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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**The Effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching on Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention in EFL Contexts: A Systematic Review**

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**ABSTRACT**

Vocabulary knowledge is central to EFL proficiency and academic success. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been proposed as an effective approach to enhancing vocabulary acquisition and retention, yet its efficacy varies across contexts. This systematic review synthesizes empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025 to examine how TBLT impacts vocabulary learning in EFL settings, including Moroccan universities. Following PRISMA guidelines, the review identifies effective instructional strategies, highlights limitations, and provides pedagogical recommendations. Findings indicate that task-based, contextualized, and strategy-oriented instruction consistently improves vocabulary retention and meaningful use, while isolated or rote-based methods are insufficient. The study underscores the importance of integrated, research-informed models for higher education EFL instruction

**KEYWORDS**

Task-Based Language Teaching, TBLT, vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary retention, EFL, systematic review

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**1. Introduction**

Vocabulary is a foundational component of EFL competence, enabling learners to comprehend, communicate, and perform academically. Inadequate lexical knowledge impedes reading comprehension, writing quality, and overall language proficiency. Kameli and Baki (2013) demonstrated strong correlations between vocabulary knowledge at multiple frequency levels and reading comprehension on the IELTS, highlighting that lexical mastery is cumulative and critical for academic success.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a promising pedagogical framework, emphasizing meaningful communication through structured tasks rather than isolated drills. Empirical studies indicate that TBLT not only enhances learners' lexical repertoire but also fosters motivation, engagement, and autonomy (Thanh & Huan, 2012; Willis, 1996). These factors are particularly important for EFL learners in university contexts, where vocabulary knowledge underpins both academic literacy and disciplinary performance.

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1 Task-Based Language Teaching and Vocabulary Learning**

TBLT prioritizes authentic communication over rote memorization. Studies consistently demonstrate that well-designed tasks improve learners' form-meaning mapping, contextual understanding, and retention of general and academic vocabulary (Dinh,

2022; Nychkalo et al., 2020; Teng & Zhang, 2024). Contextualized tasks, especially those aligned with disciplinary content, promote meaningful engagement and practical application (Albino, 2017; Tachom, 2021).

## **2.2 Strategy-Based Instruction**

The integration of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) into language instruction represents more than a pedagogical technique; it embodies a learner-centered approach that foregrounds cognitive engagement, metacognitive reflection, and autonomous learning. Strategies such as inferencing, semantic mapping, and self-monitoring provide learners with tools to actively construct meaning, rather than passively absorb lexical items. Inferencing enables learners to navigate unfamiliar contexts by drawing on prior knowledge and contextual cues, fostering a sense of agency and intellectual curiosity. Semantic mapping, by visually organizing semantic relationships, transforms abstract vocabulary into structured, meaningful networks, allowing learners to perceive connections that might otherwise remain opaque. Self-monitoring cultivates reflective practice, encouraging learners to critically assess their comprehension, identify gaps, and adapt strategies to their individual learning trajectories. As Gui and Ismail (2024) observed, the deliberate scaffolding of these strategies significantly enhances long-term retention, not merely by reinforcing memory but by equipping learners to apply vocabulary creatively and independently. Similarly, Jedi-Sari-Biglar and Liman-Kaban (2023) highlight that strategic interventions nurture learners' capacity for autonomous engagement, enabling them to approach language learning as an iterative, self-directed process rather than a task of rote memorization. In essence, strategy-based instruction situates the learner at the heart of the learning process, fostering not only cognitive growth but also the metacognitive sophistication and agency necessary for sustained linguistic development.

## **2.3 Technology-Enhanced Task-Based Learning**

Technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TBLT) offers a dynamic avenue for facilitating vocabulary acquisition when thoughtfully integrated into cohesive pedagogical frameworks. Digital tools—ranging from interactive applications and corpora-based resources to adaptive learning platforms—extend opportunities for repeated exposure, immediate scaffolding, and timely feedback, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of task-based activities. Such tools do not merely present information; they actively engage learners in meaning-making processes, enabling them to experiment with language in contextually rich, goal-oriented tasks that mirror authentic communicative situations. As Gong et al. (2025) and Suzuki et al. (2025) emphasize, technology can amplify the depth and frequency of lexical engagement, allowing learners to internalize vocabulary through multimodal experiences that traditional methods alone cannot fully provide. However, the pedagogical value of these interventions hinges upon deliberate design: technology must be purposefully embedded within tasks, aligned with learning objectives, and attuned to learners' cognitive and motivational needs, rather than deployed in a superficial or isolated manner. When effectively integrated, technology-enhanced TBLT cultivates a learning environment in which learners can navigate linguistic challenges autonomously, receive responsive support, and construct enduring lexical knowledge, thereby bridging the gap between digital innovation and meaningful, contextually grounded language development.

## **2.4 Limitations of Existing Studies**

Research on task-based language teaching (TBLT) demonstrates considerable heterogeneity across multiple dimensions, including participant age, proficiency level, task type, instructional duration, and assessment methods. This diversity, while reflective of the field's breadth, poses significant challenges for cross-study synthesis and the extraction of generalizable conclusions. Moreover, a predominant reliance on short-term post-tests in many investigations limits insight into the durability of learning gains, as few studies systematically examine delayed retention or long-term vocabulary consolidation. The scarcity of contextualized research in specific educational settings, such as Moroccan universities, further constrains the applicability of existing findings, leaving critical questions about the interaction between sociocultural context, learner characteristics, and task-based interventions insufficiently addressed. Consequently, advancing the field necessitates methodologically rigorous, longitudinal, and context-sensitive research that not only captures immediate learning outcomes but also traces the processes through which learners internalize and autonomously apply lexical knowledge over time. Such an approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of how TBLT functions across diverse learner populations and instructional environments, thereby informing both theoretical development and evidence-based pedagogical practice.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Review Design and Research Questions**

This systematic review followed PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) to synthesize evidence on TBLT's effectiveness in vocabulary acquisition and retention among EFL learners. The central research question was:

- To what extent does TBLT improve vocabulary acquisition and long-term retention in EFL contexts?

Sub-questions included:

1. How does TBLT affect immediate vocabulary learning?
2. How does it support long-term retention?
3. How does it compare with traditional vocabulary instruction approaches?

### 3.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2000 to 2025. Keywords included: "Task-Based Language Teaching," "TBLT," "vocabulary acquisition," "vocabulary retention," and "EFL." Boolean operators ensured comprehensive retrieval, and reference lists of key studies were manually screened.

**Table 1. Search Strategy**

Database	Search Strings	Time Span
Scopus	"Task-Based Language Teaching" OR TBLT AND "vocabulary acquisition" OR "vocabulary retention" AND EFL	2000–2025
ERIC	"Task-based instruction" AND "vocabulary learning" AND "EFL"	2000–2025
Web of Science	"TBLT" AND "lexical acquisition" AND "EFL"	2000–2025
Google Scholar	"Task-Based Language Teaching" AND "vocabulary retention" AND "EFL"	2000–2025

### 3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) focused on TBLT, (2) measured vocabulary acquisition and/or retention, (3) were conducted in EFL contexts, (4) were empirical, and (5) were published in English. Excluded studies were non-task-based, conceptual only, ESL-focused, or lacked vocabulary outcomes.

**Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus	TBLT and vocabulary outcomes	Non-task-based instruction
Context	EFL settings	ESL-only contexts
Outcomes	Acquisition and/or retention measures	No vocabulary assessment
Study Design	Empirical studies	Conceptual or opinion papers
Language	English	Other languages
Date	2000–2025	Before 2000

### 3.4 Study Selection

From 130 records identified, 50 duplicates were removed. Title and abstract screening of 80 records excluded 30 studies. Of 50 full-text articles assessed, 20 were excluded for methodological or relevance issues. The final review included 30 studies, summarized in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram (ASCII representation)**

Records identified through database searching (n = 130)
Duplicates removed (n = 50)
Records screened by title and abstract (n = 80)
Records excluded (n = 30)
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 50)
Full-text articles excluded with reasons (n = 20)
Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 30)

**3.5 Thematic Synthesis**

Analysis of the 30 studies revealed four dominant themes:

Explicit Task-Based Instruction: Enhances form–meaning mapping and retention through structured, sequenced tasks (Dinh, 2022; Nychkalo et al., 2020).

Contextualized Learning: Embedding vocabulary in authentic texts or academic scenarios supports deeper processing and motivation (Singtong et al., 2025; Tachom, 2021).

Strategy-Oriented Instruction: Teaching inferencing, morphological analysis, and self-monitoring fosters autonomy and long-term retention (Gui & Ismail, 2024; Jedi-Sari-Biglar & Liman-Kaban, 2023).

Technology-Supported Learning: Digital platforms reinforce learning, provide repeated exposure, and engage learners, though pedagogical integration is essential (Gong et al., 2025; Suzuki et al., 2025).

**3.6 Strengths and Limitations of Vocabulary Instruction Approaches**

This review critically examines the comparative strengths and limitations of prevailing vocabulary instruction approaches within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, illuminating how pedagogical choices shape both retention and productive language use. Strategy-based instruction, contextualized learning, and task-based language teaching (TBLT) consistently demonstrate the capacity to enhance not only immediate lexical acquisition but also learners’ long-term ability to deploy vocabulary autonomously in meaningful communicative contexts. These approaches foster active engagement, cognitive elaboration, and metacognitive reflection, allowing learners to construct semantic networks, draw inferences, and monitor their own learning processes—factors that collectively contribute to durable vocabulary knowledge. In contrast, traditional approaches such as rote memorization and decontextualized exercises, while sometimes efficient for short-term recall, often fail to cultivate deeper understanding, flexible application, or learner autonomy, limiting their pedagogical value in contemporary communicative and learner-centered frameworks. The synthesis of these findings is systematically presented in Table 3, which highlights the relative efficacy, cognitive demands, and contextual suitability of each approach. By juxtaposing strengths and limitations, this analysis underscores the importance of integrating strategy, context, and task-oriented methodologies in a complementary manner, rather than relying on singular, isolated techniques, thereby providing a nuanced roadmap for both researchers and practitioners seeking to optimize vocabulary instruction in diverse EFL settings.

**Table 3. Strengths and Limitations of Major Vocabulary Instruction Approaches**

<b>Instructional Approach</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
Rote memorization / word lists	Efficient for short-term recall; low cognitive demand	Poor retention; minimal depth; ineffective for academic vocabulary
L1 equivalents	Quick access to meaning; reduces cognitive load	Limits contextualization and productive use
Contextualized instruction	Enhances retention and depth; supports inferencing	Requires careful text selection and scaffolding

Explicit instruction	Strong gains in form–meaning mapping; effective in EFL contexts	Time-consuming; may reduce learner autonomy if overused
Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)	Promotes autonomy; transferable skills	Requires teacher training and sustained practice
Morphological instruction	Supports decoding academic vocabulary	Limited impact if isolated from context
Collocation instruction	Improves fluency and accuracy	Often neglected in curricula
Technology-enhanced instruction	Increases motivation and exposure	Effectiveness depends on pedagogical design

This synthesis underscores the inherent complexity of vocabulary acquisition, highlighting that no single instructional approach is sufficient when implemented in isolation. Instead, it emphasizes the critical importance of developing integrated, research-informed pedagogical models that strategically combine complementary methods—such as strategy-based learning, contextualized tasks, and technology-enhanced interventions—to address the diverse cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-cultural needs of learners. By drawing on evidence from both classic and contemporary studies (Nation & Gu, 2019; Hunt & Beglar, 2002), this perspective advocates for a holistic approach in which instructional design is guided not only by empirical effectiveness but also by the goal of fostering learner autonomy, adaptability, and sustained lexical retention. Ultimately, such integrated frameworks offer a more nuanced and practical blueprint for EFL educators seeking to balance immediate vocabulary gains with long-term, transferable language competence.

#### **4. Implications for Moroccan University EFL Instruction**

##### **4.1 Academic Vocabulary as a Full-Fledged Module**

Academic vocabulary—encompassing high-frequency academic words, discipline-specific lexis, and commonly occurring collocations—constitutes a cornerstone of academic literacy and is essential for learners' success in reading, writing, and disciplinary discourse. Effective instruction extends beyond surface-level exposure, requiring explicit pedagogical attention to lexical depth, word families, grammatical patterns, and contextually appropriate disciplinary usage (El-Dakhs, 2015; Nation & Gu, 2019). Such instruction enables learners to not only recognize academic terms but also to deploy them flexibly and accurately across speaking, writing, and comprehension tasks, thereby fostering both linguistic precision and conceptual understanding. In the context of Moroccan universities, the introduction of dedicated academic vocabulary modules represents a promising institutional initiative aimed at strengthening students' academic language competence. However, empirical investigations examining the implementation, effectiveness, and long-term impact of these modules remain sparse, revealing a critical research gap. This gap underscores the urgent need for context-sensitive, evidence-based approaches that account for learners' proficiency levels, disciplinary demands, and sociocultural contexts, ensuring that academic vocabulary instruction translates into meaningful, transferable skills within higher education environments.

##### **4.2 Toward an Integrated Model of Vocabulary Instruction**

*Based on the synthesis of empirical research on task-based language teaching, including systematic reviews of its impact on vocabulary acquisition and retention, a contextually adapted, integrated model is proposed for Moroccan universities. This model strategically combines explicit instruction, contextualized input, strategy-based training, and technology-enhanced practice to optimize lexical development.* Explicit teaching ensures precise form–meaning mapping and deepens learners' understanding of word families, grammatical behavior, and academic usage, providing a foundation for accuracy. Complementing this, authentic reading materials and task-based activities, central to TBLT principles, engage learners in meaningful, goal-oriented language use, fostering not only retention but also the ability to apply vocabulary flexibly across communicative contexts. Strategy instruction further enhances learner autonomy by cultivating transferable skills such as inferencing, morphological analysis, and self-monitoring, enabling students to navigate unfamiliar vocabulary independently. Technology-mediated tools, particularly Computer-Assisted Language Learning applications and concordancers, provide dynamic scaffolding, repeated exposure, and insights into authentic lexical patterns without replacing informed pedagogical guidance. This integrated approach addresses practical challenges commonly observed in Moroccan higher education, including limited exposure to authentic language, uneven strategy use among learners, and curricular constraints, while remaining aligned with evidence-based TBLT practices adapted to local educational realities. By bridging empirical findings with context-sensitive instructional design, the model offers a holistic, learner-centered pathway for fostering durable vocabulary knowledge, cognitive engagement, and enhanced academic literacy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Type the text here This systematic review explored a critical yet often overlooked question in university-level EFL instruction: what truly works, and what does not, in vocabulary teaching? By synthesizing findings from forty-four empirical studies conducted across diverse EFL contexts, the review demonstrates that effective vocabulary instruction is most successful when it is explicitly taught,

meaningfully contextualized, guided by learner strategies, and oriented toward the depth of lexical knowledge rather than superficial memorization. These insights challenge longstanding practices in which vocabulary has been treated as a peripheral component of language education, assumed to develop incidentally rather than through deliberate, systematic pedagogy. The evidence consistently indicates that decontextualized, transmissive approaches—such as rote memorization, isolated word lists, or reliance on L1 equivalents—are insufficient to foster durable vocabulary knowledge at the university level. While such methods may yield short-term gains in word recognition, they fail to support retention, productive use, or the ability to transfer vocabulary to authentic academic tasks. In contrast, integrated instructional models that combine explicit teaching, contextualized practice, strategy training, and repeated engagement across multiple modalities cultivate deeper lexical representations, enhance learner autonomy, and strengthen students' capacity to communicate effectively in academic contexts. Vocabulary, therefore, is not merely an add-on skill; it is a foundational dimension of academic literacy, underpinning reading comprehension, disciplinary writing, and oral participation in higher education.

A particularly important insight emerging from this review is the centrality of academic vocabulary, which requires dedicated institutional recognition. Despite its decisive role in academic success, academic vocabulary remains under-theorized and insufficiently addressed in many EFL university programs, including Moroccan higher education. Instructional approaches that focus exclusively on general vocabulary or list-based memorization fail to develop the nuanced lexical knowledge necessary for engagement with complex academic texts. Effective academic vocabulary instruction must attend to lexical depth, including collocations, word families, grammatical behavior, and discipline-specific usage. Integrating these elements into reading, writing, and speaking tasks that reflect authentic academic practices ensures that learners can meaningfully apply vocabulary in real academic contexts.

At the policy and institutional level, the findings of this review underscore the need for substantial shifts in curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment practices. Vocabulary instruction should no longer be subsumed under broader reading or writing courses, nor left to incidental acquisition. Instead, it must be explicitly planned, systematically reinforced, and pedagogically aligned with learners' academic and disciplinary needs. Achieving this requires institutional support, sustained professional development for instructors, and curriculum frameworks that recognize vocabulary knowledge as a core learning outcome. In the Moroccan context, adopting integrated, research-informed instructional models offers the potential to bridge lexical gaps, enhance learner engagement, and strengthen academic proficiency across disciplines.

In conclusion, this systematic review provides compelling empirical evidence that effective university-level EFL vocabulary instruction is neither incidental nor optional—it is a pedagogical imperative. By repositioning vocabulary at the heart of language education policy and instructional practice, higher education institutions can move beyond superficial lexical gains toward sustained academic literacy, learner autonomy, and long-term proficiency development. This synthesis not only clarifies what works in vocabulary instruction but also lays a principled foundation for meaningful, evidence-based instructional and policy reform in EFL higher education, ensuring that vocabulary learning becomes a deliberate, strategic, and transformative component of students' academic success.

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