Teaching English Vocabulary:
What International Language Educators Tell Us

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ABSTRACT

This study was motivated by Hunt and Beglar's (2002) approaches to teaching vocabulary in which they proposed seven principles of teaching vocabulary. Based on these principles, a questionnaire consisting of 24 four-point Likert scale items on vocabulary teaching practices, and an open-ended item which sought information about problems in teaching vocabulary was developed. The participants were English educators from different countries drawn from an online survey using a questionnaire through LinkedIn groups such as Applied Linguistics, ESL Teacher Professionals, iTeach English and Group-digests. The participants were invited to respond to the questionnaire voluntarily following a web link of the questionnaire in SurveyMonkey.com. The findings show that there were interesting differences of practice in teaching vocabulary with respect to Hunt and Beglar's seven principles across teaching experiences of the participants, school levels, and learner status. Further examination of the participants' written responses to challenges in teaching vocabulary indicate that retention and motivation were the most frequently mentioned problems they had in teaching vocabulary.

KEYWORDS: vocabulary, incidental learning, explicit instruction, learning strategy

Introduction

One of the teachers' concerns in teaching English vocabulary is how to teach it in a way that learners can understand and use the vocabulary appropriately. Techniques and strategies teachers use will determine how learners learn vocabulary. Good proficiency in English cannot be achieved without having sufficient amount of vocabulary knowledge. Discussions about techniques of teaching English vocabulary have appeared in many publications. However, a widely accepted view about the best way to teach vocabulary has not been reached. For the last decade, there have been two options for teaching English vocabulary; explicit instruction and incidental learning. Explicit instruction, among others, involves discussion about new words learners need to know, breaking words into their component parts such as teaching word formation, deliberate introduction of new words, and building fluency of new words. Incidental learning refers to acquiring new words through listening, reading, speaking, or writing practice.

According to Nation (2002), English vocabulary should be taught systematically because the focus of teaching is essential for learning to take place. Hunt and Beglar (2002), on the other hand, suggest that vocabulary should be taught in a way that combines both explicit and incidental learning and the strategies for learning vocabulary should be introduced to learners. The different approaches to teaching vocabulary has led teachers to treat vocabulary teaching differently through various kinds of classroom tasks from presentation of words in a list to involvement of learners in collaborative activities.

All activities for English vocabulary learning are based on one major reason, that is, the acknowledgement of the importance of vocabulary in language learning. Vocabulary is an "important aspect of language development" (Nunan, 2001, p.103), "basic building blocks of language" (Brown, 2001, p.377), and unique to language acquisition (Wang, 2009). With this recognition, learners are advised to use various strategies in order to remember and use appropriate vocabulary in communication. Many methods have been implemented to produce the most effective results and the best retention.

Unlike today, the teaching of English vocabulary in the past did not receive much attention. Moir and Nation (2008) observed that many experts assumed it was not important to teach vocabulary because learners can learn words naturally, and therefore, learning vocabulary was not emphasized. For the past decade, the interest in teaching vocabulary has been increasing and the views of teaching vocabulary have significantly changed. Therefore, researchers have shown great interest in this vast area. A similar interest has also been shown by language teachers who strive to find out effective techniques for teaching English vocabulary (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009).

In the history of language teaching and learning, including that of vocabulary, the methods and techniques used have been various as a result of different approaches. Obvious changes can be seen from asking learners to memorize a set of words through rote learning to using words in meaningfully communicative contexts. This way of teaching does not view language learning as merely a process of habit formation through repetitive activities (Nunan, 2004).

Researchers have found that using task-based activities can improve students' vocabulary learning and their confidence (Orawiwatnakul, 2011; Khabiri, & Charmgar, 2012). Some task-based activities may include assigning students to find out functions of words in different contexts, synonyms, antonyms, rewriting definitions, creating new sentences, or discussing the meaning of the same word in different sentences (Mokhtar et al., 2010).

In order to help learners acquire new English words, they need to be taught strategies for learning vocabulary. Graves (2010) suggests that learners need to learn about words, not simply acquire them. Direct teaching of vocabulary learning strategies such as the use of dictionaries, use of context clues, or identifying parts of words can help learners to become more independent learners (Baumann et al., 2003)

It is important to note that the emergence of new technologies has provided ELT with effective means and options of teaching language including vocabulary. Therefore, it is justifiable to suggest that multimedia software be utilized in language teaching. As pointed out by Yang and Chen (2007), learners will experience the joy of language learning if learning is facilitated with technology such as the mobile phone, computer, or Internet access. According to Chen and Chung, (2008), many researchers believe that electronic devices such as mobile phones can support both formal and informal learning and it is an important issue in English language education especially in EFL contexts (Taki & Khazaie, 2011).

Numerous studies on English vocabulary learning strategies have been conducted (e.g. Tsai & Chang, 2009; Loucky, 2002; Dolati & Mikaili, 2011; Taki & Khazaeni, 2011). These studies, and others, have focused on learner strategies of learning vocabulary, effects of using dictionaries on vocabulary acquisition, effects of using games to facilitate students' vocabulary learning, or using cell phones or other mobile devices for teaching or learning vocabulary. In spite of new insights into teaching vocabulary from the various studies, the contexts and settings have been confined to classroom experiments or cross sectional research.

The present study attempted to gauge the different ways of teaching vocabulary by language educators from different countries and how their practices differed across school levels (primary, secondary, tertiary), status of learners (first, second, foreign language learner), and length of their teaching experience. In addition, this study also elicited problems in teaching vocabulary. The findings of this study may point to the need for more elaborate discussion of teaching vocabulary as to what approach is preferable for specific contexts of learning.

Methodology

This study used a descriptive method that describes how language educators around the world taught vocabulary in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education levels. In addition, it also describes problems they encountered in teaching vocabulary. The participants of this study were language educators who have been teaching English either as a first, second, or foreign language. They were invited to participate voluntarily via an online survey in www.SurveyMonkey.com through LinkedIn groups such as *Applied Linguistics, ESL Teacher Professionals, iTeach English,* and *Group-digests*. The questionnaire did not contain the item that specified the participants' countries because this variable was not relevant to this study. However, from the email messages that they sent through the LinkedIn groups it can be recognized that the participants were from Asia, America, Africa and Europe. The table below provides information about the participants.

Table 1
The participants of the study

	1st LL	2nd LL	FLL	Percent	Count
Primary	2	5	1	9.9%	8
Secondary	4	10	18	39.5%	32
University	1	14	26	50.6%	41
					Total: 81

As can be seen in the table, there were 81 teachers in the study. They taught at primary, secondary, or university level as indicated in the first columns. The rows show the number of teachers who taught first, second, or foreign language learners. Of this number, 45.2% have taught for over 15 years, and 21.4% have taught for 1-5 years. The other 19% have taught for 6-10 years, and 14.3% have taught for 11-15 years.

The questionnaire was based on Hunt and Beglar's (2002) approaches to teaching vocabulary: incidental learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development in which they proposed seven principles of teaching vocabulary as listed below:
1. provide opportunities for incidental learning,
2. diagnose which of the 3,000 most common words learners need to study,
3. provide opportunities for intentional learning of vocabulary,
4. provide opportunities for elaborating word knowledge,
5. provide opportunities for developing fluency with known vocabulary,
6. experiment with guessing meaning from context,
7. examine different types of dictionaries and teach students how to use them.

Based on these principles, 25 questionnaire items were designed comprising three parts; the first section was participant's demographic information such as length of teaching experience (new vs. experienced), status of their learners (first, second, or foreign language learner), and institution levels they work in (primary, secondary, and university). The second section of the questionnaire had items with a four-point Likert scale (never – sometimes – often – always), and the third section was an open-ended item which elicited information about problems in teaching English vocabulary. The reliability of the questionnaire (KR 20) was 0.89.

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively to show the extent to which the participants showed differences of approach to teaching vocabulary depending on length of their experiences (new vs. experienced), education levels (elementary, secondary, tertiary), and status of the learners (first, second, or foreign learners). The data from the open-ended item were narrative texts that were coded for themes showing problems of teaching English vocabulary. The analysis of both data types is displayed in figures in the sections below.

Results and discussion

The findings are divided into four parts: overall finding, comparison across school levels, learner status, and years of teaching experience. The items in the questionnaire have been classified into six strategy categories characterizing the practice of teaching vocabulary: incidental learning, intentional learning, elaborating word knowledge, developing fluency, guessing from context, and use of dictionary. Figure 1 below shows the general overview of teaching vocabulary from all participants.
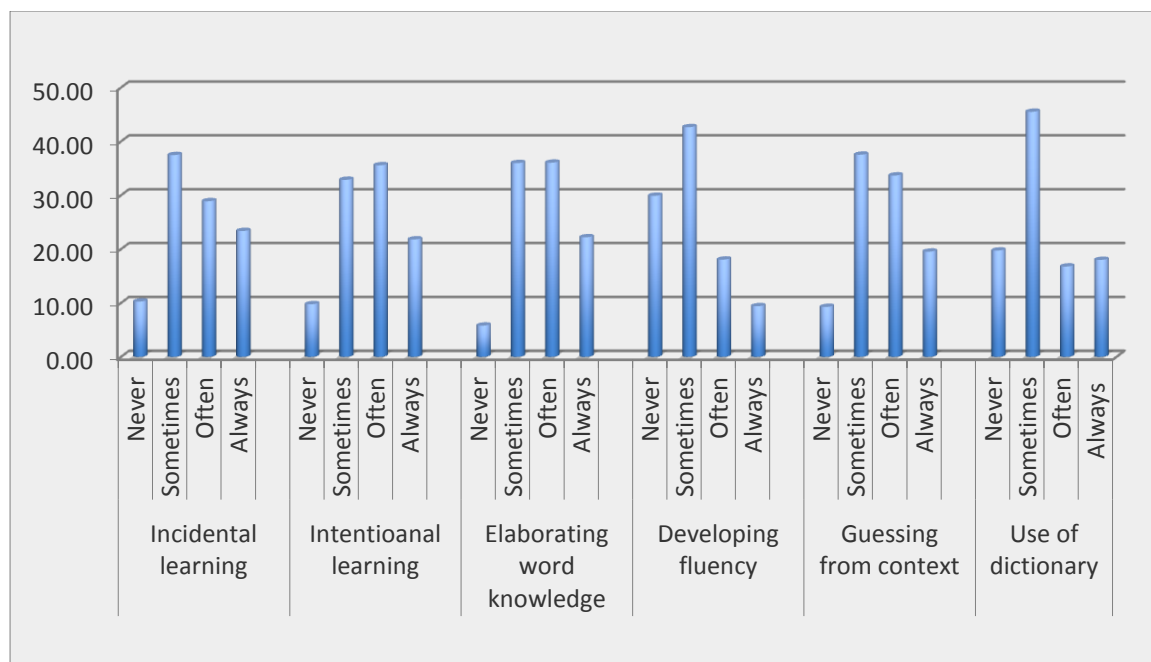
Figure 1. Overall finding of teaching vocabulary

As can be seen in Figure 1, the participants did not seem to vary significantly in the way they taught vocabulary to their learners. When the option *never* was left out from the calculation, the average proportions of participants who selected the strategies were as follows: incidental learning 30%, intentional learning 30%, elaborating word knowledge 32%, developing fluency 23%, guessing from context 30%, and use of dictionary 27%. It appears that developing vocabulary fluency was not practiced as much compared to other strategies. Developing fluency of vocabulary already known by learners is actually an essential activity because it can help learners recognize words or use words without hesitation. This strategy can be enhanced through extensive reading and learning high-frequency vocabulary (Hunt & Beglar, 2002).

The following figures display the comparisons of strategies of teaching vocabulary across the three variables; school levels, learner status, and teaching experience.
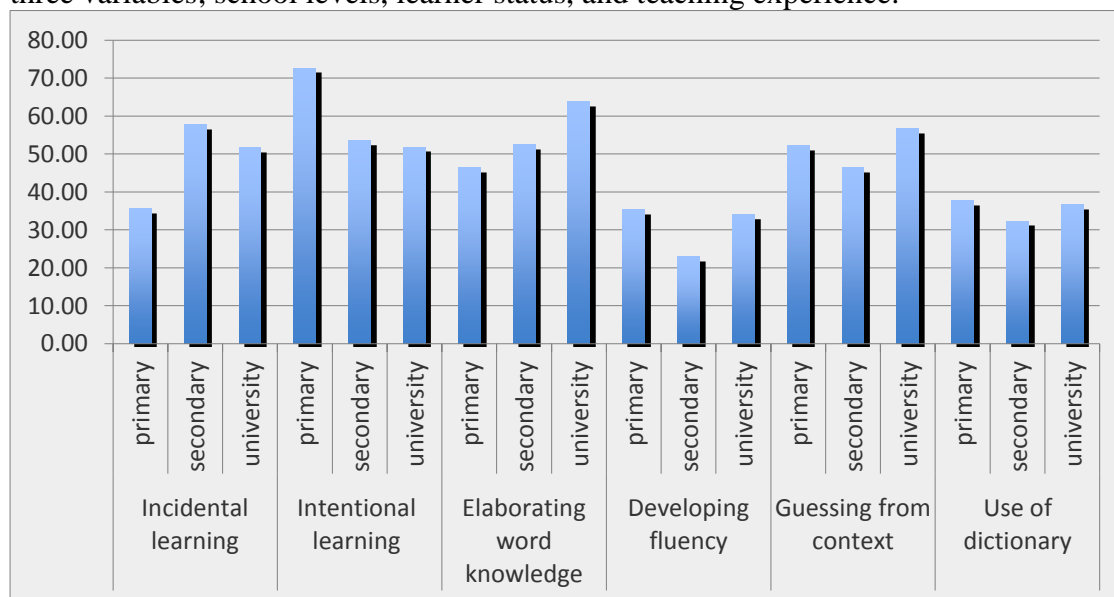

Figure 2. Comparison of strategies across school levels

Figure 2 indicates three strategies the participants used more frequently in higher levels of

education. As can be seen in the figure, incidental learning, elaborating word knowledge, and guessing from context were used by more participants at secondary and tertiary levels compared to those used in the primary school. This finding indicates that more incidental learning of vocabulary was practiced as learners moved up to a higher level of education. At secondary and university levels learners are usually assigned to cope with more readings as they have more experience with English and get more exposure to the language. A similar argument may also apply to elaborating word knowledge and guessing from context; as learners become more mature and more experienced with English, they may be required to utilize their analytical skills in acquiring new words such as learning affixes, using new words in new sentences, learning semantic web, learning synonyms, determining parts of speech, dividing words into parts, etc. while the use of the dictionary seemed to be equal across school levels. With the availability of handy bilingual and electronic dictionaries and their ease of use, learners may not need to have much training in using dictionaries.
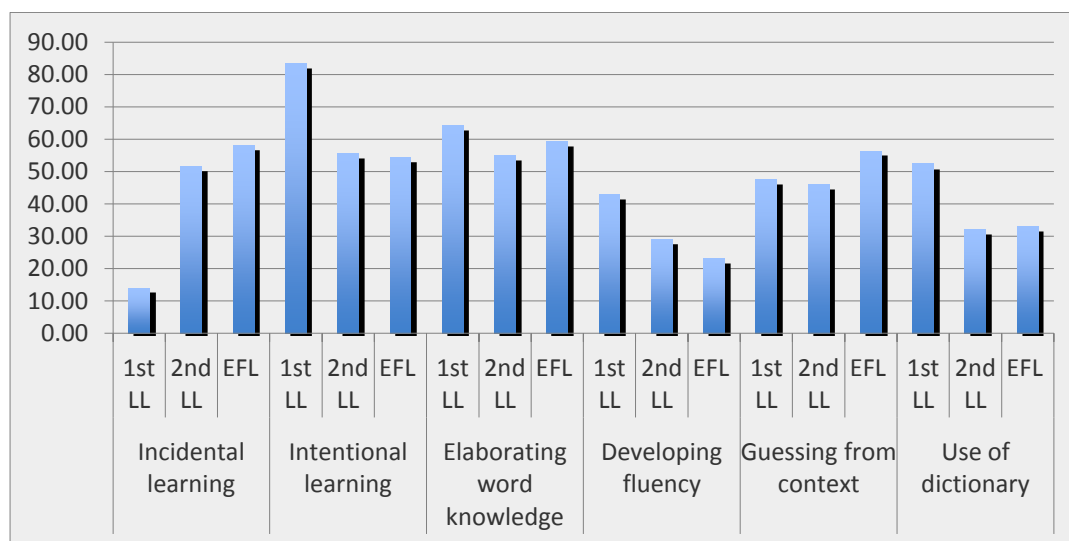

Figure 3. Comparison of strategies across learner status

In Figure 3, only two strategies were used more frequently in the classes of second and foreign language learners compared to those used in classes of first language learners; incidental learning and guessing meaning from context. It is interesting to observe that there was a significant difference of incidental learning in second and foreign language learners' classes compared to that in first language learners. Native versus non-native status of the learners could be a factor for this difference and it may be argued that non-native learners should be given more exposure to English through more readings from which they are expected to learn vocabulary incidentally. Another interesting observation of the finding in Figure 3 was: intentional learning decreased with the 'foreignness' status of the learners. As can be seen in the figure, the proportions of teachers using intentional vocabulary learning dropped from '1st, 2nd, to EFL', quite the opposite to incidental learning. Another decrease of proportions of strategy use was also evident in cross comparison of elaborating word knowledge, developing fluency, and use of dictionary.
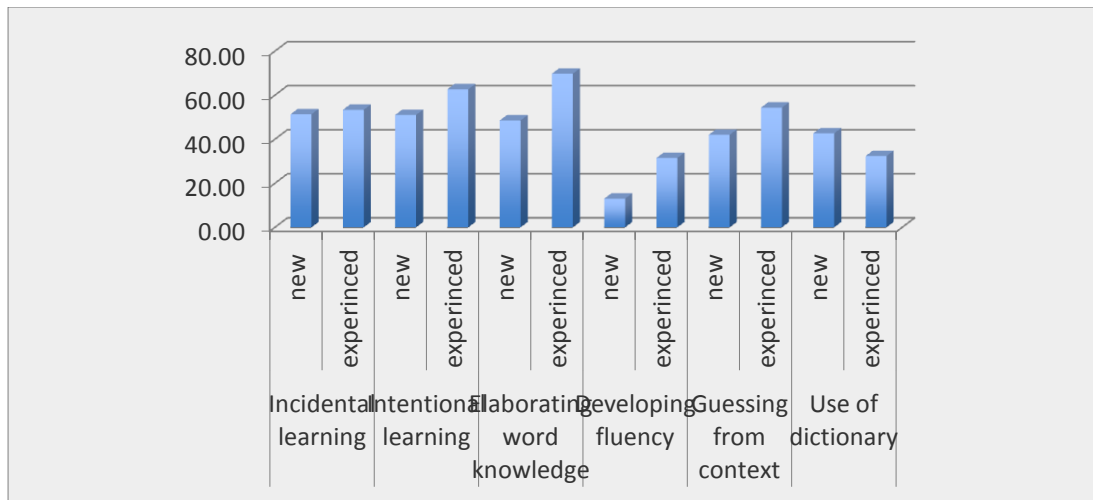
Figure 4. Comparison of strategies across teaching experience

Figure 4 shows differences of strategy used by new teachers who have taught for 1-5 years and experienced teachers who have taught for over 15 years. The difference of strategy use was evidenced in intentional learning, elaboration of word knowledge, developing fluency, and guessing from context, with more proportions of experienced teachers utilizing these strategies. This difference may point to the effect of length of service in the profession during which teachers can develop their professional skills and confidence in delivering various kinds of teaching strategies.
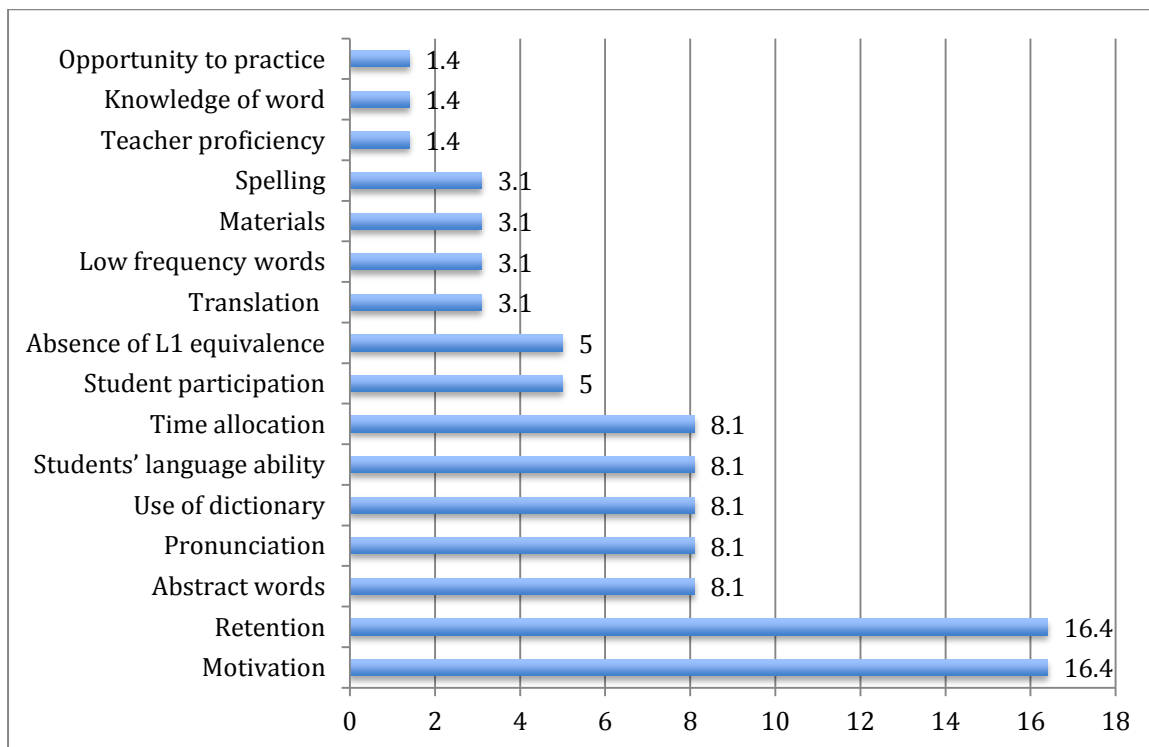

Figure 5. Problems in teaching English vocabulary

Astika, G. (2015). *The English Teacher, XLIV*(2), 84-95.

As displayed in Figure 5, we can see a range of problems related to factors that were internal and external to the learners. The most notable problems revealed by the participants were retention of new words and student motivation. An examination of the participants' responses about the problems they had in teaching English vocabulary revealed four aspects of motivation in learning vocabulary, as seen in the following excerpts:

1. "I think my students, as foreign language learners, lack enough opportunities to practice the vocabularies they learn and they don't have the strong consciousness of learning vocabulary by adopting different ways".
2. "Not all my students want to learn new words nor how to search for them. Also, most of my students do not want to use dictionary for their own learning purposes".
3. "Unless students have a real reason to continue using English (study at a foreign university or college), many students now are losing interest in improving their skills and abilities".
4. "The problem I have is teaching in an environment where the students refuse to speak English in the classroom and it is difficult to get them motivated to use new vocabulary".

These motivational problems appear to be pervasive regardless of geographical contexts. The comments above point to the need for creating the opportunity for the students to practice English vocabulary through, for example, task-based activities (Orawiwatnakul, 2011; Khabiri & Charmgar, 2012; Mokhtar et al., 2010) that can raise learners' confidence and consciousness for the need to have a sufficient stock of vocabulary.

Students' learning culture may also contribute to their reluctance to speak English in class. Their culture may be in conflict with the teaching strategy which requires active use of the language. These motivational problems may cause students to experience difficulties in remembering vocabulary, as revealed by the participants in response to the questionnaire:

1. "Unless the items are made part of their long term memory, then the students will not actually use the item. Also students often pick on one word, normally Latinate, and use that rather than synonyms".
2. "The most difficult aspect is for them to retain all the new words, since apart from the school lessons they have poor speaking and listening opportunities".
3. "I need to keep a check on the improvement of the students if I fail to do so they end up forgetting them and they are back to square one".
4. "Writing new words to really remember them is often a problem these days with PC and a tablet at hand".
5. "When the new words piled up and are not reviewed sufficiently, they will just evaporate".

These comments indicate the importance of creating the opportunities for frequent writing practice and assessment. Students should actually practice writing new words as a technique to retain them in memory via technology use such as that suggested by Yang and Chen (2007) or Chen and Chung (2008). This is especially crucial amidst rapid progress in educational technology and gadgets such as smart phones and iPads where students only need to type on keyboards or tap images to see new words on the screen. This could be an important area of research on vocabulary retention.

Conclusion

This study has explored the practices of teaching vocabulary by teachers from different parts of the world and revealed some interesting differences with regard to learner status, educational level, and teaching experience. Besides, notable challenges in teaching vocabulary suggest the need for pedagogical innovations to increase learners' motivation and vocabulary retention. The findings of this study have revealed the increasing practice of incidental learning from primary education to university. The increasing proportions of incidental learning along the educational ladder may indicate that vocabulary acquisition through incidental learning is a gradual process. If this is the case, then, this process can be enhanced through practice from simple to more demanding tasks, for example, repeated read-aloud practice with lexically-rich materials in primary school and extensive reading or extensive listening in secondary and university levels.

Although the findings have provided useful information about teaching vocabulary, a couple of limitations of the study need to be pointed out. First, the participants were invited via an online survey. Their voluntary participation made it impossible to control for representativeness of participants. Second, this study only spanned two months. A longer duration of study could involve more participants and yield richer as well as more conclusive results.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6SZ9PDZ

Part A

Please select the option that best describes your activity in teaching English vocabulary.

1. I have been teaching English for ….
      a. 1-5 years   b. 6-10 years   c. 11-15 years d. over 15 years
2. My learners are …
      a. first language learners   b. second language learners
      c. foreign language learners.
3. I am teaching in …
      a. primary school b. secondary school   c. university
4. I teach vocabulary when students find difficult words while reading a text.
      a. Never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
5. I teach vocabulary when students find difficult words while listening to a recording.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often d. always
6. I teach vocabulary when students find difficulty while listening to a video.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
7. I teach vocabulary using word pairs: English words and the translation in first language (L1).
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
8. I teach vocabulary and practice saying the word aloud.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
9. I review vocabulary immediately after teaching the word first time in class.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
10. I teach a few words at one time (five to seven) rather than many words (ten to fifteen).
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
11. When I teach vocabulary, I ask students to associate the word with a visual image.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
12. When I teach vocabulary, I ask students to associate the words with the words they already know.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
13. When I teach vocabulary, I identify the affixes and the grammatical patterns.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
14. When I teach vocabulary, I ask students to use the word in new sentences.
      a. Never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
15. When I teach vocabulary, I also teach the collocations such as *nice view* or *blond hair*.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
16. When I teach vocabulary, I also teach synonyms such as: *rich* and *wealthy*.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
17. For building word fluency, I ask students to read texts with familiar words in different speeds.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
18. For building word fluency, I ask students to read group of familiar words several times.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
19. I ask students to underline new words and try to guess the meaning from the context.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
20. I ask students to decide if a new word is a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
21. I ask students to divide a new word into its parts such as *unlock* becomes *un+lock*.
      a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
22. I ask students to use bilingual dictionary to find meanings of new words.

a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
23. I ask students to use a dictionary on the website to find meanings of new words.
     a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always
24. I teach students how to use a dictionary to find the correct meaning of new words.
     a. never   b. sometimes   c. often   d. always

Part B

What problems do you have in teaching vocabulary? Please write a brief description of the problems in the space below.

25. My problems in teaching vocabulary.