

## Gaza EFL 11<sup>th</sup> graders' use of vocabulary learning strategies

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### Abstract

Learning strategies play a central role in developing English as a foreign language students' lexical abilities. The study aimed to explore Gaza 11th graders' use of English vocabulary learning strategies. Besides, the study examined Gaza 11th grade teachers' perceptions of the students' problems with using such strategies. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 students and 16 teachers so as to achieve the purposes of the study. Results indicated that the students tended to practice many learning strategies, such as repeating words several times, guessing the meanings of unknown words from context, and asking help from a teacher. Findings also revealed that the students neglected two types of learning strategies, including metacognitive strategies and affective strategies. Additionally, the study showed the students' problems with English vocabulary learning strategies as perceived by the teachers i.e., students' habits of learning words in isolation, students' low self-esteem, and other problems. Finally, the researcher provided the study recommendations.

**Keywords** EFL graders, Gaza, learning, strategy, vocabulary

### 1. Introduction

Lack of vocabulary knowledge can hinder English as a foreign language (EFL) students from using a language communicatively. According to Schmit (2010), students should acquire a large amount of words to function appropriately in a second language. Istiqomach (2020) also provides that lexis is one of the important language elements foreign language (FL) students should focus on, and learning an adequate number of words is essential to practice all language skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

As a sequence of the central role of vocabulary in improving language skills, several studies have been conducted on EFL students' use of vocabulary learning strategies. For example, Abid (2019) investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by Iraqi EFL university students. Ali (2020) examined the relationship between the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi EFL undergraduate male students and their scores in a vocabulary test. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) also explored the types of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Malaysian students majoring in teaching English as a second language. Likewise, Baharudin (2019) investigated vocabulary learning strategies utilized by Malaysian ESL

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undergraduates. Bristi (2015) examined the strategies employed by Bangladeshi undergraduate students when learning English words. Garita and Sanchez (2021) identified the types of indirect learning strategies utilized by EFL university students at Costa Rica. Furthermore, Makrami and Al-Awaid (2020) studied lexis learning strategies practiced by the EFL learners at Jazan University. Finally, the two experimental studies of Ebrahimi, Azhideh, and Aslanabadi (2015) and Naeimi and Foo (2005) affirmed the effectiveness of employing direct and indirect strategies in developing EFL students' vocabulary knowledge.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous studies approached Palestinian students' use of English vocabulary strategies. Palestinian people are educated through two educational periods: obligatory education period starting from the first grade and ending with the 10th grade and secondary education period, including 11th and 12th grades. The successful completion of the 10th grade is a key requirement for entry to the secondary education. English language learning is compulsory in all Palestinian schools, including Gaza secondary schools. Four-six class periods a week are devoted to delivering English textbooks to Palestinian secondary school students. It is noteworthy that vocabulary is an important component in all English textbooks used in Palestinian schools.

Based on 24 years of work experience as teacher of English language at Gaza schools and universities, the researcher noted the problems encountered by Palestinian students while learning English words. Furthermore, Hammad (2016) indicated that lack of lexical knowledge was the most annoying problem Palestinian university students faced while writing English compositions. Hammad (2014) also showed that Gaza primary graders confronted many difficulties when learning English words. Consequently, the current study aimed at examining Gaza students' use of English vocabulary learning strategies through addressing the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Gaza 11<sup>th</sup> graders practice when learning English vocabulary?
2. What are Gaza 11<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' perceptions of the students' problems with using English vocabulary learning strategies?

### *1.1. Literature Review*

The literature review consists of a theoretical framework and a number of previous studies.

#### *1.1.1. Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework discusses the definition of vocabulary, importance of learning EFL vocabulary, types of EFL vocabulary learning, and EFL vocabulary learning strategies.

Vocabulary is defined as the words that compose a language (Vocabulary, 2022). It is also defined by Neef and Vater (2006) as a stock of words of a language or the list of lexemes. Kailani and Muqattach (1995) refer to many types of vocabulary, including the following:

- Active words are used in everyday speech, and they should be taught and learned through focusing on meaning, form, and collocation.
- Passive words are not needed for production in speaking or writing, and learners should recognize them in context.
- Function words are elements of the grammatical system of a language, such as prepositions, conjunctions, etc.
- English for special purposes (ESP) words are related to special interests, jobs, or professions.

Based on the above, the researcher defines vocabulary as the words that compose a language, as the focus of the present study is specifically placed on active words.

### *1.1.2. Importance of Learning EFL Vocabulary*

Lexis is one of the important language elements EFL students should focus on. Acquiring an adequate number of words is essential to practice all language skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Istiqomach, 2020). Students also should acquire a large amount of words to function appropriately in a second language (Schmit, 2010). According to Rafik-Galea and Wong (2011), vocabulary is often regarded as a source of problems for foreign language learners. Hammad (2016) also showed that lack of lexical knowledge distinctly contributed to Palestinian university students' poor performance in English writing.

### *1.1.3. Types of Vocabulary Learning*

There are two types of vocabulary learning i.e., incidental vocabulary learning and intentional vocabulary learning. Intentional vocabulary learning happens when a learner employs intentional techniques for focusing explicitly on learning new words through strategies. Incidental learning may happen when a student reads a large amount of texts (Schmit, 2010). In other words, intentional learning focuses on learning words as a main objective, whereas in incidental learning students notice words while included in the overall meaning (Olmez & Saka, 2020). In this context, Schmit (2010) indicates that intentional learning of vocabulary is more effective than incidental learning.

### *1.1.4. Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies. Learners need to train on vocabulary learning strategies since such strategies include activities and techniques that can facilitate vocabulary learning process. They include making conscious efforts to observe new words, context-based inferencing, and storing into long-term memory (Takac, 2008). Oxford (1996) and Takac (2008) classify language learning strategies, including vocabulary learning strategies into two main categories i.e., direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies require mental processing of the language, and they include cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and memory strategies. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, provide indirect support for language learning through planning, evaluating,

seeking help, and controlling anxiety, and they encompass metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Memory strategies can assist in entering information into long term-memory and retrieving it when necessary i.e., recalling, linking items, grouping and structural reviewing (Patino & Romero, 2015). They are used to commit new words to memory by associating the newly learned vocabulary items with the existing ones (Olmez & Saka, 2020). Examples of memory strategies encompass remembering vocabulary in a context (Teng, 2015), remembering words by reviewing them frequently, reviewing word items after the end of the lesson, using semantic mapping and scales to remember words, associating words with synonyms, antonyms, cognates, and grammatical functions, remembering lexical items from images of words meanings and forms composed in mind, and remembering words from writing English names on physical objects (Abid, 2019; Hamzah, Kafipour, & Abdullah, 2009; Makrami & Al-Awaid, 2020).

Cognitive strategies are used for forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages into the target language (Oxford, 1996). Cognitive strategies are essential for developing lexis since they involve identification, storage and retrieval of words (Ilach & Alonso, 2020). For Macaro (2003), cognitive strategies employed in explicit vocabulary learning should focus on identifying the form and meaning of a word, processing it into the working memory, and committing it to the long-term memory. Examples of cognitive strategies are paying attention to new English words when watching English movies, referring to the dictionary when necessary, examining the different contexts of a word, practicing new words in writing and speaking, repeating a word several times, taking a list of new English words, keeping a vocabulary notebook, and listening to a tape of word lists (Abid, 2019; Teng, 2015).

Compensation strategies include guessing meanings and switching to the native language (Oxford, 1996). They are actions enabling students to compensate for the inadequate repertoire of language skills to produce language, such as using synonyms. Examples of compensation strategies are figuring out the meanings of unknown words from context, focusing on the Arabic equivalents of English words to recognize meanings, guessing meanings of words from common sense and knowledge of the world, and using logical relations to guess meanings of unknown words (Teng, 2015).

Affective strategies enable students to control emotions, motives, and attitudes through employing some techniques, such as deep breathing, relaxation, meditation, self-encouragement, talking with others to reduce anxiety, self-relaxation, self-reinforcement, and laughing (Patino & Romero, 2015). Affective strategies are also shown through self-talking, and redirecting of negative thoughts about one's capability of learning a language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Metacognitive strategies are usually employed to control and assess vocabulary learning (Olmez & Saka, 2020). According to Tarricone (2011), metacognition refers to one's knowledge about one's cognitive processes, and it includes active monitoring, observation and consequent regulation of such processes. Patino and Romero (2015) view that metacognitive strategies include planning, monitoring, evaluating, linking the new information with

the previous learnt material, and organizing ideas. Examples of metacognitive strategies include checking and evaluating progress in vocabulary learning and strategy use through self-tests (Tiing, et al., 2021), and setting a goal or a plan for learning new vocabulary (Teng, 2015)

Social strategies facilitate interaction with others. Such strategies are related to asking questions and cooperating with proficient users of language (Patino and Romero, 2015). The strategies also include practicing language, seeking help, getting involved in cooperative work i.e., team work and pair work (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006).

Takac (2008) provides another classification of vocabulary learning strategies, including formal vocabulary learning strategies, self-initiated independent vocabulary learning strategies, and spontaneous vocabulary learning strategies. Formal vocabulary learning strategies are used in classrooms and based on instrumental motivation i.e., testing word knowledge and repeating words. Self-initiated independent vocabulary learning strategies depend on the conscious efforts of the learners i.e., grouping words together, using words in context, using different types of dictionaries, and taking notes. Spontaneous vocabulary learning strategies reflect students' personal attitudes and interests and communication needs i.e., listening to songs, remembering words from movies or TV. shows.

It is worth mentioning that the researcher made use of the classification of English vocabulary learning strategies provided by Oxford (1996) and Takac (2008) in analyzing the semi-structured interviews data in this study. According to such classification, English vocabulary learning strategies are divided into two main categories i.e., direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and memory strategies. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, encompass metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

#### *1.1.5. Previous Studies*

Some relevant descriptive studies focused on EFL students' use of vocabulary learning strategies. For instance, Asgari and Mustapha (2011) explored the types of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Malaysian ESL university students. The study conducted open-ended interviews with 10 students, and findings showed that the participants utilized several strategies, such as learning a word through reading, using monolingual dictionaries, using English language media, and applying new English words in their daily conversation. Results also revealed that the students used memory, determination, and metacognitive strategies. In the same vein, Baharudin (2019) investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by 40 Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Using a questionnaire, the study found that memory and social strategies were the most frequently used by female undergraduates while male undergraduates made more use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Moreover, Bristi (2015) examined vocabulary learning strategies used by 70 Bangladeshi EFL undergraduate students. A questionnaire was administered to the participants. The findings revealed that the participants highly used determination strategies and moderately used social, memory, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Likewise,

Garita and Sanchez (2021) identified the types of indirect learning strategies utilized by 50 EFL university students living in America. The study used two questionnaires to collect the data. The results showed that the participants used indirect learning strategies. Makrami and Al-Awaid (2020) studied vocabulary learning strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners. A questionnaire was administered to 78 male students, and findings indicated that 'guessing the meaning of new and unknown vocabulary' got the highest score whereas 'using a dictionary to find meanings of new words' got the lowest score. A study of Tiing et al. (2021) also identified the English vocabulary learning strategies utilized by 40 Malaysian pupils. Based on a questionnaire, the study concluded that metacognitive strategies were the most used. The study also found that female pupils employed more strategies than male pupils, and they favored social strategies. Sihotang, Afriazi, and Imranuddin (2017) aimed to find out vocabulary learning strategies applied by 86 Indonesian EFL students. A questionnaire was implemented in the study, and results showed that the students applied six groups of vocabulary learning strategies, including determination strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies, and social strategies.

Other descriptive studies examined the correlation between EFL students' vocabulary learning strategies and their vocabulary knowledge. For example, Abid (2019) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used by 100 Iraqi EFL university students in relation to their vocabulary size. A vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire and a vocabulary test were utilized in the study. Results concluded that the Iraqi EFL learners were unaware of the strategies they were supposed to employ in learning vocabulary. Results also showed that the participants' vocabulary size was limited, and had no relation with the strategies used. Likewise, Ali (2020) examined the relationship between the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by 50 Saudi EFL undergraduate male students and their scores in a vocabulary test. A questionnaire and a vocabulary test were used to collect data. The study concluded that in understanding a reading text, the participants tended to figure out the meanings of unknown words, mainly by guessing word-meanings through different sub-strategies. The study also found that the participants' scores on the vocabulary test were significantly correlated with the type of strategies they used. Furthermore, Teng (2015) identified the correlation between vocabulary learning strategies and the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. The researcher applied a questionnaire to 145 Chinese EFL university students (low achievers) and two vocabulary tests. Results indicated that indirect strategies were less frequently used than direct strategies, and there was a positive relationship between the participants' use of vocabulary learning strategies and breadth and depth of vocabulary.

The three experimental studies of Ebrahimi, Azhideh, and Aslanabadi (2015), Naeimi and Foo (2005), and Taghinezhad, Azizi, Shahmohammadi, Kashanifar, and Azadikhah (2016) were concerned with the effect of some types of vocabulary learning strategies on EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. Ebrahimi, Azhideh, and Aslanabadi (2015) investigated the effect of using 'guessing the meaning of new vocabulary from context' on the

vocabulary knowledge of 60 students in an English institute in Tabriz. The researchers designed two groups. Utilizing a pre/post-test, the study showed that contextual guessing affected the students' vocabulary learning, and helped them keep the second language vocabulary in their minds. Furthermore, Naeimi and Foo (2005) explored the effectiveness of implementing direct versus indirect vocabulary learning strategies on vocabulary acquisition of 60 EFL pre-intermediate language learners. Employing a vocabulary test, results indicated that students who used direct strategies in their learning outperformed the other group who employed indirect learning strategies. Taghinezhad, Azizi, Shahmohammadi, Kashanifar, and Azadikhah (2016) also examined the effect of indirect and direct learning strategies on the vocabulary learning of 90 Iranian EFL upper-intermediate students. The students were divided into two experimental groups. One experimental group received vocabulary instruction using direct learning strategies and the other group received vocabulary instruction employing indirect learning strategies. Results indicated that the students who used indirect strategies in their learning outperformed their counterparts in the other group. Apparently, none of the previous studies approached Palestinian students' use of English vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, the present study examined Gaza EFL 11th graders' practice of vocabulary learning strategies. It is worth mentioning that the previous studies assisted the researcher in developing the study instruments.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Research design*

The researcher employed the qualitative method for describing Gaza EFL 11th graders' use of vocabulary learning strategies. Lichtman (2010) views that the qualitative method can present in-depth description and understanding of human experiences.

### *2.2. Participants*

The sample of the study was composed of 36 participants (20 11th graders and 16 11th grade teachers) learning and teaching English at six secondary schools in Gaza (West of Gaza and East of Gaza directorates). The students were males and females with different proficiency levels i.e., high achievers, intermediate achievers, and low achievers. The researcher also considered the students' section i.e., literary-section students and scientific-section students when selecting the student participants. For more information about the students' problems with using English vocabulary learning strategies, the researcher interviewed 16 female and male teachers teaching English language to 11th graders in the selected schools.

### *2.3. Research Instruments*

For the study data to be obtained, the researcher used two semi-structured interviews. For Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2006), semi-structured interviews can help in gathering in-depth data since a researcher can probe beyond the interview questions. The researcher developed the interviews

questions after considering some relevant studies (e.g., Abid, 2019; Ali, 2020; Garita & Sanchez, 2021; Makrami & Al-Awaid, 2020; Teng, 2015; Tiing, et al., 2021). Then, she checked the face validity and content validity of the interviews (validating the interviews questions by a group of referees who were specialized in English language teaching). Each interview lasted 40 minutes, and was audio-recorded.

#### 2.4. *Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

The study collected its data in the second semester of the school year 2021-2022. After obtaining the consent from the Palestinian Ministry of Education, the researcher gathered in-depth data about the student participants' English vocabulary learning strategies through conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 students who were interviewed in focused-groups.

Similarly, the researcher interviewed 16 teachers in groups. The researcher conducted the interviews in the libraries of the selected schools, and allowed the participants to use their mother tongue while talking. All participants were assured of complete confidentiality of their answers, and they were willing to participate in the research.

For analyzing the data, the researcher utilized the steps written in Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, (2006) i.e., transcribing the interviews in Arabic verbatim, translating the Arabic transcription into English, coding the transcribed data, and organizing it into a number of categories. The categories of the students' interviews consisted of six main categories, including minor ones i.e., students' use of cognitive strategies (repeating words several times, using words in context, paying attention to new English words when watching English movies, using dictionaries (bilingual dictionaries and monolingual dictionaries) for determining the meaning of new words), students' use of compensation strategies (guessing meanings from context and asking about the mother tongue equivalents of English words to recognize meanings), students' use of social strategies (asking for help from a teacher, asking for help from classmates), students' use of one metacognitive strategy (checking the effectiveness of the strategies used for learning English vocabulary during the course), and lack of students' use of affective strategies.

The categories of the teachers' interviews included students' habits of learning English words in isolation, students' low self-esteem, students' poor linguistic abilities, students' cares about the Ministry of Education traditional exams, lack of teachers' knowledge about English vocabulary learning strategies, students' habits of studying English vocabulary one day before exam, and inadequacy of time available for learning English vocabulary in English classes. For achieving data credibility, another researcher reviewed and coded the transcribed material, and the two researchers agreed with each other on 88% of the coded data.

### **3. Findings**

#### 3.1. *Results of First Research Question*

The first question was "What strategies do Gaza 11<sup>th</sup> graders practice when learning English vocabulary?" In an effort to answer this question, the

researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 students. The interviews analysis revealed that the students employed four cognitive strategies. The first cognitive strategy used by all students was repeating words several times. For most of the students, memorizing words rather than using them in a context was a key to passing the Ministry of Education exams.

Participant T. 5 (a female student with a high achievement level): I repeat English words several times in order to store them in my mind. I used to employ such technique and I got high scores in final exams.

Participant T. 8 (a male student with a low achievement level): My English teachers never asked us to rehearse any conversations or dialogues. How then will we use words in a context?

However, findings indicated that four students tended to use English vocabulary in conversations and dialogues outside classrooms.

Participant T. 10 (a female student with a high achievement level): I and all my family members use English words through having long conversations with my uncle living in America. All of us prefer to improve our language through such conversations.

Participant T. 7 (a male student with a high achievement level): Yes, I practice English words though chatting with my friends in United States of America. I also practice English words in writing my diaries.

Participant T. 11 (a female student with an intermediate achievement level): I practice English language in front of a mirror. I imagine myself talking in the class saying many speeches. Then, I try to conduct conversations with my sisters and brothers at home.

The second cognitive strategy was paying attention to new English words when watching English movies. Six interviewees reported that they sometimes paid attention to new English words when watching English movies, videos, and shows and listening to English songs.

Participant T. 16 (a female student with an intermediate achievement level): I acquire many new words from watching English videos and listening to English songs. I enjoy such movies and songs, and pay attention to the way native English speakers pronounce words.

The third cognitive strategy reported by a few students (four students) was using dictionaries (i.e., bilingual dictionaries and monolingual dictionaries) for determining the meanings of new words.

Participant T. 9 (a female student with an intermediate achievement level): I prefer to use my dictionary to identify the meanings of all unknown words. I read both Arabic and English meanings.

Participant T. 1 (a male student with a high achievement level): I often look up my dictionary for recognizing meanings of key words. I prefer looking up my dictionary to guessing words from context because using a dictionary enables me to make sure of the exact meaning of a word.

In contrast, the study data concluded that three students tended to guess meanings from context (a compensation strategy). In their opinions, guessing can help in comprehending the overall meaning of a text.

Participant T. 20 (a female student with a high achievement level): I usually read the proceeding and following sentences to guess the meanings of

unknown items. Guessing can assist me in understanding the overall meaning of a passage.

Moreover, a majority of the students were found to center on another compensation strategy i.e., asking about the mother tongue equivalents of English words to recognize meanings. From their perspectives, finding Arabic meanings could facilitate the process of learning new vocabulary items.

Participant T. 14 (a male student with a high achievement level): I usually write the words with its Arabic meanings. We are used to writing all lesson words associated with their Arabic meanings in our notebooks.

Participant T. 13 (a female student with a low achievement level): When reading a passage, I translate all sentences into the mother tongue language. Such translation can help me understand all details included in the passage. The interviews data also showed that while a great number of students overused one of social strategies i.e., asking help from a teacher, only two students tended to ask help from classmates. The majority of students viewed that teachers could provide them with quick and correct answers for their questions.

Participant T. 9 (a female student with an intermediate achievement level): When I encounter a difficult word, I immediately ask my teacher about its meaning. I do not ask my classmates, because they lack knowledge.

Participant T. 12 (a male student with an intermediate achievement level): Asking my teacher about the meanings of unfamiliar words is easier and faster than guessing words from context or using dictionaries.

Additionally, results reported that the students did not use any memory strategies other than remembering words from images of Arabic meanings of words in mind (17 students) and remembering words from contexts (four students).

As for the affective strategies, none of the students utilized any affective strategies because most of them did not feel anxious due to their carelessness. Only two students expressed the feelings of anxiety and frustration associated with the study of English vocabulary.

Participant 19 (a female student with a low achievement level): I usually get low scores in English. I hate opening English textbooks, and I feel frustrated and anxious when studying English vocabulary. When I try to study it I close the book, and look for anything to eat.

Finally, the interviews analyses showed that while only one student with high proficiency level preferred to check the effectiveness of the strategies she used for learning English vocabulary during the course, the rest of the students did not utilize any metacognitive strategies.

In sum, the interviews analysis showed that the participants tended to use several strategies when learning English vocabulary, such as repeating isolated words several times, using words in context, guessing the meanings of unknown words from context, identifying mother tongue equivalents of words to recognize meanings, paying attention to new words when watching English movies, videos, and shows, asking for help from a teacher, and asking for help from classmates.

### 3.2. *Results of Second Research Question*

The second research question was "What are Gaza 11<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' perceptions of the students' problems with using English vocabulary learning strategies?" For this question to be answered, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers. All interviewees reported that most of the students used to learn English words in isolation rather than in context.

Participant T. 11 (a female teacher with 27 years of experience): Most students used to learn English vocabulary through memorizing isolated words. They keep the spelling of words by heart without using them in context. I tried to change this bad habit, but I could not.

The second problem was related to the teachers themselves. Some teachers complained about their lack of knowledge about the learning strategies of English language, including vocabulary learning strategies.

Participant T. 2 (a female teacher with 15 years of experience): I do not have any idea about English vocabulary learning strategies. Our supervisors focused on teaching strategies (i.e., lesson procedures, teaching aids, teaching techniques, etc.) rather than learning strategies. How then can we train the students to use such strategies?

The third problem was linked to the students' cares about the Ministry of Education final exams. According to all interviewees, students are concerned only about the exams designed by the Ministry of Education, and such exams do not focus on language use.

Participant T. 5 (a male teacher with 15 years of experience): Most students study language only for passing the Ministry of Education Exams. The exams neglect speaking and listening skills, and therefore do not test the students' ability of using vocabulary items.

The fourth problem was connected with time devoted to teaching and learning English language. Some teachers complained that they could not provide students with opportunities to practice English vocabulary in dialogues and conversations due to the inadequacy of class periods available to learning English vocabulary.

Participant T. 6 (a female teacher with 23 years of experience): Because the time allocated for teaching English language is not enough, we cannot provide students with opportunities to use key words in dialogues and conversations. We even do not focus on key words in a text. We need more class periods to deliver English textbooks. Do you remember Egyptian curricula we learned when we were students? Such Egyptian textbooks did not include such huge amounts of words, concepts, rules, and exercises. How can we, as teachers, find time for setting activities through which students can use vocabulary items communicatively? Indeed, a heavy focus is placed on quantity rather than quality.

Participant T. 15 (a female teacher with 23 years of experience): I cannot find time for training students to use words in context, guess the meanings of words from context, use dictionaries, and associate words with cognates, grammatical functions, synonyms, and antonyms, etc.

The fifth problem was students' low self-esteem. The interviewees reported that some students were with low self-esteem. In the teachers' views, such

students doubted their abilities to succeed in English vocabulary tests; consequently, they did not try to practice any learning strategies.

Participant T. 3 (a female teacher with 20 years of experience): I think that many low achievers feel frustrated with English language. They do not try to use any learning strategies because they do not believe in their success.

The final problem was students' low linguistic abilities. Many teachers viewed that some students were unable to practice English vocabulary learning strategies due to their poor linguistic abilities.

Participant T. 14 (a male teacher with 22 years of experience): You ask me whether the students practice vocabulary learning strategies or not! Some students are still not able to write English letters.

Participant T. 3 (a female teacher with 20 years of experience): How can they use words in dialogues and conversations and they can hardly utter a word?

It may be argued that the automatic promotion policy employed in Gaza schools resulted in students' poor linguistic abilities. According to all teachers, many parents did not make any effort for enhancing their children's linguistic competence since they guaranteed that their children would be systematically promoted to the next grade even if they could not pass exams.

A summary of the students' problems with English vocabulary learning strategies included the students' habits of learning words in isolation, students' low self-esteem, students' low linguistic abilities, students' cares about the Ministry of Education traditional exams, lack of teachers' knowledge about English vocabulary learning strategies, and inadequacy of time available for learning English vocabulary in English classes.

#### **4. Discussion and Implications**

Results indicated that the students in this study tended to utilize several learning strategies i.e., repeating words several times, asking for the mother tongue equivalents, asking help from a teacher, asking help from classmates, using a dictionary for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words, and other strategies. Congruent with this result, Asgari and Mustapha (2011) showed that Malaysian ESL students majoring in teaching English as a second language utilized various strategies when learning English vocabulary i.e., learning a word through reading, using monolingual dictionaries, and using English language media. Baharudin (2019) also found that Malaysian ESL undergraduates learned vocabulary through employing cognitive and social strategies.

However, the current study reported that the students neglected employing two important types of learning strategies i.e., metacognitive strategies and affective strategies. According to Khan and Khan (2018), learning strategies, including affective strategies and metacognitive strategies play a central role in facilitating language learning. Furthermore, Patino an Romero (2015) state that affective strategies enable students to control emotions, motives, and attitudes through employing some techniques, such as deep breathing, relaxation, meditation, self-encouragement, self-relaxation, and self-reinforcement. Metacognitive strategies also enhance students' abilities of planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Thus, Gaza teachers (i.e., 11th grade teachers) should train the students on practicing vocabulary learning

strategies, including affective strategies and metacognitive strategies in English classes.

The present study also found that the majority of students used to rely on their teachers for determining the meanings of unknown words. Only a few students were found to work on their own in identifying the meanings of unfamiliar words though guessing meanings from context and referring to a dictionary when necessary. In this context, Gelzheiser, Scanlon, Hallgren-Flynn, and Connors (2019) view that some students are dependent on the teacher out of habit and teachers can teach the idea of independent hypothesis generation and confirmation through telling the students to use learning strategies, such as figuring out unknown words by themselves. EFL students should train the students to guess the meanings of puzzling words from context. For Shankar (2008), guessing the meaning of a word from its use in context may improve students' abilities of comprehension, speed up their reading, make learners aware of semantic properties, and help learners to use words appropriately in context. Based on that, Gaza EFL teachers are strongly recommended to encourage students to work on their own in determining the meanings of puzzling words through guessing and referring to a dictionary when necessary.

Another result was that most students did not use lexical items in context due to the inadequacy of class periods available to learning English. In line with this result, Hammad and Abdellatif. (2012) showed that the number of the class periods devoted to teaching English for Palestine was perceived by teachers to be inadequate. Rasinski, Padak, Newton, and Newton (2008) provide that ESL/EFL learners need frequent opportunities to try out new words in varied learning contexts. So, the researcher recommends the Ministry of Education in Gaza to assign extra class time to provide students with ample opportunities to use English words effectively.

Furthermore, the interviews showed that many teachers complained about their lack of knowledge about English vocabulary learning strategies. Kailani and Muqattach (1995) view that EFL teachers should be aware of all pedagogical (i.e., teaching and learning strategies) strategies and techniques required for delivering English textbooks successfully. Therefore, the researcher advises Gaza EFL supervisors to hold training courses and provide guidance to assist 11th grade teachers to recognize various learning strategies, such as direct and indirect learning strategies.

Related to the study findings was that some students were with low self-esteem, and they did not practice any affective strategies for overcoming such feelings. School counselors in Gaza schools (i.e., specifically schools including 11th grades) should provide kids and students with all tips and support for helping them to get rid of their frustration and reduce their anxiety. They need to train pupils to employ many affective strategies (i.e., deep breathing, relaxation, meditation, self-encouragement, self-relaxation, self-reinforcement, and other strategies) to control their negative feelings. According to Thompsom (2002), a school councilor can support a safe learning environment and help students achieve better results.

Moreover, results indicated that both teachers and students were interested in the Ministry of Education exams, and such exams encourage

memorization rather than language use. It seems that the students tended to use such rote-learning technique in previous stages of learning, and ignored other important strategies, such as guessing the meanings of words from context and using lexical items in its real context. Roy (2017) states that L2 students' weakness in syntax may be attributed to examination system that tests students' rote memorization rather than their analytical and creative thinking. Hammad (2014) also argued that a main reason for Gaza EFL students' inability to use reading strategies was rote-memorization technique some students utilized in their study. It is advisable, here, for the Ministry of Education in Gaza to design English exams centering on questions that can improve the students' use of language items.

Additionally, the teachers' interviews revealed that the students used to study English subject, including vocabulary items one day before exam, the thing which might hinder employing vocabulary learning strategies and storing such items into the long-memory. Fawcett (2018) views that students should plan for their study i.e., deciding the number of hours needed for the study, study systematically, and assign at least three days before the exam for review rather than study. Royal (2016) also states that the day before the test should be to light study. Therefore, Gaza EFL teachers have to urge the students to study English lexical items slowly over a period of time so that the students could store words into the long-term memory.

A final important result was related to automatic promotion policy employed in Gaza schools. According to all teachers, automatic promotion resulted in students' poor linguistic abilities. In their opinions, many parents did not make any efforts for improving their children's linguistic competence since they guaranteed that their children will be systematically promoted to the next grade without study. Evans, Myers, and Lifeld (2000) state that though automatic promotion helps children self-esteem, it should not be the procedure of all grades. They further provide that this approach should be evaluated. Turtel (2005) also views that automatic promotion emphasizes a message that people can succeed in life without any effort. It lets students do not make efforts, knowing they will upgrade to the next grade without study. Based on that, the Ministry of Education in Gaza is powerfully recommended to evaluate the automatic promotion policy employed in Gaza schools.

## **5. Conclusions**

Results indicated that though the students tended to practice many learning strategies i.e., repeating words several times, asking help from a teacher, and asking for the mother tongue equivalents, they neglected two important types of learning strategies i.e. metacognitive strategies and affective strategies. Furthermore, the study showed the students' problems with English vocabulary learning strategies, such as students' habits of learning words in isolation, students' low self-esteem, students' low linguistic abilities, students' cares about the Ministry of Education traditional exams, lack of teachers' knowledge about English vocabulary learning strategies, and inadequacy of time available for English vocabulary teaching and learning.

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**Appendices****Appendix A****A semi-structured Interview (The Student's Interview)**

1. What social strategies do you employ when learning English vocabulary? Do you study English words in groups, Do you ask for a help? etc. Why/Why not?
2. What affective strategies do you employ when learning English vocabulary? Do you take deep breath when learning difficult English words? Etc. Why/Why not?
3. What cognitive strategies do you employ when learning English vocabulary? Do you pay attention to new English words when watching English movies? Do you repeat words several times? Etc. Why/Why not?
4. What compensation strategies do you employ when learning English vocabulary? Do you guess meanings from context? Do you focus on the Arabic equivalents of English words to recognize meanings? Etc. Why/Why not?
5. What memory strategies do you employ when learning English vocabulary? Do you associate words with its cognates? etc.. Why/Why not?
6. What strategies do you use for evaluating your vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning strategies? Do you practice self-tests, quizzes? etc. Why/Why not?
7. Do you employ other types of strategies? Please give examples.

## **Appendix B**

### **A semi-structured Interview (The Teacher's Interview)**

1. Do Gaza EFL 11<sup>th</sup> graders practice vocabulary learning strategies in English classes? Why/Why not?
  - a. Do they practice guessing strategies, i.e. guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words from context? Why/Why not?
  - b. Do they refer to a dictionary when they are not sure about a word? Why/Why not?
  - c. Do they associate English words with its cognates, synonyms, antonyms? Why/Why not?
  - d. Do they study English words in groups or in pairs? Do they ask for your help? Why/Why not?
  - e. Do they associate a word with its grammatical function? Why/Why not?
  - f. Do they practice the new English words they have learned in writing or speaking classes? Why/Why not?
2. What are the students' problems with the strategies of learning English vocabulary in classes? Please, give examples.