /out of context. They are unlimited in number in the sense that they accept any new classes as they are often referred to as 'open-ended' words.

#### e- Structure or Function Words

The primary function of this group of words that constitutes part of the grammatical system is grammatical. These types of words are limited in number, which belongs to a 'closed class' that accepts no new member i.e., no new words are added. The meaning is primarily provided from their function in a sentence. This class covers conjunctions, prepositions, articles, etc.

According to Al-Hamash and Younis (1985:108-9), three different types of vocabulary are distinguished: speaking vocabulary, writing vocabulary, and reading vocabulary.

#### a- Speaking Vocabulary:

This group of vocabulary constitutes the smallest one, and it also applies to vocabulary that one knows and utilizes naturally in one's language.

#### b- Writing Vocabulary:

This category is broader than the speaking vocabulary group, and it includes all elements from the speaking vocabulary and

items from the writing vocabulary that are considered more formal.

#### c- Reading Vocabulary :

This group contains both the former two and other terms whose meanings are based mainly on their contexts and whose meanings are also not entirely accurate or plain to the reader to be used confidently in speaking or writing.

The fourth type of vocabulary is proposed by Davis (2002:1). This kind of vocabulary is referred to as d-Listening vocabulary. This group covers those words that one understands, more or less, when he hears them.

## II. Vocabulary in Language Teaching Approaches

Maybe the communicative method has boosted vocabulary instruction because it is highly concerned with what people do with language than what they know about it. As the focus is on understanding syntactic principles and variations, the instruction of vocabulary has suffered tremendously in the Grammar-Translation method. This approach places a tremendous burden on learners, i.e. learners are required to learn by heart grammatical rules and tables of conjugation and memorize a number of vocabulary items and translate them with the help of a dictionary.

This approach aims to provide the learners with a wide literary vocabulary that may not be important to them, taken from great authors' texts. Most vocabulary is learned in this approach in the form of lists of individual words. Therefore, vocabulary teaching becomes deficient since the choice of words is not made on a scientific basis. Words are used in sentences for the sake of clarifying grammatical rules and are presented out of contexts. The focus here is on explaining the words and the structures of the foreign language but not on the meaning and use of words as presented in contexts ( Mutawa and Kailani 1989:15).

Since the new content is introduced verbally via the Direct Method, words and phrases are thought to be better learned by direct

associations with gestures, conversations, items, scenarios, or even images. Educators are encouraged to use images in the classrooms to assist students to appreciate the meaning of words by making a clear connection between the object or expression and the foreign symbol. Native language is not permitted in class, i.e. teachers are not allowed to translate words and expressions in their mother tongues ( Freeman 2003:18-22).

Other types of devices are utilized for teaching vocabulary. They include the use of (i) synonyms and antonyms, (ii) gestures and facial expressions, (iii) explicatory contexts (Explicatory context means that a word can be used in more than one sentence to express its meaning) (iv) objects involved. Nevertheless, this approach shows one defect, presenting vocabulary based on demonstrability in class rather than frequency. Many essential and necessary words for learners might be neglected in this respect (Al-Hamash and Younis 1985:70-2).

The Structural Approach has not also given vocabulary due consideration since the acquisition of grammatical rules, and exceptions of the language are emphasized rather than other aspects of language (among them vocabulary ). Structuralists believe that if a learner can understand the basic patterns, he can construct a great deal of vocabulary later. In other words, the language structure is seen as more essential than the acquisition of vocabulary. Thus, specialists, particularly, textbook designers have shown undue (or perhaps minor ) attention to the aspect of Vocabulary (See Al-Hamash and Younis 1985:74).

The aspect of vocabulary has flourished by developing a new approach to F.L.T. known as the Communicative Approach. This flourishing is due to the fact that this method prioritizes the semantic content of language development, i.e. learners master the grammatical structure by meaning. Moreover, grammatical forms are taught as a means of carrying out meaningful communication. The focus here is on vocabulary correctness rather than complete grammatical accuracy. Words

are treated as entities whose meaning becomes more evident when used in suitable linguistic structures and appropriate social contexts (Thirumalai and Mallikarjuna, 2002: 13).

It is vital to recognize that the teaching and learning of vocabulary must be emphasized as vocabulary is an essential key element in learning languages and the development of an appropriate vocabulary is crucial for efficient second language use since a student would not be qualified to employ the structures and functions needed for the production of good communications without a wide range of vocabulary. Moreover, having a sufficient English vocabulary would allow students to communicate successfully in the language, and any ineffective vocabulary teaching and learning of the target language may lead to undesirable results in the acquisition of an F.L.

### III. Types of Meanings

Generally, four types of meaning can be distinguished: lexical, grammatical, connotational, and idiomatic (Muttawa and Kailani 1989:55).

#### a- Lexical Meaning

This form refers to a speaker's perception of linguistic components as representations of real things and instances. For example, the words girl hit, the ball has lexical (or denotation) meanings found in dictionaries, i.e. their meanings are the things they refer to. In teaching lexical items, teachers are required to develop their learners' awareness of the meaning of the items associated with it.

#### b- Grammatical Meaning

Grammatical meaning refers to the relationships existing between linguistic elements such as words within a sentence. This type of meaning is associated with three sub-types of meaning (1) the meaning of grammatical items ; (2) grammatical 'functions' meanings like 'subject of ', 'object of ', or 'modifier of ', and (3) the 'meaning' synonymous with phrases such as 'declarative,' 'interrogative,' or 'imperative' in the grouping of various sentence forms ( Lyons 1968:435). It is crucial to emphasize that the absolute linguistic

sense of any statement comprises the lexical meanings of individual words and structural meanings (grammatical ) meaning (ibid).To make the point clearer, consider the following sentence

- The man killed the dog.

The total sentence's meaning is decided by the meanings of all words constituting this sentence plus the syntactic relationships between the sentence units.

#### c- Connotational Meaning

Connotation has to do with the communicative value of a word,i.e. with socially acquired meanings. This type of meaning is subjective since it is associated with personal feelings, judgment or experiences. Thus lexical items may possess different senses from one person or community to another. This is why connotative meanings are less stable than lexical meanings.

Connotations are emotional relations (personal or communal) implied by a linguistic unit or are part of its context (lexical item). For instance, the word 'December' can have connotations such as 'adverse weather,' 'dark evenings,' 'parties,' or 'Christmas,' etc. (Crystal 2003:97-8).

#### d- Idiomatic Meaning

Idioms, proverbs and clichés have transparent meanings. They constitute a particular connotation that their meanings can not be predicted from their words.

Moreover, an idiom's, proverb's, or cliché's total meaning is not affected by the literal meaning of the words it constitutes. Therefore, they cannot be translated literally into another language without the special meaning being lost. In brief, they constitute an expression whose meaning is non-compositional. Also, their meanings are problematic because they carry cultural content with them (Hartmann and Stork 1972:106-7 ).

In this connection, Crystal (2003:225) defines idioms as “ a sequence of words that is semantically and often

syntactically restricted, so they function as a single unit ". Accordingly, idioms ( as well as proverbs and clichés ) must be taught as individual lexical items and presented in suitable relevant context since they constitute an integral part of language,i.e. an essential part of the vocabulary system. There are other types of meaning and the aforementioned four types: collocation, stylistic meaning, reflected meaning, etc.

## Methodology

### Participants

The sample of the present study is composed of students who are the junior students of English department at a University in Iraq. For this purpose, 50 students were chosen randomly during the academic year 2021.

### Instrument

In the current research, different instruments were used in data collection. A 50-minute English vocabulary test was used as the main tool for assessing students' achievement in vocabulary. In this regard, the researcher got benefit from some books to construct the test. The test consists of two different sections of questions out of a total mark of 100. The first section included 10 items and 3 marks were given to each. The second section consisted of 4 sub questions including A, B, C, and D. 10 marks was allocated to A, and other questions were given twenty. Furthermore, the final test and test-retest reliability was administered which were conducted in two different days within a one month interval. As mentioned before, 50 students who were selected

randomly participated in the test. After one month, the same test was given to the students for the second time with an aim to check the test reliability. It is worth mentioning that the second time only 15 students were asked to take the test.

### Procedure

In the first place, the selected EFL students were given the test to answer the questions within a time limitation of 50 minutes. In order to check the validity of the test, test items were shown to a number of professors at university so that they could check their accuracy and appropriacy. Some of the items needed some modification. As for reliability, 15 EFL students from the same sample were chosen randomly to take the test again after one month interval. Accordingly, the results were collected and recorded and based on the statistical results, the correlation between the tests was estimated to be (0.512572) with a P-value of (0.258589) which is considered highly significant.

## Results and discussion

The test taken by the 50 EFL students consisted of 14 items to assess their achievement of vocabulary items. Therefore, a total number of 700 items were expected to be achieved. According to the data presented in Table 1 and 2, only 230 items representing 34.43% of the whole items were answered correctly by the participants. Also, 438 answers were found to be wrong consisting 72.42% of the total number of the answers. Interestingly, 28 items were not attempted by the students to be answered

Table1. *The identification of the frequency and percentage of each item in question1*

Items of Question 1	Total Answers	Correct Answers	Percentage of Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers	Percentage of Incorrect Answers	Skipped Questions
1	48	5	10%	43	89.58%	2
2	49	25	51%	24	48.97%	1
3	50	32	64%	18	36%	0
4	48	5	10.41%	43	89.58%	2
5	48	6	12.5%	42	87.5%	2
6	50	8	10%	42	84%	0
7	50	11	22%	39	78%	0

<b>8</b>	47	19	40.42%	28	59.57%	3
<b>9</b>	48	6	12.5%	42	87.5%	2
<b>10</b>	48	17	35.41%	31	64.58%	2
<b>Total</b>	486	134	27.57%	352	72.42%	10

Table2. *The identification of the frequency and percentage of each item in question2*

Items of Question 2	Total Answers	Correct Answers	Percentage of Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers	Percentage of Incorrect Answers	Skipped Questions
<b>A</b>	46	21	45.65%	25	54.34%	4
<b>B</b>	49	19	38.77%	30	61.22%	1
<b>C</b>	45	30	66.66%	15	33.33%	5
<b>D</b>	42	26	61.90%	16	38.09%	8
<b>Total</b>	182	96	52.74%	86	47.25%	18
<b>Total Question1+ Question2</b>	668	230	34.43%	438	65.56%	28

Based on the reported results, the majority of the EFL students taking part in the research were not able to identify the correct answers. The average of incorrect responses was higher than the one for the correct responses, 65.56% to 34.43% respectively which indicates that EFL students' level of vocabulary achievement is low.

By analyzing the frequency and percentage of each types of error, the least frequently occurred and the most frequently occurred type of error were identified. As shown in Table3, the most frequently type of error including 234 errors, occurred due to the wrong usage of vocabularies which were similar in meaning based on the context. In addition, the least frequently type of error estimated to be 56 errors occurred due to the misusing of vocabularies in a sentence

Table 3. *Identification of the frequency and the percentage of each type of error*

Types of errors	Number of Errors	Percentage
<b>Errors in giving the meaning of vocabulary</b>	68	15.52%
<b>Errors in misusing vocabulary in a</b>	56	12.78%

Types of errors	Number of Errors	Percentage
<b>Errors in recognizing the form of the vocabulary</b>	80	18.26%
<b>Error in using of similar vocabulary in meaning based on context</b>	234	53.42%
<b>Total</b>	438	100%

According to data presented in Table 3, a large number of Iraqi EFL students were not able to achieve English vocabulary items correctly. The students' lack of understanding of the concepts used in the context resulted in errors in giving the meaning of vocabulary. Students' lack of awareness that different words may convey different meanings in different context resulted in errors in misusing vocabulary in a sentence. Students' limited knowledge of affixes i.e., suffixes and prefixes which can change a word part of speech resulted in errors in recognizing the form of the vocabulary. And wrong comprehension of similar meaning of different vocabularies resulted in error in using of similar vocabulary in meaning based on context which was known to be the most frequently type of error.

## Conclusion

Teachers need to encourage EFL students to use newly learned vocabularies in their speaking and writing and develop their knowledge of word families in order to improve their awareness of different and significant meanings that each vocabulary may have according to different context. EFL students' lack of ability to achieve vocabulary items could be due to different reasons including: students' poor reading skill which may result in their wrong recognition of vocabularies, students' failure in understanding various structures of language such as parts of speech and affixes, as well as not being able to identify the correct meaning of vocabulary items in a specific context and wrong usage of collocations.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings reached, the study has formulated the following suggestions for future research:

1- Incorporating vocabulary in the college syllabus should be a first component of the course. If this is not possible, hours should be devoted to vocabulary teaching during the reading comprehension subject to enhance vocabulary learning. This leads to an increase in the hours of reading comprehension from two to three or maybe four.

1- Encourage learners to use their prior experience to interpret the meaning and create assumptions for the kind of language that will appear in a reading. Looking into the meaning in which the word occurs happens to be the most effective method of acquiring vocabulary.

2- It is advised that students find out the meaning of complex sentences or unfamiliar terms by being engaged in inferring the meaning of unclear words through an efficient researching and reasoning mechanism.

3- The job of EFL university lecturers is to arrange the instruction in such a way that it facilitates learning. They are intended to assist and attract learners' attention to stimulus terms

and expressions, indications of connection, allow students to infer meaning with the aid of context cues, which are successful in increasing vocabulary.

4- Leading questions should be utilized as a standard approach to guide learners in a step-by-step quest for contextual hints. As a result, more consideration, focus, and time must be paid to a methodology like this to assist students in identifying cue words or other markers.

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