Teaching and Learning Vocabulary through Reading as a Social Practice in Saudi Universities

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Abstract

The study explores the social practice of vocabulary learning by examining vocabulary teaching techniques employed by teachers, the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) identified by students as most useful and the ones they felt most competent in using when reading and teachers' and students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through reading. While most vocabulary research is quantitative, this study used a mixed methods approach of quantitative and qualitative data collected from a range of sources. One hundred and fifty students majoring in English from four different universities completed a semi-structured questionnaire and twenty-two of them were interviewed. In addition, nine teachers of vocabulary and reading subjects were interviewed and their classes observed. A systematic analysis for the prescribed textbooks was also conducted. The findings revealed that both teachers and students were negotiating their autonomy on an ongoing basis, which means that the social context of learning has a powerful influence on what students learn. The study concludes that vocabulary learning is a social practice influenced by a range of factors, such as teaching techniques, VLSs, the prescribed textbook, participants' beliefs and attitudes, learners' interests, cultural values and learners' level of competence in English.

Keywords: vocabulary, autonomy, practice, strategies, social

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Vocabulary is a vital part of learning a new language. The more learners learn new vocabulary, the more likely they are to be able to use the new language effectively. In an EFL context, where opportunities for practising English in daily life may be more limited, one of the main sources of new vocabulary is reading of English texts. Reading plays a key role in increasing learners' vocabulary, and that is according to comparisons of large corpora which showed that written texts are richer in lexis than spoken ones (Horst, 2005). It has been suggested that two activities (vocabulary learning and reading) occurring simultaneously create a 'pedagogically efficient' approach (Huckin & Coady, 1999), which could help learners achieve autonomy, motivation and pleasure to learn, while also providing them with vocabulary in context (Thornbury, 2002).

Although a large number of studies have been carried out in the field of vocabulary research, most of these studies were experimental by focusing on the effectiveness of using certain techniques and strategies in teaching and learning vocabulary. Therefore, examining vocabulary teaching techniques by observing them in use is needed and 'a surprisingly under-researched area' (Nation & Webb, 2011: 15). Also, existing studies on VLSs relied heavily on the frequency of using these strategies (Schmitt, 2010). Learners may recognise the usefulness of a strategy that they do not usually use and might be willing to try new strategies if they are trained to use them (Schmitt, 1997). So, it is crucial to explore other aspects, such as the VLSs identified by students as the most useful and the strategies students felt competent in using.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Several researchers (Al-Nafisah, 2001; Al-Motairi, 2005) referred to one of the key problems in teaching English in Saudi Arabia. Students who complete secondary school seem to have a poor level of English, despite having spent on average six years studying it. Al-Nujaidi (2003) found that Saudi students had a limited vocabulary in English (500-700 words) after finishing secondary school. Another study, conducted by the Cambridge

Examination Centre in 2009, showed that Saudi students ranked 39th of the 40 nations took part in English academic and general training tests (Al-Seghayer, 2011). Saudi students reported challenges they encountered when learning English, evidenced by several studies (Al-Nafisah, 2001; Al-Motairi, 2005). One factor identified was the methods of teaching used by teachers in schools, as teachers appeared highly dependent on textbooks and on using particular methods (mainly the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method). Moreover, the topics and activities in the textbooks used in teaching English in schools did not seem to meet the students' interests. Al-Akloby (2001) focused on the reasons behind students' failure to learn English vocabulary at Saudi schools and concluded that the students used the VLSs ineffectively, the new words were mainly presented to them in wordlists, the textbook concentrated on mainly two aspects of vocabulary knowledge (pronunciation and meaning) and vocabulary recycling and testing were found to be ineffective.

It also appears that teachers of English who graduate from English departments have an unsatisfactory proficiency in English (Al-Seghayer, 2011). An unpublished study (2004) carried out by the Ministry of Education revealed that the average TOEFL score of Saudi teachers of English at intermediate and secondary schools was 430 (Al-Seghayer, 2011). Having teachers with a low level of English negatively affects students' English learning and, as a result, will most likely produce unsatisfactory outcomes. When the teachers' level of English is limited, their vocabulary knowledge is also limited, which makes their vocabulary learning and the teaching they received at university questionable. It can be concluded that the problems in teaching and learning English exist in both schools and universities. While the issues surrounding teaching and learning English in Saudi schools have been investigated by others before, the present study aims to find out how university students are taught vocabulary in reading and vocabulary classes and their use of VLSs.

Teaching and learning vocabulary through reading was chosen as the focus of this study for various reasons. Firstly, vocabulary is an important component in learning a new language and enriching vocabulary knowledge helps develop language skills. Secondly, learning vocabulary through reading seems to be a helpful strategy especially for EFL learners like the participants in this study where practising English is likely to be limited, and also for students majoring in English as they are exposed to a large number of English texts in their studies. Reading appears to be an important source to developing their vocabulary.

Therefore, this study aims to explore a range of issues in teaching and learning vocabulary through reading at Saudi universities. First, it will examine the teaching techniques used by teachers in explaining new words and the students' perspectives on the techniques used. Second, it will look at the VLSs deployed by the students, in relation to the VLSs that the students believe they use most frequently, the ones perceived by the students as most helpful and those which they feel themselves to be most skilful in. Furthermore, the study will aim to explore the teachers' and students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through reading.

2. Theoretical Background

Since the focus of the current research is examining the complex relationship between the aspects that form the social practice of vocabulary learning, this study drew on theoretical concepts widely used by researchers (e.g. Heath, Street) in the field of literacy learning that view learning as a 'social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles' (Street, 2003). According to him, knowledge about what is being learned and how this learning is socially perceived by learners plays a key role in their learning. Researchers in this field have explored further the practice of learning, based on the concept of the sociocultural theory. Literacy learning is described, from a social perspective, as 'dynamic', by dealing with both 'individual' and 'social' purposes (Barton & Hamilton, 2005). So, the focus on learning is not only on learners as individuals, but also on the social context.

Street (1995) argues that different factors, apart from passing technical skills about reading and writing, impact literacy learning in a social context, such as culture. Although the classroom appears to be one social unit, the culture of the classroom includes different views of language, preferences for learning and learning purposes (Breen, 1985). Street (1984) suggests that literacy is ideological and is derived from people's own practices and purposes. This means that learners' beliefs, for example in relation to the usefulness of learning, and attitudes towards their learning substantially influence their learning. It seems that researchers agree that learning is a "social practice", which takes place through social interactions and is not merely relevant to learners as individuals, but also embedded in the social context. Richards (2015) refers to two important dimensions to successful second language learning: 'what goes on inside the classroom and what goes on outside of the classroom', which highlights the role of learning beyond the classroom. In the field of vocabulary, the role the social context was only indicated as one of the VLSs. As EFL/ESL learning involves learning new skills about language, as in literacy learning, this study argues that vocabulary learning should not focus only on one

particular element, such as VLSs used by learners or teaching techniques employed by teachers; however, other elements in vocabulary learning should be considered.

3. Review of Literature

Since the context of the study is Saudi universities, this section starts with providing an overview about language learning context in Saudi Arabia. Also, issues on vocabulary learning are discussed.

3.1 Language Learning Context in Saudi Arabia

While Arabic is the main language commonly used as L1 in Saudi Arabia, learning a second language is well considered in Saudi Arabia, with an emphasis on English as the only foreign language introduced in schools and universities. Al-Seghayer (2005) states that 'overall, English plays an important role in Saudi Arabia on a large scale, as well on a personal level. The Saudi government views English as a vital facet of the process leading to the development of the country'.

There are specific elements about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia and the environment in which this is taught and learned. English is mainly introduced in schools, universities and via media, especially television. A review of the general objectives set by the Saudi Ministry of Education to teach English helps to show these elements and reveals the cultural values that the ministry considers when learning English. The objectives include general ones, which learners should achieve when learning any L2 in any context; for example, 'enable student to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing)'. However, there are certain objectives that imply the importance of religious and cultural values when learning English in the Saudi context, which makes the Saudi EFL context different from other countries. These objectives include:

▪ To develop the linguistic competence that enables the student - in the future - to present and explain Islamic concepts and issues, and participate in spreading Islam.

▪ To enable the student linguistically to present the culture and civilisation of his nation.

▪ To enable the student linguistically to benefit from English-speaking nations that would enhance the concepts of international cooperation that would develop understanding and respect of the cultural differences between nations (Mahib ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

Teaching English in primary schools was introduced in 2004 and this shows the government's awareness of the importance of English as a global language and the importance of learning English from an early age. This rather recent introduction of English in primary schools suggests that L2 learning of English was not a priority of the government in the past while English was introduced in primary schools a while ago in other countries. Another issue that makes the Saudi context different from other contexts is the gender segregation in education, with schools and colleges for boys only and girls only. This shows the role that cultural values play in the forming of language policy. It also reveals that the main context of learning English in Saudi Arabia is classroom-based, as English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia rather than a second language (ESL) as it is in other countries (e.g. India, Nigeria etc.). As English is taught as a foreign language, the opportunities for Saudi EFL learners to practise English in their daily life seem to be limited to mainly classroom-based activities, when compared to learners in other countries. Both public and private schools employ compulsory textbooks in teaching language. Teaching English in Saudi Arabia was found to be textbook-centralised (Al-Seghayer, 2011). This shows the position of L2 learning in Saudi Arabia, where the classroom plays the main role as a context of learning and textbooks are a crucial source in L2 learning.

3.2 Vocabulary Learning in the Classroom

A number of teaching approaches and techniques have been examined by researchers in the field of vocabulary research. For example, decontextualised and contextualised vocabulary teaching (e.g. Qian, 1996; File & Adams, 2010), using L1 and L2 in teaching vocabulary (e.g. Latsanyphone & Bouangeune, 2009; Webb, 2007), and teaching vocabulary through reading (e.g. Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010). These experimental studies explored the effectiveness of employing certain approaches or techniques in teaching vocabulary. Similarly, vocabulary learning strategies that can be used by learners were largely investigated. While some studies examined these strategies in general (e.g. Schmitt, 1997), others focused on particular strategies, such as guessing the meaning from context and using dictionaries (e.g. Nassaji, 2006; Chen & Truscott, 2010). Examining VLSs aim to help learners to be autonomous in their vocabulary learning and make them less reliant on teachers.

Teachers' and learners' autonomy can be influenced by the textbook, which plays a key role in teaching and learning and is an essential component when language is learned in the classroom context. A number of

researchers argue that textbooks play a key role in the teaching methods employed by teachers. The structure and design of textbooks imply how the lessons can be conducted so they provide a framework for teachers to deliver the lessons (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). Tomlinson (2008) agrees with this perspective and suggests that textbooks direct teachers on how they can teach lessons and, as a result, teachers mainly relied on the textbook's materials in their teaching. According to these perspectives, a teacher's autonomy seems to be minimised due to the strict structure of textbooks, which does not allow teachers to employ their own teaching methods. Other researchers refer to different issues surrounding the textbook; most notably those regarding culture, and argue that textbooks present different cultures from over the world (Modiano, 2005; Taki, 2008). This suggests that textbooks do not only teach a language, but also introduce a new culture. Gray (2002) described the textbooks used in teaching English as a 'global course book' and defined it as 'that genre of English language textbook which is produced in English-speaking countries and is designed for use as the core text in language classrooms around the world'. This means that the textbooks might not correspond to the culture of the learners who are using it.

3.3 Research Questions

The review presented above on the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching and learning vocabulary was helpful to underpin the following research questions:

1) What are the teaching techniques used to teach vocabulary in reading and vocabulary classes in Saudi universities?

2) Which vocabulary learning strategies are perceived as useful by Saudi students and which do they feel most competent in when learning vocabulary through reading?

3) What are the attitudes of teachers and students at Saudi universities towards learning vocabulary through reading?

4. Method

4.1 Participants and Setting

In total, 150 male Saudi undergraduate first-year students, whose first language is Arabic, participated in the current research. The participants belonged to roughly the same age category (18-20 years old). They were majoring in English in four universities. The distribution of the sample is shown in the following table:

Table 1. The distribution of the sample

	Number of teachers recruited	Classes observed	Number of students	Students interviewed
College A	3	4	12	2
College B	1	2	18	3
College C	2	3	29	3
College D	1	2	42	5
College E	1	2	36	5
College F	1	1	13	4
Total	9	14	150	22

At the time of the study, all student participants were in their first year at university, and all had studied English as a subject for six years before at their intermediate and secondary schools, usually in four 45-minute classes per week. In addition, all had studied English skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), as well as grammar, in their first year at university. It should be mentioned here that two colleges from the involved universities provide a vocabulary course in addition to a reading course, which is unique from other universities. Therefore, the vocabulary course at these colleges was targeted for the research.

Subjects were recruited from six colleges across four universities to ensure a more diverse sample, as most vocabulary research in Saudi universities has dealt with only one college. The four universities were in three cities set within close proximity of each other, which made access easier, given the limited time for data collection. The colleges were very similar in their approach to teaching English and vocabulary in general. The first year syllabi in the English Departments across all the colleges taking part in the study were similar, in that

they concentrated on teaching English language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), as well as grammar.

Data were collected from classroom observations by attending two classes with five teachers, while the other four teachers had only one class observed, due to clashes in timetables between the classes observed. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for the students and twenty-two of them were interviewed. Nine teachers were also interviewed.

4.2 Data Analysis

The data of the present study were both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data were generated by the closed-ended questions in the questionnaire. The responses recorded for these questions were entered into a data file and statistically analysed with the use of the computer software program SPSS. Descriptive statistics was adopted for all of the variables in order to select the appropriate test for each variable, as this provides important information e.g. the means, medians, standard deviations and the distribution of the sample.

All interviews were transcribed fully and revised by repeated listening to the recordings. As the interviews were conducted in Arabic, the researcher translated them into English and the translation was then verified by two native Arabic speakers. At the next stage, all the field notes were printed in order to begin coding, while NVivo was used in analysing the transcripts. The researcher adopted a thematic approach to coding in order to increase the reliability of the analysis. The initial stage in the analysis consisted of reading several times the transcripts and field notes in order to identify main themes and categories. In order to achieve this, a "line by line" examination was conducted. This type of analysis helps 'to generate initial categories (with their proprieties and dimensions) and to discover the relationships among concepts' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcripts and field notes were coded line by line, which helped to develop the categories which were related to the themes. The categories were drawn from the data, and informed by the research questions and the principles of sociocultural theory.

The content analysis method was employed to conduct the analysis of the prescribed textbooks. This approach of analysis can be used with any written texts such as documents and interviews and often employed with large numbers of texts (Cohen et al., 2011). Content analysis was originally considered as a quantitative type of analysis, mainly focused on words account; however, it later adopted several qualitative analysis principles, which involve texts being categorised into themes (Newby, 2010). The analysis of the textbooks in the current research went through two stages: the first was "descriptive" and the second was "analytical". The first stage, the "descriptive", provides general information about the textbooks, such as the structural elements of the textbooks, the organisation on pages and the type of tasks used. The second stage, the "analytical", aims to analyse the textbooks more in depth by generating the categories that will help to provide evidence on how these textbooks work.

5. Results

The results of the analysis of textbooks will be presented first, followed by the results of using vocabulary teaching techniques and VLSs and the students' attitudes towards their vocabulary learning through reading. The analysis of textbooks showed the purposes of the reading passages employed in the reading textbook, which aim to improve three aspects: "the ability to read", "reading comprehension" and "the ability to guess the meaning from context". The underlying "linguistic" and "pedagogical" assumptions that the prescribed textbooks make were also revealed. While the main linguistic assumptions were related to pronunciation and providing different information about the new words, the pedagogical assumptions included promoting learner autonomy by introducing certain VLSs. It was also assumed that some activities from the reading textbook would be conducted in a communicative way. The analysis showed that most of the new words introduced were among over the 3000 most frequent and different techniques were employed in the textbooks to deal with new words, including: using synonyms, defining new words in English and using the new word in a sentence, as well as using pictures as an additional technique in the "Vocabulary in Use" textbook. The cultural values the textbooks referred to differed greatly from that of the students.

The findings revealed that the teachers were "textbook-centralised" with a high dependence on the prescribed textbooks although they also showed autonomy in their use of vocabulary teaching techniques and ways in which they made use of the textbooks. Classroom observation showed that teachers used several different techniques when teaching vocabulary, such as: employing synonyms, defining the new words in English, using Arabic to explain the meaning, using the new word in a sentence and also by employing drawings, pictures and gestures. In the interviews, teachers also reported implementing these techniques in their classes. Using synonyms, defining the words in English and using Arabic were the teaching techniques most commonly

employed by the teachers observed.

The students used a range of VLSs and employed the strategies that they thought were "fast" and "easy" to use. They tended to avoid complex strategies (See Appendix A). For example, while nearly half of the students (45.3%) stated that they always use the strategy of appealing for assistance from others and (42.7%) of them referred to using an electronic dictionary, only (9.3%) of the participants stated that they always employ a monolingual dictionary and (12.6%) referred to adopting the keyword method. The VLSs that the participants thought they commonly used were also the ones believed to be most useful (See Appendix B). Students identified specific benefits of using certain VLSs and they showed autonomy in employing the strategies that they most valued. These benefits were mainly in relation to providing them with accurate and diverse information on new words and helping their retention. The participants felt skilful in using most of the VLSs used in their classes and they made a link between the strategies that they used most often and their level of competence in employing these strategies (See Appendix C).

Both students and teachers viewed learning vocabulary as crucial for learning a foreign language. In addition, all of the teachers involved in this study perceived learning vocabulary through reading as a beneficial strategy to expanding students' vocabulary and most of the students shared this view.

6. Discussion

Teachers in the current research relied mainly on prescribed textbooks and employed diverse vocabulary teaching techniques, with a focus on specific techniques such as using synonyms, defining new words in English, and using Arabic. Although teachers were textbook-centralised, they showed autonomy in their vocabulary teaching and classroom interactions were not always aligned with the assumptions made by the textbooks.

This finding resonates with Hutchinson and Torres's (1994) and Tomlinson's (2008) argument that the structure of textbooks directs teachers' approach to teaching and makes them mainly dependent on the materials and activities presented in the textbooks. The linear structure of textbooks can prevent teachers and learners from being creative in their teaching and learning process (Ur, 1996). This finding is also supported by other studies (e.g. Al-Seghayer, 2011) conducted in Saudi schools, which showed that a textbook-based approach is also used in the school context. In this research, teachers justified being "textbook-centralised" mainly due to the fact that they were required to cover a vast amount of material in the textbook. Bringing texts from outside the textbook, with the given pressures of time, was seen as time-consuming and possibly as preventing teachers from covering the textbook. These reasons showed the limited autonomy that teachers felt they had. Teachers in the present study were controlled by both the institutions that required them to cover a specific amount of material and by the highly structured textbooks. This is in line with Leithwood et al. (2004) and Benson's (2008) suggestions that educational institutions play a key role in establishing the degree of teachers' autonomy. Despite these constrains, teachers showed some degree of autonomy in their teaching.

The analysis of the classroom observations identified several techniques that teachers employed to explain the meaning of the new words. These techniques were using synonyms, defining new words in English, using Arabic, using the new word in a sentence, and using gestures, drawings, pictures and antonyms, where the first three were most preferred. These techniques have also been identified by Nation and Gu (2007) to be used by teachers when introducing the meaning of the new words through reading. As most new words being explained by teachers appeared in sentences, using the new word in a sentence as a technique was not frequently employed. Gestures, drawings and pictures can be helpful to explain the meaning of a new word, but they can only be employed with particular words. Also, pictures need to be prepared in advance and may not be suitable for all types of words, such as certain abstract concepts. Teachers occasionally used more than one technique to explain the meaning of new vocabulary. It is clear thus that teachers thought that the techniques suggested by textbooks for explaining the new vocabulary were not enough, as their students could not fully understand the meaning of the new words. This shows how teachers provided the students with scaffolded help in order to assist the students understand the meaning by using more than one teaching technique simultaneously. However, the scaffolding provided by some teachers was unhelpful when defining the meaning of new words in English.

An important finding is that Arabic was often used between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves throughout the classes observed. In some cases, even teachers who were non-native speakers of Arabic introduced new words either by using the words that they knew in Arabic or by asking students to provide the meaning in Arabic. This indicates that using students' native language in teaching English is not restricted to the teachers who share the students' native language and highlights once more the social aspect of the classroom interaction. Clearly, teachers and students need to engage in social exchanges that are not often possible in the new language and L1 can act then as a medium of communication. Similarly, Al-Seghayer (2011) also claimed

that teachers of English in Saudi Arabia tended to use Arabic 'more than needed' and used it more than English when 'giving instructions', 'providing explanations of language items' and 'conducting class activities'. From a theoretical perspective, learners normally use L1 to regulate their mental activities, as supported by empirical research (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2004; Choi & Lantolf, 2008). Hence, it was not surprising to see that L1 significantly impacted the interaction in the classrooms observed. Three reasons were reported by teachers in the interviews for using Arabic in teaching vocabulary: the students' low level of English, the anticipated difficulty of the new word and wanting to save time. Students' perceived level of competence appears to be important when teachers decide whether or not to use L1. As suggested by other researchers (Nation, 2001; Tang, 2002; Mattioli, 2004), using L1 in class may be useful for low level learners, as it can support them in understanding new vocabulary.

The analysis of the prescribed textbooks showed that the use of L1 in teaching and learning vocabulary was not referred to, implicitly encouraging the exclusive use of English in teaching vocabulary. Nevertheless, Arabic as L1 was often employed between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves throughout the classes observed. Teachers used L1 as a teaching technique, arguably showing that they were autonomous in how they introduced the new words. The decision to employ a specific teaching technique independently of the prescribed approach in the textbook shows one of the aspects of teacher autonomy (Shen, 2011). This shows that teachers and students hold different assumptions on using the L1 than the assumptions made in the textbook activities. This also revealed how teachers' and students' views on certain vocabulary teaching techniques influenced their teaching and learning. This finding points to vocabulary learning as a social practice, where different factors influence learning, such as the teaching techniques used by teachers in introducing new vocabulary and teachers' and students' views on using these techniques and the prescribed textbooks. This view on vocabulary learning as a social practice is in agreement with literacy learning research (e.g. Heath, Street) and findings from EFL research (Breen, 1985; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), who view the classroom as a social community with rules of social interaction, which often reflect out-of-class principles.

The analysis of the textbooks found that the cultural values presented in the textbooks were often substantially different from the students' own. This supports several researchers, who argue that textbooks present cultural values which can often be alien to the students (Modiano, 2005; Taki, 2008). As both teachers and students made references to the cultural values that the textbooks introduced, the role of cultural values in the practice of vocabulary learning needs to be examined when considering a good environment for learning. Certain aspects, such as students' own cultural beliefs, values and understanding, play a key role in vocabulary learning as a social practice. Aspects from outside the class, such as students' beliefs, are beyond the practices occurring in the classroom, but nevertheless important and with a direct impact on learning.

The results on using VLSs revealed that the students in this study said they tended to deploy certain VLSs more than others. The students focused on two strategies throughout the interviews: guessing the meaning from context and using a dictionary. "Simplicity" and "quickness" led students, as they reported, to focus on deploying appealing for assistance from others and using an electronic dictionary. Since the students employed some strategies that were different from the strategies introduced in the textbooks, it can be argued that they were, to a certain extent, autonomous in their vocabulary learning. Despite the strict structure of the textbooks, which asked them explicitly not to use dictionaries while reading the passage, they accessed dictionaries in class and online. Both teachers and students were engaged in different practices than the ones the textbooks anticipated them to engage in, in relation to the type of VLSs they would use. In addition to asking participants which were the VLSs they were more likely to use, the questionnaire aimed also to elicit data on the VLSs students found more useful. most of the VLSs that were seen by the participants to be frequently used were also perceived as the most useful.

Students believed that most of the VLSs that they used were helpful to them and their preferences did not always align with the VLSs promoted by teachers or the textbooks used. They perceived certain VLSs as very useful, mainly in terms of providing them with accurate and diverse information on the new words and in helping them memorise these words. This finding suggest that the students felt that most VLSs that they thought they used frequently were useful for them. As a result, strategies such as using a bilingual and an electronic dictionary and guessing the meaning from pictures or from context were seen by students as both commonly used and helpful. However, these strategies might not always be beneficial in developing students' vocabulary learning, as Schmitt (1997) argues that the VLSs that are always used by the students might not necessarily be the ones most useful for them.

Students considered themselves skilled in using most of the VLSs that they employed regularly and found most useful. They made a link between the strategies they used most often and their level of competence in employing

these strategies. The potential interpretation that led the participants to think that they were not competent enough in using certain strategies can be related to data from classroom observations and interviews. These data suggest that teachers did not teach students how to employ VLSs and just asked students to use them, mainly in relation to guessing the meaning from context or using dictionaries. Although inferring the meaning from context was referred to by teachers in class, students perceived themselves as less competent in using it. This means that the students need scaffolded help from their teachers to use this strategy. Also, the students could be more confident if they had been taught how to deploy this strategy and as a result, show 'increasingly less reliance on externally provided mediation' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

All of the teachers involved in this study perceived reading as a useful strategy in learning vocabulary and the majority of the students shared this view. They saw reading as an important source of new words; it helps to use the new words in a context and has advantages for vocabulary retention. However, they did not always agree that the prescribed textbooks were suitable in terms of content, type of reading activities or appropriateness for students' cultural values and level of competence. Reading of texts in English is also a useful strategy for EFL learners in particular, since their contact with native speakers can be limited and 'the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for some learners' (Nation, 2001). Another perceived benefit by the participants was that texts give them a context for using the new word, which helps the students know how to use this word correctly and remember it. Seeing the word in written format also helps with learning the spelling of the new word. Learning the correct spelling in particular might be difficult when learning vocabulary through other strategies, like listening. Reading was also seen by the participants as useful in improving pronunciation, especially when performed aloud. However, teachers did not read out the reading passages and did not use any CDs.

These findings revealed that the social context of learning had a powerful influence on what students learn, as both teachers and students negotiated their autonomy on an ongoing basis. It has been argued that literacy learning in a social context is affected by different factors, apart from teachers passing on technical skills about reading and writing to learners (Street, 1995). Other researchers (e.g. Heath, Street) refer to viewing the classroom in the social context of literacy learning as a community (Smith, 2010). As EFL/ESL learning involves learning new skills about language, as in literacy learning, the present study argues that vocabulary learning should not focus only on one particular element, such as VLSs used by learners or teaching techniques employed by teachers.

Based on these findings, the theoretical view on vocabulary learning this study provides challenges the implicit theoretical view that most vocabulary research holds, which restricts vocabulary learning to the teaching techniques used and VLSs employed by learners. Studies that have discussed vocabulary learning from a theoretical perspective by arguing, for example, that vocabulary learning is an 'incremental process' (Schmitt, 2010) or by focusing on the role of memory in vocabulary learning (e.g. Thornbury, 2002; Kersten, 2010), have centred their arguments on the role of the individual rather than on a sociocultural perspective, which focuses more widely on learning as a social interaction. The social context of vocabulary learning in the classroom involves multiple aspects which play a key role in learning. Certain aspects, such as teaching techniques, VLSs employed by students, the textbooks used, and teachers' and learners' beliefs influence each other and work together. For example, when learners were not told how VLSs could be used, their competence in deploying these strategies was reduced. This shows the importance of the interaction between these aspects in order to provide a good environment for vocabulary learning.

It is also apparent that the majority of the empirical vocabulary research seems to conceptualise vocabulary learning as a set of teaching techniques and VLSs. Most of the existing studies examine the effectiveness of particular teaching techniques or VLSs and provide implications based on the outcome of these studies. Nevertheless, vocabulary learning in the classroom, as the thesis argues, is a social practice involving a set of aspects, which interact in complex ways and influence the learning. In addition to the important role of teaching techniques, VLSs and the prescribed textbooks, the beliefs, attitudes and motivations that learners hold towards what they learn and how they learn also play a key role in learning. Although the classroom appears to be one social unit, the culture of the classroom includes different views of language, preferences for learning and learning purposes (Breen, 1985).

After discussing the aspects that influence vocabulary learning as a social practice, the various aspects which impact students' vocabulary learning and how these factors interact in the social of context of the classroom becomes clearer. There are certain aspects that can be more influential in the social practice of vocabulary learning than others. Language policy and EFL curriculum play the key role in the social practice of vocabulary learning in the classroom. In addition to the objectives that language policy and EFL curriculum aim to achieve,

they prescribe a specific textbook to be used in the classroom. The prescribed textbook considers learners' level of competence in English, their beliefs and attitudes, motivation and cultural values. When the textbook used in the classroom is too challenging for learners' level of competence or incompatible with their beliefs, interests or cultural values, this creates constraints for both teachers and students and becomes counterproductive for learning. Teachers are mainly responsible for introducing the content of the textbook to learners by employing their own teaching techniques. Teaching techniques include teaching VLSs in order to promote learners' autonomy. Learners' autonomy is represented in two main forms: using certain VLSs and reading texts outside the classroom.

Overall, based on the findings of the current research, which focuses on the Saudi context, it could be concluded that an effective environment for vocabulary learning should consider the following: teaching techniques, VLSs, the textbook, participants' beliefs and attitudes, learners' interests, cultural values and learners' level of competence in English. The study argues that considering vocabulary learning as a social practice and the factors which contribute to creating an effective learning environment is key to teaching and learning vocabulary in the wider global context. This makes the recommendations suggested in the following section relevant in the wider global context.

6. Conclusion: Recommendations for Improvement in Language Teaching Policy and Practice

Although this study has been conducted in a Saudi context, the following recommendations are applicable to the wider global context based on the findings discussed:

▪   The study showed that vocabulary learning is a social practice influenced by different factors, which contribute to creating an effective learning environment. The role that factors, such as teaching techniques, VLSs, the textbook, participants' beliefs and attitudes, learners' interests, cultural values and learners' level of competence play in the classroom should be considered in order to create a good vocabulary learning environment.

▪   Although learning about other cultures is important, it needs to be relevant to learners. Therefore, language policy makers need to examine the content of the prescribed textbooks to assess their relevance in relation to the cultural values of the country in which they are used.

▪   Some students in the study reported that the texts they were made to read were too difficult for them. Hence, teachers should have the time and autonomy to encourage students to find their own texts and help them identify texts suitable for their level of competence in English in order to help them practise reading outside the class.

▪   VLSs should be taught explicitly to students. Students need time to learn how to use the strategies and practice their use, especially in relation to strategies that are most relevant to learning vocabulary through reading, for instance, guessing strategies and using dictionaries. The complex VLSs, such as the keyword method, also need to be introduced to students before they can use them confidently.

▪   Students reported that they read English texts outside the classroom, especially literary texts, which shows they were striving to be autonomous learners. In addition to meeting their interests and developing their vocabulary knowledge by practising this activity, it seems that the use of other texts was helpful for them to deal with the challenges posed by their teachers' teaching approach and the textbooks used in class.

▪   The use of textbooks appears to limit teachers' opportunities to focus on learners' needs and makes them textbook-centralised. EFL language policy and departments should consider providing teachers with a syllabus emphasising the skills that students need to develop rather than a specific content, and allow the teachers to practise their autonomy by choosing materials independently.

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Appendix A

The VLSs that the participants thought that they used the most

VLS	Frequency						Mean
	*A	O	S	R	N	I	
1. I ask someone (a friend, a classmate, a teacher).	68	34	29	13	2	0	5.05
2. I use an electronic or computer dictionary.	64	36	29	8	8	1	4.94
3. I guess the meaning from pictures, if available.	54	43	28	15	4	3	4.81
4. I use a bilingual dictionary to look up the unknown words.	48	37	34	18	10	0	4.65
5. I repeat the word silently in my mind.	41	27	36	29	14	0	4.65
6. I listen to the word repeatedly.	41	40	35	24	6	0	4.59
7. I practise using the new words by talking to myself in English.	45	32	42	21	8	0	4.57
8. I ignore the unknown word while reading when I want to read without interruption since the meaning might be revealed later on in the text.	46	27	43	23	5	2	4.55

* A = always, O = often, S = sometimes, R = rarely, N = never, I = I don't know.

Appendix B

The VLSs that were perceived by the participants as most useful

VLS	Frequency					Mean
	*VU	U	QU	NU	I	
1. I practise using the new words as many times as possible in my daily conversation or writing.	90	43	13	1	1	4.49
2. I listen to the word repeatedly.	81	49	13	1	1	4.43
3. I write the word several times.	92	31	19	1	3	4.42
4. I ask someone (a friend, a classmate, a teacher).	91	32	16	7	0	4.42
5. I use a bilingual dictionary to look up the unknown words.	88	30	23	3	1	4.39
6. I use an electronic or computer dictionary.	61	41	34	4	6	4.35
7. I write the new words in a word list.	79	45	17	5	2	4.31
8. I test myself or ask others listen to me and correct my mistakes.	76	48	18	2	4	4.28

*VU = very useful, U = useful, QU = quite useful, NU = not useful, I = I don't know.

Appendix C

The VLSs that were perceived by the participants as most useful

VLS	Frequency					Mean
	*VC	C	QC	NC	I	
1. I use an electronic or computer dictionary.	66	46	23	8	3	4.12
2. I use a bilingual dictionary to look up the unknown words.	47	50	32	11	4	3.87
3. I practise using the new words by talking to myself in English.	36	43	56	9	3	3.68
4. I go back to refresh my memory of words that I learned earlier.	28	43	53	21	3	3.49
5. I practise using the new words as many times as possible in my daily conversation or writing.	33	29	63	21	2	3.47
6. I associate the new words to their synonyms or antonyms (e.g. big - huge and short - tall).	27	37	56	19	7	3.40
7. I write the new words in a word list.	31	30	56	27	4	3.39
8. I associate the new words and the words that I already know.	22	40	56	23	4	3.37

* VC = very competent, C = competent, QC = quite competent, NC = not competent, I = I don't know.