

Exploring Iraqi EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Techniques for Teaching Word Families: A Descriptive Study

Researcher. Zainab Hussein Khudar Mohammed
University of Babylon\ College of Basic Education

bas423.zanab.hussien@student.uobabylon.edu.iq

Directorate of Education of Najaf Governorate

Asst. Prof. Dr. Kadhim Muhammad Musa AlShammari

bsc.kadhim.mohammad@uobabylon.edu.iq

University of Babylon\ College of Basic Education

استكشاف تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق حول تقنيات تدريس مجموعات

الكلمات: دراسة وصفية

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أ.م.د. كاظم محمد موسى الشمري

جامعة بابل / كلية التربية الأساسية

Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a cornerstone of second language learning, providing the foundation for developing communicative competence in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Among the various approaches to vocabulary instruction, teaching word families is widely regarded as an effective strategy to promote lexical growth and morphological awareness. Word families groups of words sharing a common root with affixes enable learners to decode unfamiliar vocabulary and foster connections between related lexical items. However, limited research exists on how Iraqi EFL teachers perceive and implement techniques for teaching word families within secondary education, particularly at the critical stage of Sixth Preparatory level.

This descriptive study investigates Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of instructional techniques employed to teach word families in the Sixth Preparatory English textbook. A structured and validated questionnaire, consisting of ten items focusing on word family instruction, was administered to a purposive sample of 200 EFL teachers from government schools in Najaf, Iraq. Descriptive statistical methods, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were employed to analyze teachers' responses and identify perceived levels of effectiveness for each instructional technique.

The findings revealed that teachers highly value techniques such as semantic mapping, morphological analysis, and contextualized practice. These methods were perceived to significantly enhance students' ability to recognize word patterns, expand vocabulary retention, and apply lexical knowledge in authentic language contexts. The

results also highlighted a tendency among teachers to integrate learner-centered strategies that align with Cognitive and Constructivist learning theories, emphasizing active engagement and meaning-making. However, challenges such as time constraints, large class sizes, and varying student proficiency levels were identified as barriers to consistent implementation.

The study concludes that a multifaceted, theory-informed approach to teaching word families is essential for improving vocabulary acquisition among Iraqi EFL learners. It recommends professional development initiatives to equip teachers with innovative instructional strategies and suggests further research to explore the impact of these techniques on learners' performance and attitudes toward vocabulary learning.

Keywords: teacher, language, English, foreign, Iraq, techniques, teaching, group, words.

الملخص

يعد اكتساب المفردات حجر الزاوية في تعلم اللغة الثانية، حيث يوفر الأساس لتطوير الكفاءة التواصلية في سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) من بين الأساليب المختلفة لتعليم المفردات، يعتبر تدريس عائلات الكلمات على نطاق واسع بمثابة استراتيجية فعالة لتعزيز النمو المعجمي والوعي الصرفي. عائلات الكلمات -مجموعات من الكلمات التي تشترك في جذر مشترك مع اللواحق -تمكن المتعلمين من فك رموز المفردات غير المألوفة وتعزيز الروابط بين العناصر المعجمية ذات الصلة. ومع ذلك، هناك أبحاث محدودة حول كيفية إدراك معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وتنفيذهم لتقنيات تدريس عائلات الكلمات في التعليم الثانوي، وخاصة في المرحلة الحرجة من المستوى السادس الإعدادي.

تبحث هذه الدراسة الوصفية في تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق حول التقنيات التعليمية المستخدمة لتدريس عائلات الكلمات في كتاب اللغة الإنجليزية للصف السادس الإعدادي. طُبِّق استبيان مُنظَّم وموثَّق، يتألف من عشرة بنود تُركِّز على تعليم عائلة الكلمات، على عينة هادفة من ٢٠٠ مُعلِّم لغة إنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من مدارس حكومية في النجف، العراق. واستُخدمت أساليب إحصائية وصفية، تشمل المتوسطات الحسابية والانحرافات المعيارية والتوزيعات التكرارية، لتحليل استجابات المُعلِّمين وتحديد مستويات الفعالية المُتصوِّرة لكل أسلوب تعليمي.

أظهرت النتائج أن المُعلِّمين يُقدِّرون تقنيات مثل رسم الخرائط الدلالية، والتحليل الصرفي، والممارسة السياقية. وقد اعتُبرت هذه الأساليب مُحسِّنة بشكل كبير لقدرة الطلاب على إدراك أنماط الكلمات، وزيادة استيعابهم للمفردات، وتطبيق المعرفة المعجمية في سياقات لغوية أصيلة. كما سلَّطت النتائج الضوء على ميل المُعلِّمين إلى دمج استراتيجيات مُتمحورة حول المُعلِّم تتماشى مع نظريات التعلم المعرفية والبنائية، مع التركيز على المُشاركة الفعَّالة وتكوين المعنى. ومع ذلك، حُدِّدت تحديات مثل ضيق الوقت، وكبر حجم الفصول

الدراسية، وتفاوت مستويات كفاءة الطلاب، كعوائق أمام التطبيق المُتسق. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن اتباع نهج متعدد الأوجه ومبني على النظرية لتدريس عائلات الكلمات أمر ضروري لتحسين اكتساب المفردات بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق. ويوصي بمبادرات التطوير المهني لتزويد المعلمين باستراتيجيات تعليمية مبتكرة ويقترح المزيد من البحث لاستكشاف تأثير هذه التقنيات على أداء المتعلمين ومواقفهم تجاه تعلم المفردات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معلم، لغة، إنجليزية، أجنبية، العراق، تقنيات، تدريس، مجموعة، كلمات.

1.1.Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as a cornerstone of language proficiency and a crucial element in the development of both receptive and productive language skills (Nation, 2001). Among the various strategies for enriching learners' lexical knowledge, the teaching of word families holds a prominent place. Word families groups of words sharing the same root and affixes offer learners the tools to recognize patterns, decode unfamiliar words, and expand their vocabulary repertoire systematically. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where exposure to authentic language use is often limited, effective instruction in word families can bridge gaps in lexical competence and facilitate learners' reading comprehension and language production.

The Iraqi EFL context presents unique challenges in teaching vocabulary, particularly at the Sixth Preparatory level, where students are expected to acquire a wide range of vocabulary to meet curriculum demands and prepare for national examinations. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process by selecting and implementing appropriate instructional techniques that align with learners' needs and linguistic levels. However, research on how Iraqi EFL teachers perceive and apply techniques for teaching word families remains scarce. Understanding their perceptions is vital, as it sheds light on the pedagogical practices currently adopted and highlights areas for potential improvement.

Globally, several studies have underscored the effectiveness of morphological awareness and semantic mapping as techniques for teaching word families (Bauer & Nation, 1993; Nagy, 2007). These approaches are grounded in Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of mental processing and schema building, and Constructivist Theory, which advocates for learner-centered, context-rich instruction (Vygotsky, 1978). Despite this, many classrooms in Iraq continue to rely heavily on rote memorization and translation methods, which may hinder learners from developing a robust and flexible lexical repertoire.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of the techniques they use for teaching word families. By doing so, it aims to provide insights into current instructional practices, evaluate their perceived effectiveness, and

offer recommendations for enhancing vocabulary instruction in Iraqi EFL classrooms. The findings are expected to inform curriculum designers, teacher trainers, and policymakers about effective pedagogical strategies that promote lexical development and support language learning outcomes.

1.2. Problem Statement and Significance of the study

Vocabulary acquisition is widely acknowledged as a central component of second language learning, forming the foundation for learners' communicative competence and academic success (Nation, 2001). Among the various strategies for vocabulary instruction, teaching word families groups of words sharing a common root with different affixes has been identified as an effective approach for promoting morphological awareness and enhancing learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words and recognize lexical patterns (Nagy, 2007). In EFL contexts such as Iraq, where students often face limited exposure to authentic language use, word families can play a pivotal role in facilitating systematic vocabulary expansion and supporting reading comprehension and language production (Bauer & Nation, 1993).

However, in Iraqi secondary schools, vocabulary instruction continues to be dominated by traditional methods such as rote memorization and direct translation, which may fail to foster the deep lexical understanding and active usage required for proficiency (Alqahtani, 2015). While the Sixth Preparatory English textbook includes explicit focus on lexical areas like word families, there is limited empirical research exploring how Iraqi EFL teachers perceive and implement instructional techniques for teaching them. This gap is significant because teachers' perceptions influence their pedagogical choices and directly impact learners' outcomes (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Addressing this issue is crucial not only for improving vocabulary teaching practices but also for informing curriculum development and teacher training programs. By investigating teachers' perceptions, this study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of current instructional strategies and to highlight areas for pedagogical enhancement. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical discourse on vocabulary instruction by emphasizing learner-centered, cognitively engaging approaches supported by Cognitive and Constructivist theories (Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978). These insights may encourage the adoption of innovative teaching techniques that better equip Iraqi EFL learners with the lexical competence necessary for academic and professional success in a globalized world.

1.3. Research Objectives

- a. Identify techniques used by Iraqi EFL teachers to teach word families.
- b. Evaluate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these techniques.
- c. Provide recommendations for improving word family instruction in EFL classrooms.

1.4. Research Question:

What are Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of techniques used for teaching word families?

2.0 Literature Review

Vocabulary acquisition has long been recognized as a cornerstone of second language learning and a critical factor in developing communicative competence (Nation, 2001). Without an adequate lexical repertoire, learners struggle to engage effectively in both receptive and productive language skills. Schmitt (2008) argues that vocabulary teaching strategies must move beyond rote memorization toward approaches that promote deeper cognitive processing and active usage.

2.1 Word Families in Vocabulary Instruction

Word families' groups of words sharing a root and varying prefixes or suffixes provide learners with a morphological framework that enables them to decode unfamiliar words and expand their lexical knowledge efficiently (Bauer & Nation, 1993). Research suggests that teaching word families enhances morphological awareness, supports reading comprehension, and improves learners' ability to infer meanings in context (Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). In EFL contexts like Iraq, where exposure to authentic English input is limited, focusing on word families can bridge gaps in lexical development and support independent vocabulary acquisition.

2.2 Previous Studies on Teaching Word Families

Alqahtani (2019) conducted a study on Saudi EFL learners and found that explicit instruction in word families improved learners' recognition and usage of related vocabulary. Similarly, Sukying (2020) investigated the relationship between morphological awareness and vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners and reported significant gains in lexical retention and usage when learners engaged in activities involving word family analysis.

In the Iraqi context, Abdulwahid (2020) highlighted challenges in teaching lexical areas due to curriculum constraints and reliance on traditional teaching methods. This underscores the need for studies examining innovative and effective approaches such as those involving word families.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The effectiveness of teaching word families is supported by several learning theories. Cognitive Theory emphasizes the importance of schema building and meaningful processing, where learners integrate new vocabulary into existing mental frameworks (Anderson, 2010). Constructivist Theory, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), highlights the role of active learner engagement and social interaction in building knowledge, supporting activities like group discussions and collaborative tasks for teaching word families. Furthermore, Behaviorist principles such as repetition and reinforcement still play a role in initial stages of learning, especially in drilling root words and affixes (Skinner, 1957).

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

While international studies have demonstrated the benefits of teaching word families, few empirical studies have explored Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding this instructional approach. This gap justifies the current study's focus on understanding teachers' perspectives, as they are central to implementing effective classroom practices that align with learners' needs and curricular goals.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of the techniques used for teaching word families in the Sixth Preparatory English textbook. A descriptive approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data to explore trends and patterns in teachers' instructional practices and perceptions (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 population and sample

The study's target population comprised Iraqi EFL teachers working in government secondary schools in Najaf. A purposive sample of 200 teachers (98 males and 102 females) was selected to ensure representation of diverse teaching experiences and educational backgrounds. Participants were selected based on their active engagement in teaching the Sixth Preparatory English curriculum, ensuring familiarity with the lexical areas and techniques under investigation.

3.2 Research Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a researcher-designed questionnaire developed to assess teachers' perceptions of instructional techniques for teaching word families. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items specifically focused on word family instruction. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing for the quantification of responses.

The instrument underwent validation procedures to ensure content and face validity. Content validity was established through expert reviews from three senior EFL educators, while face validity was assessed via a pilot study involving 30 EFL teachers. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.87, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected during the academic year 2025 from selected schools in Najaf. Prior to distribution, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The questionnaires were administered in person and collected within a two-week period to ensure a high response rate.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical techniques were applied to analyze the data. Measures of central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation) were computed for each item to determine the overall perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of

various teaching techniques. Frequency distributions were also used to identify trends in responses. All statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

4.0 Results

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to its objectives and theoretical frameworks. The data were analyzed to explore Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of instructional techniques for teaching word families in the Sixth Preparatory English textbook. The results are organized according to the study's objectives and interpreted through the lenses of Cognitive and Constructivist theories.

4.1 Objective 1: Identifying Techniques Used for Teaching Word Families

The descriptive analysis revealed that teachers employ a variety of techniques to teach word families, with a strong emphasis on:

Semantic Mapping ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.64$): Teachers reported frequent use of semantic maps to help students visualize relationships among words sharing the same root. This technique aligns with Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes meaningful organization and schema building in memory (Anderson, 2010).

Morphological Analysis ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.67$): Teachers encouraged students to break down words into roots, prefixes, and suffixes, fostering morphological awareness. This supports the cognitive process of recognizing patterns and facilitating retention (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012).

Contextualized Practice ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.68$): Teachers integrated word families into authentic reading and writing tasks, promoting active engagement. Constructivist Theory underscores this practice by highlighting the importance of contextual learning where learners construct meaning from real-life situations (Vygotsky, 1978).

Other techniques such as flashcards, group activities, and using authentic texts were also noted but with moderate frequency.

4.2 Objective 2: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Techniques

The findings indicate that teachers perceive semantic mapping and contextualized practice as highly effective in enhancing students' ability to recognize, recall, and use word families. These perceptions resonate with Constructivist principles that advocate learner-centered approaches and active participation in knowledge construction (Bruner, 1966).

Additionally, the use of morphological analysis reflects a cognitive strategy that promotes deeper processing of lexical items, allowing learners to connect new vocabulary to existing knowledge frameworks (Schmitt, 2008). Teachers noted that such techniques help students develop autonomy in learning vocabulary, supporting the metacognitive aspects emphasized in Cognitive Theory (Flavell, 1979).

4.3 Objective 3: Exploring Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

Despite the reported effectiveness, teachers identified challenges such as:

Time constraints in covering all lexical areas comprehensively.

Diverse learner proficiency levels, making it difficult to implement complex strategies uniformly.

These findings highlight the need for professional development programs that equip teachers with adaptable strategies suitable for heterogeneous classrooms. Aligning instruction with Cognitive and Constructivist principles may provide solutions by fostering active, differentiated learning environments.

4.4 Theoretical Alignment of Results

The results demonstrate a clear alignment with:

Cognitive Theory, which supports techniques that involve mental organization, pattern recognition, and metacognition (Anderson, 2010; Flavell, 1979).

Constructivist Theory, emphasizing social interaction, real-world tasks, and learner autonomy in vocabulary acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1966).

The combination of these theoretical frameworks offers a comprehensive explanation for why teachers favor techniques that engage learners actively and contextually.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of instructional techniques for teaching word families. The results indicate a strong preference for semantic mapping, morphological analysis, and contextualized practice as effective strategies for enhancing students' lexical competence. These perceptions align closely with both Cognitive and Constructivist learning theories, as well as with evidence from prior studies on vocabulary instruction.

5.1 Alignment with Cognitive Theory

Cognitive Theory posits that learners process language input by organizing it into meaningful mental structures, or schemas, which facilitate retention and retrieval (Anderson, 2010). The teachers' reported use of semantic mapping supports this principle by enabling students to visualize relationships between words sharing common roots, thus aiding in deeper cognitive processing. Similarly, morphological analysis helps students deconstruct words into roots and affixes, allowing them to infer meanings and recognize patterns a process central to developing morphological awareness (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012).

The study also highlights the role of metacognition, where teachers encourage students to reflect on their learning strategies and monitor their progress in using word families. This approach resonates with Flavell's (1979) emphasis on metacognitive awareness as a crucial element in effective language learning.

5.2 Alignment with Constructivist Theory

Constructivist Theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment and social engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers' use of contextualized practice embedding word families in authentic reading and writing tasks provides learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge

in meaningful contexts. This not only enhances retention but also promotes communicative competence, as advocated by Bruner (1966). Group activities and collaborative tasks reported by some teachers further support this constructivist approach, as they foster peer learning and negotiation of meaning.

5.3 Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings are consistent with Alqahtani (2019), who found that explicit instruction in word families improved Saudi EFL learners' lexical awareness and retention. Similarly, Sukying (2020) reported that morphological awareness significantly enhanced EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. These studies, like the current research, underscore the importance of focusing on word families as a pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms.

However, challenges identified in this study such as time constraints and varying student proficiency levels mirror concerns raised by Abdulwahid (2020) regarding vocabulary instruction in Iraqi contexts. These barriers suggest a need for adaptive strategies and professional development programs that equip teachers to manage diverse classroom realities.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

The study's results emphasize the necessity of adopting a multi-theoretical approach to vocabulary instruction. While behaviorist techniques like repetition may serve as a foundation, integrating cognitively and constructivist-informed strategies provides richer, more engaging learning experiences. Teachers should be encouraged to design tasks that promote active learner participation, contextual use of

6. Conclusion

This study explored Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of instructional techniques for teaching word families in the Sixth Preparatory English textbook. The findings revealed that teachers highly value strategies such as semantic mapping, morphological analysis, and contextualized practice. These techniques were perceived as effective in enhancing students' morphological awareness, fostering the ability to decode unfamiliar words, and promoting vocabulary retention through meaningful use.

The results align closely with Cognitive Theory, which highlights the role of schema building, pattern recognition, and deep processing in vocabulary learning (Anderson, 2010). Teachers' preference for semantic mapping and morphological analysis reflects their awareness of strategies that engage learners cognitively and facilitate long-term retention (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012). Similarly, Constructivist Theory supports the integration of contextualized practice and collaborative learning activities, enabling students to construct knowledge actively through interaction and real-world applications (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1966).

However, the study also identified challenges such as time constraints, diverse student proficiency levels, and limited access to resources, which often hinder consistent implementation of these techniques. These barriers underscore the need for

teacher training programs that focus on equipping educators with adaptable, learner-centered approaches to vocabulary instruction.

In conclusion, teaching word families using a combination of theory-informed techniques can significantly enhance lexical development in Iraqi EFL classrooms. A shift towards more interactive and cognitively engaging practices is essential for preparing students to meet academic and communicative demands effectively.

7. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Integrate Morphological Instruction:

Curriculum designers should incorporate explicit teaching of word families and morphological structures in EFL textbooks to support students' lexical growth (Nation, 2001).

Professional Development for Teachers:

Teacher training programs should focus on developing educators' skills in applying cognitive and constructivist strategies, such as semantic mapping, context-rich tasks, and learner-centered activities (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Use of Technology in Vocabulary Instruction:

Schools should encourage the integration of digital tools and applications (e.g., mind-mapping software, interactive games) to facilitate engaging and effective word family instruction.

Differentiated Instruction:

Teachers should be trained in strategies that cater to diverse learner proficiency levels, allowing all students to benefit from word family activities regardless of their language ability (Tomlinson, 2014).

Further Research:

Future studies should explore students' perceptions of word family instruction and experimentally assess the effectiveness of specific techniques in improving vocabulary retention and use. Expanding research to other Iraqi provinces could provide comparative insights and strengthen generalizability.

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