Teaching English Language Vocabulary to EFL Learners in the Arab Region: A Preliminary Reading

Gamal Abdel Nasser¹ and Montasser. M. A. Mahmoud²

¹Professor of English Language Literature, Head of English Language Department, College of Languages and Translation, Misr University for Science and Technology, Ex-Head of English Language Department, Cairo University,
²Assistant Professor, English Language Department, Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, Deanship of Preparatory Year and Supporting Studies

Author Note
Montasser M.A. Mahmoud https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9387-2785
We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Room 52, Build. 450, Dept. of English, Rakah, Imam Abdulrahman University, Damam. Email: Mmamahmoud@iau.edu.sa

Abstract
This study is intended to have an in-depth discussion on the chief subject of this research paper, which is the most appropriate method of teaching English language vocabulary to EFL learners in the Arab region. To conduct this study, the two researchers investigated and gathered a large set of notable sources of information and research papers having dealt with vocabulary instruction to find an answer to the main question of this study. Both researchers attempted to provide theoretical coverage of specific areas applicable to English language vocabulary instruction. This theoretical coverage investigated the basic methods and strategies employed by each one of them, which specialists have classified as specific media for teaching vocabulary. They are, in order, Grammar-translation, Direct Method, Audio-lingual, Total-physical Response and Communicative Learning. These methods have proven their efficiency, seriousness, quality, and practical validity in educational circles, whether there or here in the Arab region. However, these methods, despite their importance, did not prove their worth as did other simple techniques and strategies that were effective and more influential on the EFL
learners. These include the use of visual aids, bi-lingual dictionaries, the introduction of repeated verbal/written drills and guesswork exercises to find the appropriate meanings of words or phrases. To attain such conclusions, the collected data ought to be comprehensive and insightful, with study results arising from detailed review of related literature.

**Keywords:** Teaching processes, English language vocabulary, grammar translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, total-physical response, communicative learning approach

**Teaching English Language Vocabulary to EFL Learners in the Arab region**

Perhaps learning any second/foreign language requires, first and foremost, the learners' knowledge of the vocabulary (Allen, 1983) of this language, before they go through the methods and strategies of learning the language itself. A human being, that is any human being, acquires his/her mother tongue from the source, that is, from the family in which he/she is raised and the cultural milieu in which he/she grows up, such as educational institutions (Chomsky, 1965). Then comes the world at large outside these two primary mediating environments. As soon as the one of us turns outside the family and school, one finds it a must to learn a second language, at least, besides one’s acquired mother tongue, in order to communicate with the requirements of the time, deal with its developments, and adapt to its ever evolving and changing outputs.

We, as Arabs, are forced, after acquiring our mother tongue, the Arabic language, to learn a second language from a young age, so that we can deal, for example, with a computer, a tablet, or a mobile phone. Such technological inventions have become common in our daily life, not to mention the rest of the modern inventions such as receivers, smart screens, satellites, and social media that have been imposed on everyone in the era of globalization.

Hence, linguists have not been preoccupied with the necessity of learning a second language as much as they have been concerned about how to learn this language and the methods and strategies required to learn it. In this context, linguists have begun prioritizing learning strategies and started to arrange them according to the role of each priority or stage so that the learning cycle would eventually be completed by including all the necessary methods and curricula.

In order that the learning process of the second language does not take place in cognitive vacuum, it has become inevitably necessary for the linguists to think about the vocabulary concepts of the language to learn and identify them before entering the same basic learning
skills that must be cultivated and consolidated in the mind of the learner. By these, it is meant, of course, the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To master using the language in both written and oral forms, learners need to acquire and memorize more vocabulary as it is considered the main chief aspect of learning English as a foreign or a second language. Vocabulary can be divided into two main types; receptive and productive as stated by Shih et.al (1997), Schmitt and Schmitt (2000), and Nation (2001). Receptive vocabulary includes words that a person can identify and understand when hearing while productive vocabulary refers to words that we can use in oral and written context (Hatch & Brown, 1995).

It is commonly known that vocabulary is an essential resource for using language in oral and written communication since no one can use a language unless they master vocabulary (Cameron, 2001). Susanto & Fazlinda (2016) referred to vocabulary as an important aspect of second language learning classroom; therefore, vocabulary learning is a highly necessary unit upon which you can build up other language skills and knowledge. Considering the process of vocabulary learning, you will find that it is not only an issue of memorizing new words, but it also implies using these words in the correct context and increasing the limit of one’s words to enlarge the area of vocabulary is also crucial. This reflects the importance of selecting the most appropriate strategy and method since acquiring and developing vocabulary have no specific rules like syntax and phonology. In other words, it is unclear which rules can be followed in vocabulary instruction or which language terms should then be mastered first (Susanto, 2017).

**Context of the Problem**

The focus of this research paper revolves around one of the most important topics of the existing teaching processes that takes place in educational institutions in countries of the world in general and our Arab region in particular. Perhaps this educational issue acquires special importance as it is the backbone of learning any language. It is the raw material that is added to educational vessels, when teaching grammatical rules, linguistic structures, stylistic features, and so on. Therefore specialists, experts and those responsible for teaching languages and, of course, linguists are interested in this dangerous aspect of education. The aim of helping students understand new vocabulary and acquire large number of words to use them later in communication is still hard to reach. The issue of learning and teaching vocabulary in EFL contexts and pedagogy is not considered of an unwelcome influence or effect remaining.

It is commonly known that vocabulary teaching is one of the most debatable issues in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Allen (1983) believed that learning vocabulary is a must in all language teaching. How then was the way to teach vocabulary,
English vocabulary, for example, to Arab students, and what were the necessary strategies and methods for that? This issue has preoccupied the thought of linguists, whether Western or Eastern, for a long time. Each one of them, generation after generation, has proposed, amended, and developed these strategies in order to reach the best and most effective not to say the most useful value in the speed of vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning. It is often stated that methods adopted to teach vocabulary commonly help students to acquire new words and be aware of any progress happened in terms of vocabulary learning. All English language instructors need to be alert and intelligent regarding the most convenient method that meets students’ needs, and the best method to select for teaching vocabulary so that the general and specific objectives could be effectively and easily achieved. More than one method could be used in vocabulary teaching and learning, but each one of them has its own merits and demerits. Therefore, it is highly important to decide on the most appropriate one to be used to enhance and develop students’ enthusiasm for acquiring and mastering more vocabulary. Although no method can be classified as the best model to be used, some of them are supposed to be more appropriate than others. Hence, the main question tackled in this article is the following.

- Which teaching methods is considered the most convenient to be used in learning and teaching vocabulary to Arab students?

To have an effective answer to the main question of this research paper, which is the most appropriate method that could be used for teaching vocabulary to non-native students, a conceptual review of relevant fields to teaching and learning vocabulary was made. This overall coverage encompassed five teaching methods with focusing on their general principles for learning and teaching of vocabulary in an EFL context, and techniques adopted by these methods in teaching and learning vocabulary.

**Research Method**

The current study adopted the record keeping method which is classified as one of the qualitative research methods that presents more descriptive results and help draw clear inferences (Thakur, 2022). The adopted method gets benefits from the available reliable sources and data to understand the problem under study and determine the best solution and recommendations. To achieve this goal, the two researchers read a convenient number of different types of resources to put their hand on the merits and demerits of each of the five selected methods when used to teach vocabulary. The comprehensive and ample data collected from these resources were mostly non-numeric, but they provided the two researchers with
profound understanding of the problem that made their findings based upon thorough and reliable analysis.

Literature Review

No language can be learnt without vocabulary as it is the first and main base upon which any language including foreign, and second languages is built. Walters (2004) stated that both students and instructors see vocabulary acquisition as a chief aspect of any language teaching or learning. Since 1980s teaching vocabulary has immensely developed as linguists and language experts started to focus on studying the process of teaching vocabulary during that period. In 1980s, for example, Terrel developed the Natural Approach that focuses on understandable and meaningful input rather than proper creation of grammatical structures. In 1983, Allen presented some examples of practical techniques that can be used in vocabulary teaching. In 1985, Gairns and Redman mentioned the main principles of vocabulary teaching. In 1997 Sokmen talked over the new approaches in teaching second language vocabulary when he affirmed that research recommended adding explicit vocabulary to the usual inferring activities inside class. Most studies highlighted the importance of teaching vocabulary to successfully use a foreign language in oral and written communication (Nation 2001; Read, 2004; Tellier, 2008; Chou, 2014; and Susanto, 2017) and how it could be problematic due to the inability of instructors to select the most appropriate method or strategy to teach vocabulary (Ansari, 2012; Nafa, 2013; Oljira, 2015; Susanto, 2017; Hossain, 2018). Berne & Blachowics (2008) referred to that when they stressed that instructors sometimes could not decide on the best time to start making an instructional focus on vocabulary learning. In addition, (Colorado, 2013) proposed the following six steps to help EFL learners acquire and master complex words and concepts; "pre-selecting a word from an upcoming text or conversation; explaining the meaning with student-friendly definitions; providing examples of how it is used; asking students to repeat the word three times; engaging students in activities to develop mastery; and asking students to say the word again. Some of these problems are also represented in identifying the difference between teaching vocabulary of a foreign language and that of students’ native language, which technique, method or strategy should be employed so that students can acquire and master words. In the process, for general techniques have been proposed: 1) the Grammatical-Translation (GT) methods, 2) the Audio-Lingual (AL) methods, 3) the Total-Physical Response (TPR) strategy and 4) the Communicative Approach (CA).
Grammar Translation Method and Teaching Vocabulary

The grammar-translation method is – as known – the derived from the classical method of teaching Ancient Greek and Latin, through which students learned grammatical rules and they applied them by translating sentences between the target language and the native language. Translation was, then, the most important classroom activity. Although this method is considered the oldest method as it dates back to the 16th century, Corder stated in the first chapter of his book “Papers in Applied Linguistics” (Allen & Corder 1975) that it was “the most deductive approach” (p.13). Vocabulary is basically taught through using translation, cognates, bilingual words list, or dictionaries. Kids can be provided with a few vocabulary words to memorize as a starter, just to let the wheel of learning rolling. Using this technique will help you as an English language instructor to be sure that your students will not be unable to understand a sentence that contains one or more of the vocabularies included in the list, and you will not find yourself unable to explain the meaning of every single word. It is recommended for instructors who want to use this method to offer their students with a vocabulary handout including seven to ten important words relevant to the lesson or chapter they are going to teach before the lesson. This list will not only be just words with meaning or definition, but it can also contain some spirits of interest such as pictures, colors, small digital images or icon used to express an idea or emotion. In this way the translation method could help other methods such as direct or communicative ones to contribute effectively to the process of learning, and students can bolster their existing list of words with more vocabulary. The tutor would, for example, ask students to take a number of vocabulary words from their favorite local and popular songs and then translate them into English (Zhou. & Niu, 2015). However, this method is heavily censured due to the absence of contextual and experiential depth, and it began to take a back seat to other new methods.

The Direct Method and Teaching Vocabulary

This method is completely different from the first method as it does not allow translation to be used as it seeks providing the meaning directly through using the target language without recourse to learners’ local language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Schmitt (2000) highlighted the main features of vocabulary teaching by using the direct method when he stated that it focused on using different techniques such as reading aloud, question and answer exercises, dictation, using new vocabulary in full structured sentences or using pantomime, realia, conversation practice, map drawing, paragraph writing, and pictures when introducing new words since no translation is ever used. However, this method is not recommended to be
used at the early stage as it requires competent instructors as well as advanced-level students (Rao & Elizabeth, 2007). Also, abstract words may not be easy to be taught through this method as instructors would find difficulty explaining their meaning. If some scholars claim that all words can be explained using this method, it must be underscored that they will take much more time that could be saved to use in explaining other aspects of the language.

The Audio-lingual Method and Teaching Vocabulary

This method is defined as a technique that lays special emphasis on the repetition of words to help native-tongue learners use the target language communicatively. Richards and Rogers (1986) stated that this method is used to instruct language through making full use of EFL learners’ response to certain verbal input so that their restraints could be reduced and their effective filter might be decreased. Several studies were conducted to prove that this method is highly effective in developing and improving vocabulary learning and teaching such as Hosain, 2013). Reading through the main features of this method reflects the great degree of similarity between it and those of the earlier Direct Method, however, some new concepts were developed in this method such as using “linguistics patterns” in combination with “habit forming” (Brown, 1994). This method focuses on developing EFL learners' communicative competence; therefore, Brown (1994) affirmed that the quick spread and success of this method was due to its concentration on this aspect through adopting practical and effective techniques such as repetition, extensive mimicry, language patterns and memorization. It can be theoretically stated that this method in particular was one of the first language teaching methods to be strongly grounded in linguistics and psychology as well. In this method, the teaching process is reinforced by drills, or rather, mechanical exercises, in order that the students vary the dialogue without altering the grammar. Consequently, the lessons are built on such static exercises, where the learners have little control – if none – on their output (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Using this method is expected to help EFL learners acquire new words easily in a fun way as it stimulates them to learn and memorize new vocabulary through extensive repetition and a variety of elaborate drills. However, studies’ results showed that developing EFL learners' vocabulary through rote learning in the Audio-lingual method was not as meaningful as it was in the natural method (Tehrani et al., 2013; Tager-Flusberg & Calkins, 1990; and Stine & Bohannon, 1983).
The Total-Physical Response and Teaching Vocabulary

This method, it should be noted, was developed by James Asher (1968), a professor emeritus of psychology at San José State University. It is a method of teaching vocabulary concepts by using physical movement as a reaction, on the parts of learners, to verbal input. It is a language-teaching method based on the coordination of speech and action. Here, the process mimics the way enfant, for example, first learn the language vocabulary. A glaring example of this method is the singing of the learners, not only for fun, but also for incorporating movements that they can always remember to bring back to their own minds the vocabulary, they have previously learned. Gayanti and Satriani (2020) concluded that this method could be effectively used to help EFL learners acquire new vocabulary as it stimulates them to be more active in learning, memorizing, and saying new words with more confidence. It has been reported by the Lincoln Center of Albania (2014) that this method helps EFL learners recognize and memorize new words due to its memorable activities that EFL learners cannot forget easily. Listening to new words and instructions in English can guarantee EFL learners' natural acquirement. Fadiana et.al (2020) believe that using this method will help EFL learners memorize new words for a longer period than using any other method as they will attempt to understand the language expression before starting to produce any verbal conversation. They also consider using physical movement will ease learning vocabulary than giving abstract word first. However, it must be stated that this method works less effectively with abstract word.

This method is particularly beneficial for EFL Learners because it gives them chances not only to recognize the sound pattern or the pronunciation of a certain word, but it helps them know the meaning of new words and associate it to the action they are performing with it. In addition, repetition is considered so much valuable as it allows EFL learners to acquire and master new vocabulary by repeating through a total physical response throughout the day. It can be said that this method uses gestures as well as physical actions to teach new vocabulary when transitioning from one piece of the lesson to the next so that EFL learners can experience repeated exposure to new vocabulary over the course of a day. Although this method is presumed to be perfectly suitable for young learners, kids, or beginners (Saehu et al., 2017; Arlette & Hounhanou,2020) as it is a fun method to alter the style and pace of a lesson, it cannot be flexibly adopted to teach academic words for adult EFL learners especially if they could not be represented or expressed physically. Also, this method turns to be ineffective if it was used alone for a long period of time without resorting to depend on other types of drills and tasks. This method is built upon using instructions and orders; therefore, it tends to neglect vocabulary used in descriptive, argumentative, comparative, and narrative context.
The Communicative Language Teaching Method and Teaching Vocabulary

The field of vocabulary teaching in ESL or EFL contexts has witnessed new ideas and approaches since the 1960s. One of them is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that developed due to the changes in the British Situational Language Teaching approach dating from the late 1960s (Savignon, 1991). The communicative approach is one which stresses the importance of communicating real meanings during the process of learning a second language. The learners are here required to perform activities based on personal information they collect about their peers in class, which should be true-to-life and meaningful, such as their own individual experiences (Littlewood, 1981). This method focuses mainly on developing the communicative competence through encouraging learner-centered teaching. The focus has turned to be on the use of the language, not learning the language as EFL learners are expected to make a distinction between the form and function of the language. Real-life situations are fully used, so it looks different from the audio-lingual method that makes full muse of repetition and drills. In this way EFL learners find themselves more motivated and enthusiastic to give active responses and reactions due to their own desire to communicate in meaningful way. Teaching vocabulary by using this method does not give priority to teaching vocabulary in the form of wordlist of isolated words any more since vocabulary is actually taught in authentic contexts. The main focus will be on enhancing communicative proficiency rather than mastering the forms. By doing so, EFL learners can acquire words in a natural way, and the level of understanding vocabulary knowledge will increase and improve. It is highly recommended to give students chances to practice words in different contexts so that students can remember them and develop their comprehension of the words’ use. Also, visual as well as aural aids are recommended to be used when teaching vocabulary within various context in order to help learners manipulate new words in different ways. However, instructors need to be more proficient and competent in terms of organizing skills and linguistic competence to be able to apply the method effectively and reach inspired results. Studies also revealed that EFL learners find difficulty inferring the meaning of jargon words and idiomatic expressions (Gebeyehu, 2019) when using this method to learn vocabulary as they were uncertain of guessing the meaning of such types of words in some contexts.

Conclusion

These methods, despite their importance, did not prove their worth as did other simple techniques and strategies that were effective and more influential on the EFL learners. Regardless of these, partly theoretical, often quoted quartet of methods, it has practically been
proven to be the most frequently now used vocabulary-learning strategies are those related to bilingual dictionaries, verbal/written repetitive drills, text-based guessing exercises and meaning-find activities (Schmitt 1997). These strategies have, to a great extent, proven their quality, seriousness, validity and practicality in a large number of educational circles all over the world. It is for this reason that some linguists have found them to be perfectly suitable for the education environments in the Arab region. Therefore, it is recommended for the teaching of English vocabulary to non-native speakers, especially Arab students anywhere in the Arab region to use visual aids as they are highly effective, but selecting the appropriate pictures, for example should be considered. Cute cartoon images are expected to be appreciated by younger learners while photos of grown-ups are mostly preferred by adult learners. Also, simple vocabulary is recommended to be used first before going further to teaching more complex words, phrases, or idioms. Complexity must be widely avoided when you start teaching vocabulary to help students be familiar with texts they are studying. One of the most recommended techniques to teach vocabulary is to depend on oral communication through using group as well as peer work since granting learners more chances to use new vocabulary in communicating with each other could help them develop their master of new vocabulary that will affect their individual performance in EFL. Before starting teaching vocabulary, instructors need to be sure that their EFL learners are well aware of the daily instructional words used in EFL class, and then instructors can build their oral conversation to be revolved around new vocabulary that need to be learnt and taught. To follow this technique EFL instructors should urge their EFL learners to speak in class as much as possible. Interactive as well as meaningful questions are highly recommended to be used instead of simple "yes or no" questions. By doing so EFL learners are expected to learn new words in appropriate academic contexts to be used later in their future schooling. Scaffolding vocabulary is also recommended to support EFL learners by using graphic organizers, word walls, word wizard boxes, and cognates. EFL instructors and teachers in our Arab region should put into account that teaching foreign language vocabulary is not the same as teaching learners' local, and that teaching English language vocabulary is different from teaching it to adult learners. Therefore, EFL instructors and teachers should be well-prepare and look for the most appropriate techniques that could be used. Although there are more than one way to learn and teach new words, it is highly important to know that there is no single best way (Blachowicz et.al 2006). Therefore, EFL instructors and teachers are required to put the following four points suggested by Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) into account: (1) the EFL learners they are teaching, (2) the type of vocabulary they are going to teach, (3) the learning objective behind teaching such
vocabulary, and (4) the techniques they are supposed to use for teaching these new words. After considering the previous four factors, EFL learners and instructors can use the following eight strategies to develop their EFL learners’ vocabulary; (1) Alphaboxes (Hoyt, 1999) sheet in which he records important words about a certain topic using the 26 letters of the alphabet, (2) Word questioning (Allen, 1999) which help EFL learners define, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate new vocabulary in their readings, (3) Linear arrays (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2002) that helps EFL learners create associations among vocabulary, and identify subtle distinctions between words, (4) Polar opposites (Yopp & Yopp, 2009) by which EFL learners can make analysis and evaluation of characters involved in a specific text by rating them on a variety of dimensions along a three-, five-, or seven-point continuum, (5) Word sorts for narrative text (Allen, 2007; Hoyt, 2000) in which the EFL instructors and teachers use index cards to make a pre-lesson collection of important words and phrases from a story on them, (6) Story impressions (McGinley & Denner, 1987) in which EFL learners use available clue vocabulary connected with the events, characters, and setting in a certain reading to rewrite their individual version, (7) Word sorts for expository text (Hoyt, 2002) which includes collecting vocabulary from an expository text with other vocabulary available on index cards to review and make probable categories to which learners give names and reorder the index cards in the correct category, (8) Anticipation guides (Merkley, 1997) in which the EFL learners try to anticipate meanings of a text before reading, then they start reflecting upon these meanings during reading, and finally be sure of confirmed meanings after reading.

Endnotes

1. Vocabulary is a very important aspect of any language since the overwhelming majority of meaning is carried lexically.

2. There is almost unanimity among linguists on this important issue. See, for example, Allen (1983), Taylor (1990), Wallace (1988) and McCarthy (1900).

3. EFL instructors and teachers are highly asked to motivate their EFL learners to use new vocabulary in their daily communication inside and outside English classes; show them that learning new vocabulary is a vital means to improve their reading comprehension (Harmon et.al, 2008); give them full chances of learning clusters of words that have similar origin (Hennings, 2000); let them be actively involved in interactive word-learning experiences (Rosenbaum, 2001); and guide them efficiently to the best way to learn new words before, during, and after reading any text (Greenwood, 2004);
References


http://www.jstor.org/stable/328185?


Flanigan, K., & Greenwood, S. C. (2007). Effective content vocabulary instruction in the middle: Matching students, purposes, words, and strategies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 51*(3), 226-238. [https://doi.org/10.1598/jaal.51.3.3](https://doi.org/10.1598/jaal.51.3.3)


Saehu, A., Sariyati, I., & Syah, M. (2017). Total physical response method for mastering English vocabulary. 2nd International Conference on Sociology Education. [https://doi.org/10.5220/0007093100730076](https://doi.org/10.5220/0007093100730076)


http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0604.11