

## The Role of EFL Teachers' Productive Vocabulary Size in Explaining Public School Students' Vocabulary Knowledge

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**Abstract:**

This study aimed to measure the productive vocabulary size of English language teachers in public schools in Saudi Arabia and to examine its role in explaining students' low vocabulary knowledge in light of previous research findings. The study was motivated by the noticeable gap between the educational goals for English vocabulary and the actual level achieved by students by the end of secondary school. Given learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, there is a need to investigate the sources of linguistic input available within the classroom. The study adopted a quantitative descriptive approach and involved a sample of 42 male and female English language teachers working in public schools in Qassim region. The X-LexP test (Al-Falah, 2010) was used to measure the participants' productive vocabulary size within the 5,000 most frequent words in English. The results showed that the teachers' mean productive vocabulary size was 4,058 words, indicating that most participants possessed a relatively high productive vocabulary knowledge. A comparison with the findings of previous studies also revealed a clear gap between teachers' vocabulary size and students' vocabulary knowledge at the level of the most common words in English. This finding suggests that students' low vocabulary knowledge may not be primarily attributable to teachers' productive vocabulary size, but may instead be related to other classroom factors, such as how teachers use their productive vocabulary in classroom interaction and the actual amount of English exposure provided during the lesson. The study recommends greater attention to the pedagogical use of teachers' vocabulary knowledge in classroom practices.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary size, vocabulary knowledge, teacher talk, linguistic input

## 1. Introduction:

Over the past few decades, English language education in Saudi public schools has received increasing attention due to the growing importance of English in the fields of economics, technology, and science. English was officially introduced into school curricula in the 1960s (Al-Seghayer, 2005), and since then, several developmental reforms have been implemented. One of the most notable reforms was the introduction of English at earlier stages of schooling, particularly at the primary level, after it had previously been limited to the intermediate and secondary levels (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). This reform increased instructional time and created greater opportunities for enhancing learners' language proficiency.

Despite these efforts, empirical research continues to point to a gap between the learning outcomes targeted by the Ministry of Education and the actual outcomes of English instruction (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). In terms of vocabulary development, the Ministry set a target of approximately 3,000 English words to be acquired by students by the end of secondary school. (Alsaif, 2011). However, several previous studies have shown that the actual average vocabulary size of secondary school graduates is only around 1,000 words (Al-Hazemi, 1993; Alsaif, 2011; Alhaj et al., 2019). Alsuhaibani (2025) likewise found that secondary school graduates' performance on vocabulary levels tests remains below the expected level. This concern is further reflected in the researcher's teaching experience in English courses at the Technical College of Environmental Sciences in Buraidah, where newly enrolled trainees graduating from secondary school often appear to have very limited English vocabulary knowledge. Research on second language acquisition suggests that vocabulary size is an important indicator of overall language proficiency and that a minimum knowledge of 2,000 of the most frequent words in English is essential to achieve a basic level of comprehension and communication (Nation, 2001). Given the limited opportunities for exposure to English outside formal education in the Saudi Arabia, classroom input becomes the main source of English and often the only meaningful opportunity for vocabulary acquisition.

Since the classroom constitutes the primary source of English exposure for many learners in Saudi Arabia, examining the nature of the linguistic input provided by the teacher becomes essential for understanding students' limited vocabulary development. The teacher serves as one of the main sources of linguistic input in the classroom. This role extends beyond presenting the curriculum content to include enriching the classroom environment through teacher talk, repeated exposure to vocabulary, and vocabulary use across multiple contexts. Previous research has shown that teacher talk may provide learners with vocabulary exposure equal to, or even greater than, that offered by textbook

content (Donzelli, 2007; Vassiliu, 2001, as cited in Milton, 2009). In addition, vocabulary that appears in teacher talk, particularly when repeated across different contexts, may support incidental vocabulary acquisition (Milton, 2009). This raises an important question regarding the extent to which teachers' vocabulary knowledge may affect students' vocabulary development.

### 1.1. Research Problem:

Despite ongoing efforts to improve English language education in Saudi Arabia, public school students continue to demonstrate low levels of English vocabulary knowledge in relation to the expected outcomes. Given that the teacher is one of the major sources of linguistic input in the classroom, there is a need to examine the productive vocabulary size of English language teachers and to explore its possible relevance to students' vocabulary knowledge in Saudi public education.

### 1.2. Research Questions:

- What is the average productive vocabulary size of English language teachers in public schools in Saudi Arabia?
- To what extent can English language teachers' productive vocabulary size help explain students' low vocabulary knowledge in light of previous studies?

### 1.3. Significance of the Study:

Many previous studies have focused on analyzing curriculum and textbook content in order to explain their effect on learners' vocabulary acquisition (Alsaif & Milton, 2012; Alhudithi, 2017; Alshumrani & Al-Ahmadi, 2022). However, the role of the teacher within the classroom still requires further investigation, given that the teacher is one of the main sources of the linguistic input to which learners are exposed. In this respect, the present study contributes to literature by offering a deeper understanding of one factor that may influence learners' vocabulary acquisition through measuring teachers' productive vocabulary size and examining its relevance to students' vocabulary knowledge.

The findings of this study may also contribute to ongoing efforts to improve English language education in Saudi public schools by drawing attention to the importance of teachers' productive vocabulary knowledge as a factor affecting the quantity and quality of the linguistic input students receive in the classroom. The findings may also help guide English teacher preparation and professional development programs toward greater attention to productive vocabulary knowledge, thereby enhancing opportunities for vocabulary acquisition and improving learners' overall language proficiency.

### 1.4. Definition of Terms:

**Vocabulary Knowledge:** Vocabulary knowledge refers to what a learner knows about words,

including their form, meaning, and use in different linguistic contexts (Nation, 2001; Milton, 2009).

**Vocabulary Size:** Vocabulary size refers to the number of words a learner knows in a language (Nation, 2001; Milton, 2009).

**Productive Vocabulary:** Productive vocabulary refers to the words that a learner can retrieve and use appropriately in productive language skills such as speaking and writing (Nation, 2001).

### 1.5. Limitations of the Study:

This study is limited to a purposively selected sample of English language teachers working in public schools in Qassim region in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalized to all English language teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It should also be noted that the interpretation of the relationship between teachers' productive vocabulary size and students' vocabulary knowledge was based on an analytical comparison with previous studies rather than on direct measurement of students taught by the participating teachers.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Studies:

### 2.1. The Effect of Vocabulary Size on Language Skills:

In recent years, vocabulary size has attracted increasing attention as an important indicator of second language learners' proficiency. Nation (2001) argued that vocabulary forms the foundation of language skills, while Milton (2009) emphasized the close relationship between learners' overall language proficiency and the size of their vocabulary. Accordingly, several studies have examined the relationship between vocabulary size and learners' performance across different language skills.

With regard to listening, Stæhr (2009) examined the relationship between learners' vocabulary size and their listening comprehension ability. The results revealed a strong correlation ( $\rho = 0.70$ ), highlighting the important role of vocabulary size in listening comprehension. In terms of reading and writing, Karakoç and Durmuşoğlu-Köse (2017) investigated the impact of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge on learners' performance in reading and writing during an intensive English program. The findings showed a statistically significant positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and performance in both skills and also indicated a relationship between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their overall language proficiency.

Similarly, Kılıç (2019) examined whether learners' performance in writing and speaking could be predicted by their vocabulary knowledge. The findings revealed a positive correlation between different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge; receptive, productive, and depth of knowledge, and learners' performance in writing and speaking. Li et al. (2024) also found that learners' vocabulary test results

may help predict both their general language proficiency and academic success in educational settings where English is used as the medium of instruction.

Overall, the findings of previous studies indicate that broader vocabulary knowledge enhances learners' ability to understand and use language in communicative contexts and improves their chances of academic success. Accordingly, it is important to examine the factors that may contribute to vocabulary development among learners, including the linguistic input to which they are exposed in the classroom, with the teacher serving as one of its most important sources.

## **2.2. The Role of Teacher Talk in Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition**

In many countries where English is taught as a foreign language, the classroom represents the primary source of linguistic input, as learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. In such settings, the teacher becomes one of the main sources of classroom linguistic input. Research in second language acquisition has shown that repeated exposure to language is one of the most important factors supporting vocabulary learning (Ellis, 1994). Milton (2009) noted that the spoken input provided by teachers in class has not received sufficient attention in vocabulary acquisition research, despite its potential importance as a source of vocabulary exposure.

Donzelli (2007) was among the earliest studies to address this issue. The study compared the vocabulary learners were exposed to through teacher talk with the vocabulary available in textbooks. It concluded that teacher talk can provide an amount of vocabulary exposure equal to, or even greater than, that provided by the textbook, which highlights the important role of teacher discourse in enriching the classroom linguistic environment and enhancing learners' opportunities for vocabulary acquisition.

Recognizing the need to better understand the role of teacher discourse in vocabulary growth, some recent studies have explored this issue more closely. Bastidas (2023), for example, compared recordings of three teachers delivering beginner level Spanish as a second language lessons. The analysis focused on the amount of linguistic input provided by the teacher, the degree of student interaction, and the repetition and distribution of vocabulary in teacher talk. The study found that teacher talk constitutes an important source of classroom input and that repetition and lexical diversity in teacher discourse create opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Grøver et al. (2022) investigated the role of teacher talk during shared reading activities in supporting second language learners' vocabulary development. The findings showed that teachers' use of varied vocabulary and their explanations of words during classroom interaction contribute to vocabulary learning. The study concluded that the quality of teacher discourse plays an important role in

supporting vocabulary development. A similar conclusion was reported by Wanzek et al. (2023), who found that the range of vocabulary used by the teacher and the way it is presented in classroom interaction are positively associated with improvements in students' vocabulary and broader language outcomes.

Farrow et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between teacher talk and learners' vocabulary development. The study focused on three features of teacher's talk; the use of sophisticated vocabulary, complex syntax, and decontextualized language that goes beyond the immediate classroom context. The findings showed that the quality of teacher discourse was related to learners' vocabulary growth, and that complex syntax was the feature most strongly associated with vocabulary improvement. These findings indicate that the language used by the teacher during classroom interaction may play an important role in supporting vocabulary acquisition.

Overall, previous studies indicate that teacher talk constitutes an important source of classroom linguistic input and that its features, such as lexical diversity, repetition, and the quality of linguistic structures, may enhance opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. These studies also show that the teacher's role extends beyond delivering textbook content, as teacher-student interaction enriches the classroom linguistic environment and broadens the range of vocabulary to which learners are exposed.

Although the present study does not directly measure teachers' actual classroom discourse, it assumes that teachers' productive vocabulary size represents one of the linguistic resources that may shape the nature of the linguistic input they provide. Accordingly, greater attention should be paid to English language teachers' productive vocabulary size as one of the factors that may influence the linguistic input available to learners.

### **3. Methodology:**

#### **3.1. Research Design:**

The study adopted a quantitative descriptive design to measure the productive vocabulary size of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia and to provide a comparative and interpretive analysis in light of previous studies.

#### **3.2. Population and Sample:**

The population of the study consisted of English language teachers working in public schools in Saudi Arabia. The sample included 42 male and female English language teachers employed in public schools in Qassim region. All participants held a bachelor's degree in English language. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to twenty years, and they taught at different educational levels, including the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels.

### **3.3. Instrument:**

The study used the X-LexP test (Al-Falah, 2010) to measure teachers' productive vocabulary knowledge. The test is based on the widely used X-Lex test for receptive vocabulary knowledge (Meara & Milton, 2003), which measures vocabulary knowledge within the 5,000 most frequent words in English. Previous studies have shown that these tests have acceptable levels of validity and reliability in measuring vocabulary knowledge among English language learners.

Al-Falah's (2010) test consists of 100 Arabic words distributed across five columns, with each column representing one frequency level in English and covering 1,000 of the most frequent words. Participants are required to write the English equivalent of each Arabic word. To reduce possible translation errors, the first letter of the target English word is provided. Each correct response is awarded 50 points, making the final score an approximate estimate of the participant's productive vocabulary size.

### **3.4. Procedures:**

The teachers were contacted directly, and the purpose of the study was explained to them. They were then provided with an informed consent form to indicate their voluntary agreement to participate. After completing a brief demographic questionnaire, each participant was asked to complete the vocabulary test individually in paper form. The test was administered in person, with some participants completing it at their schools and others in locations arranged outside the school setting. The researcher monitored the testing process to prevent practices that might compromise the accuracy of the results, such as the use of dictionaries or translation tools during the test.

### **3.5. Statistical Methods:**

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to estimate the productive vocabulary size of the teachers.

## **4. Results:**

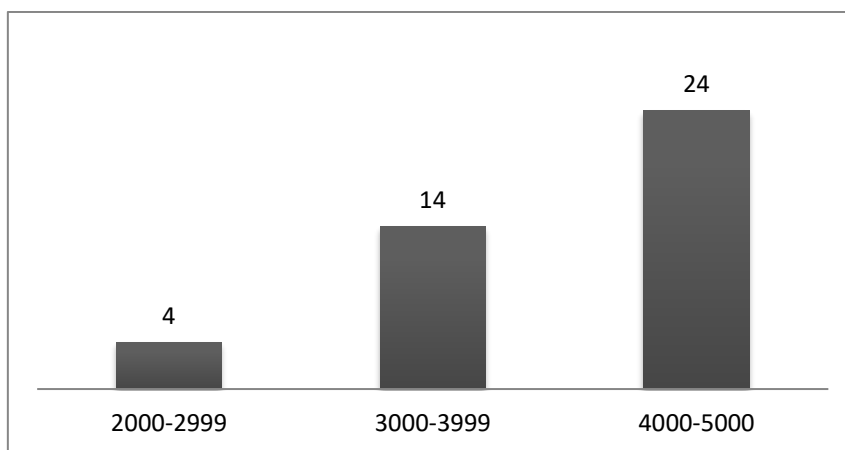
### **4.1. Results for the First Research Question:**

To answer the first research question, which stated "What is the average productive vocabulary size of English language teachers in public schools in Saudi Arabia?", the analysis of the test results showed that the mean productive vocabulary size of the participating teachers was approximately 4,058 words out of 5,000, with a standard deviation of 732. This indicates noticeable, though not substantial, variation in vocabulary knowledge across the sample. Table 1 presents a summary of the findings.

**Table 1:** Mean and Standard Deviation of the X-LexP Test Results

|                      |         |
|----------------------|---------|
| <b>Sample</b>        | 42      |
| <b>Mean Score</b>    | 4058.33 |
| <b>St. Deviation</b> | 732.346 |

As shown in Figure 1, most teachers demonstrated a relatively high productive vocabulary size. 24 out of the 42 participants scored within the 4,000–5,000 word range, representing the largest proportion of the sample. By contrast, 14 teachers fell within the 3,000–3,999 range, while only four teachers scored within the 2,000–2,999 range.

**Figure 1:** Distribution of the sample according to their scores on the X-LexP

The results also showed that the lowest score was 2,500 words, whereas the highest score was equivalent to 5,000 words; only one participant achieved the maximum score. Overall, these findings indicate that the participating English language teachers were able, on average, to produce around 4,000 of the 5,000 most frequent English words. However, this result should be interpreted in light of the nature of the instrument used. Since the X-LexP test provided the first letter of the target English word, this may have facilitated the words retrieval and contributed to a higher estimate of productive vocabulary size. Accordingly, the present findings should be viewed as an approximate indicator of teachers' productive vocabulary size rather than a direct reflection of their actual spontaneous vocabulary use during classroom talk.

Despite this limitation, the findings suggest that most teachers possess a relatively high productive vocabulary size, which may enable them to use a sufficient range of common vocabulary in the classroom. This finding is important considering the literature suggesting that the classroom environment is a major source of linguistic input and that teacher talk can broaden the range of vocabulary to which learners are exposed (Donzelli, 2007; Vassiliu, 2001, as cited in Milton, 2009).

#### 4.2. Results for the Second Research Question:

To answer the second research question, which stated “To what extent can English language teachers’ productive vocabulary size help explain students’ low vocabulary knowledge in light of previous studies?”, the comparison with previous studies on the vocabulary knowledge of public school students in Saudi Arabia revealed a noticeable gap between teachers’ productive vocabulary size and learners’ vocabulary knowledge at the end of secondary school. Several studies have reported that students’ average vocabulary size at secondary school graduation is approximately 1,000 words (Al-Hazemi, 1993; Alsaif, 2011; Alhaj et al., 2019). This comparison suggests that learners’ low vocabulary knowledge may not be primarily attributable to teachers’ productive vocabulary size, since the present findings indicate that teachers possess a substantially larger productive vocabulary than learners.

This gap may therefore be better explained by other classroom related factors, such as how teachers make use of their vocabulary in class, the range of words they provide to learners, and the extent to which vocabulary is repeated and recycled during classroom interaction. This interpretation may also be supported by the findings of Mitchell and Alfuraih (2017), who reported that more than 60% of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia use Arabic for about 30% of lesson time, which may reduce both the quantity and the quality of English input available to students in the classroom. These findings highlight the need for further investigation into classroom related factors, particularly the nature of the linguistic input provided by the teacher and the actual amount of English used during instruction.

#### 5. Summary of Findings:

- The average productive vocabulary size of the English language teachers who participated in the study was 4,058 words out of the 5,000 most frequent English words, indicating that most teachers possessed a relatively high productive vocabulary size.
- A comparison of the present findings with previous studies on the vocabulary knowledge of students in public school in Saudi Arabia suggests that learners’ low vocabulary knowledge is not primarily associated with teachers’ productive vocabulary size.
- The findings indicate that the issue may lie not in teachers’ productive vocabulary size itself, but rather in the extent to which this vocabulary is used in classroom practice in ways that provide learners with meaningful opportunities for vocabulary exposure and acquisition.

#### 6. Recommendations:

- English teacher preparation programs should give greater attention to productive vocabulary size and its relationship to actual classroom practice.

- Educational supervision should incorporate indicators for evaluating the quality of English teachers' classroom discourse, such as lexical variety, clarity, repetition, and the extent to which vocabulary is used in interaction with students.
- Blended learning approaches should be integrated into English language teaching in ways that increase learners' exposure to vocabulary both inside and outside the classroom and support repetition and recycling through a range of digital activities.

### 7. Suggestions for Future Research:

- Future studies should directly examine the relationship between teachers' productive vocabulary size and the vocabulary size of their students within the same classroom to provide a more accurate statistical test of the relationship.
- Further research should measure teachers' productive vocabulary size through analysis of recordings of their actual classroom talk rather than relying solely on vocabulary tests.
- Additional studies should investigate other classroom related factors affecting vocabulary acquisition, such as the amount of language exposure, patterns of classroom interaction, types of language activities, and the use of multimedia resources.

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