Regular Article

Enhancing Primary School Vocabulary Through Task-Based Learning: A Study of Effectiveness and Challenges

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigated the effectiveness of using task-based learning (TBL) in enhancing English vocabulary skills among 80 sixth-grade female pupils from two primary schools in Beni Suef Governorate, Egypt. The participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 40) receiving TBL instruction and a control group (n = 40) receiving regular instruction. A pre-post vocabulary test was conducted on the two groups. Results revealed statistically significant differences (α ≤ 0.05) in post-test scores favoring the experimental group. The effect size was large, indicating a strong and positive impact of TBL on vocabulary development, where tasks effectively facilitated the acquisition of vocabulary through visual aids and contextualized tasks, demonstrating its alignment with prominent learning theories. This study supports the integration of TBL into pedagogical practices for vocabulary instruction, suggesting a shift from traditional rote memorization towards more engaging and interactive learning experiences. The results emphasize the importance of further research exploring the effectiveness of TBL across different age

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groups, contexts, and task types, while also examining the role of learner motivation and engagement. By embracing TBL and continuously refining its implementation, educators can empower learners to achieve their full language learning potential.

Keywords: Vocabulary sub-skills, Task-based learning (TBL)

Introduction

Language is a fundamental means of human communication, encompassing a complex system of sounds, symbols, and rules that enable individuals to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Its cognitive, social, and cultural benefits are undeniable. Cognitively, language facilitates problem-solving, abstract thinking, and skills acquisition. Socially, it fosters relationships, teamwork, and experience sharing, strengthening community bonds. Culturally, language plays a vital role in preserving customs, values, and histories, serving as a crucial tool for societal advancement and growth.

English, recognized as a global language, finds wide use in business, diplomacy, and academia. Dyvik (2023) estimates 1.46 billion global English speakers in 2023, representing approximately 18.07% of the world's population. This signifies that nearly one in five individuals possesses the ability to communicate effectively in English. While approximately 26% of English speakers use it as their first language, a substantial 74% utilize it as a second language. For individuals with diverse linguistic backgrounds, English acts as a common medium of communication. Proficiency in English is a prerequisite for professionals seeking to advance their careers and enhance their opportunities for international networking and collaboration within today's competitive global economy. English is a crucial subject for primary school pupils, despite their limited vocabulary and pronunciation challenges (Puche Payá, 2020). This deficiency hinders their ability to understand others and effectively articulate their needs. Therefore, lexis is considered a fundamental element of language, particularly in English.

The development of vocabulary items for young learners helps in improving foundational skills. A strong vocabulary base enables pupils to acquire and improve reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019). Young learners recognize the necessity of acquiring vocabulary to effectively convey their intended meaning (Hestetræet, 2015). Vocabulary, as a crucial component of academic achievement and successful learning, significantly impacts all language users. Several studies have examined vocabulary learning (Zou et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2022; Lai & Chen, 2023; Jing et al., 2023), while others have focused on vocabulary instruction (Ismatullayeva, 2020; Permana, 2020; En-nda & Koumachi, 2022; Liando et al., 2022; Fauziningrum et al., 2023), introducing instructors to useful and readily applicable vocabulary teaching methods and exercises. Mekheimer (2023) explored the potential of cognitively-style

tailored e-learning environments to enhance not only vocabulary learning but also student motivation, which is essential for long-term educational engagement and success. This study highlighted individual student differences and suggested that integrating cognitive styles into vocabulary learning strategies could improve the effectiveness of instruction.

Since languages are built upon words, vocabulary items are very necessary for acquisition these language. Establishing an instructional emphasis on vocabulary acquisition can be challenging as many teachers lack confidence in best practices and struggle to find starting points for vocabulary learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). The development of English vocabulary remains a significant challenge for both English language teachers and learners. To address these challenges, EFL teachers ought to employ effective educational systems that create an active learning environment where pupils are the focus. This involves encouraging positive participation, moving away from regular methods that rely heavily on teacher-centred instruction and neglecting learner interactions. The importance of task-based learning has gained recognition among specialists in language teaching and learning since the last decade of the 20th century.

The task-based learning, with its emphasis on student participation and vocabulary production, presents a promising avenue for vocabulary instruction. By engaging in tasks, learners apply vocabulary in context. Task-based vocabulary instruction has been identified as an effective method for enhancing vocabulary knowledge and advancing comprehension across the four language skills (Milton, 2013). Pinter (2015) highlights that task-based learning emphasizes meaningful engagement, genuine learner interaction, and purposefulness, all crucial factors in advancing language learning. Furthermore, Nation (2001) asserts that task-based instruction facilitates language acquisition in real-world settings, boosting pupils' motivation and communicative proficiency. The task-based learning offers opportunities for integrating the four language skills, making sufficient vocabulary essential for task performance and calling upon learners' productive and receptive abilities.

In this vein, Nation & Hamilton-Jenkins (2000) identify three key tenets of task-based vocabulary instruction: deliberate attention, meaning negotiation, and word use. Purposeful attention to vocabulary learning from word lists can enhance vocabulary acquisition. Meaning negotiation has been observed to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Newton (2013) emphasizes the role of peer support stemming from learner-learner task-based interaction, where pupils actively negotiate word meaning to complete tasks collaboratively. Finally, when students utilize a word to expand or create a new understanding, they learn it more readily.

It is important to note that regular vocabulary instruction often relies heavily on rote memorization, lacking context and leading to isolated learning. This makes it difficult for pupils to apply the vocabulary or grasp its meaning. Additionally, teachers often provide words and their definitions without student

interaction or participation, creating passive recipients of knowledge and hindering vocabulary recall and application. In contrast, task-based vocabulary instruction adopts a more dynamic approach, providing students with relevant real-world scenarios to acquire new words. Through a variety of tasks, pupils actively engage with the language, gaining opportunities to utilize the vocabulary in meaningful ways (Dóczi & Kormos, 2015). Based on these observations, the researcher chose to utilize task-based learning (TBL) to develop English vocabulary among primary school pupils.

Context of the Problem

The researcher, based upon her experience as an EFL teacher at a primary school, noticed that several sixth-grade pupils were unable to acquire and use English vocabulary items properly. To delve into the underlying causes and pinpoint specific vocabulary skills requiring improvement, she conducted interviews with EFL teachers and supervisors. That formed the basis for a vocabulary skills checklist, which was subsequently presented to a jury of experts for validation. After incorporating expert feedback, the revised checklist was used to assess 30 sixth-grade pupils at Nazlet El Barqi Primary School in El Fashn district, Beni Suef. That pilot study diagnostic test results revealed a significant lack of vocabulary acquisition and use skills, particularly in areas such as comprehending the meaning of individual words, associating words with corresponding pictures, identifying word types, classifying words into semantic groups, determining antonyms, spelling words correctly, deriving new words from learned vocabulary, and utilizing words to construct meaningful sentences. Those findings highlighted the need for targeted interventions to address the specific weaknesses and to enhance the vocabulary proficiency of sixth-grade pupils.

That deficiency negatively impacted pupils' performance in other English language skills and their ability to communicate effectively within the educational setting. To gain a deeper understanding of the specific vocabulary skills lacking among the pupils, a pilot study diagnostic vocabulary test was administered to 30 sixth-grade students at Nazlet El Barqi Primary School. That test, designed based on the validated vocabulary skills checklist, evaluated twelve distinct vocabulary sub-skills.

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Table 1

The Pilot Study Diagnostic Vocabulary Test Results

Vocabulary Sub-skills	Participants number	Mark	Min.score	Max.score	Mean	Std. Deviation	Success Rate
Keyword Detection	30	5	2	4	2.73	0.78	53.3%
Word Meaning	30	5	1	3	1.56	0.59	3.34%
Word Creation	30	5	1	4	1.46	0.67	3.33%
Word Grouping	30	5	1	3	1.43	0.66	6.66%
Picture Matching	30	5	1	4	1.47	0.80	6.70%
Context Clues	30	5	2	4	2.60	1.31	50.0%
Opposites	30	5	0	3	1.03	0.58	3.34%
Spelling	30	5	0	4	0.93	0.86	3.31%
Word Type	30	5	0	3	1.00	0.64	3.23%
Sentence Building	30	5	0.5	3.5	1.04	0.74	3.34%
Word in Context	30	5	2	4	2.66	1.34	56.6%
Prefix Meaning	30	5	2	4	2.63	1.31	53.4%
Total test	30	60	13.5	35.5	20.6	19.5	3.33%

The results of the pilot study diagnostic vocabulary test (Table 1) reveal a stark reality: the pupils demonstrated a significant lack of proficiency across nearly all vocabulary sub-skills. The average success rate for the entire test was a mere 3.33%, indicating a widespread deficiency in vocabulary knowledge. Notably, the majority of sub-skills achieved success rates below 10%, including identifying the meaning of given words, formulating new words from learned vocabulary, classifying words into semantic groups, relating words to pictures, determining antonyms, spelling correctly, and identifying word types. While some sub-skills like detecting keywords, using context clues, identifying the word in context, and determining word meaning from prefixes showed slightly higher success rates, they still fell below 60%. These findings underscore the critical need for targeted vocabulary instruction to address the identified weaknesses and foster effective communication skills among the students.

Previous studies on vocabulary acquisition (Abd Elsalam, 2019; Tahoon, 2021; Khalid, 2023; Ibrahim, 2023; Al-Sabbagh, 2023; Gamal et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2024) and task-based learning (TBL)

(Belghoul & Merrouche, 2020; Mustapha, 2023; AlAdl, 2023) further support the research problem. These studies helped the researcher identifies research gaps, techniques, instruments, and methodologies that guided the current research. The lack of previous studies directly relevant to the current study highlights the need for further research in this area.

Statement of the Problem

In light of the aforementioned results of the pilot study diagnostic test, which revealed that many sixth-grade primary school pupils lacked vocabulary skills. Therefore, this research attempted to use task-based learning to investigate and ascertain if it is effective in enhancing those skills.

Aim and Rationale

The current research aims to identify the effectiveness of using task-based learning (TBL) in developing vocabulary skills among primary school pupils. The rationale for this study aligns with Egypt's 2030 educational vision, which emphasizes a comprehensive and inclusive system that equips learners to meet future challenges. This vision includes expanding access to high-quality education, encouraging lifelong learning opportunities, and integrating technology into the educational process. Key objectives include fostering critical thinking, promoting creativity and innovation, and aligning educational initiatives with labor market demands. Despite this vision, some elementary schools continue to rely heavily on regular approaches to teaching English, particularly vocabulary, which is a fundamental aspect of language mastery, understanding others, and effectively communicating one's thoughts. Therefore, it is crucial to implement innovative teaching approaches that align with the cognitive processes associated with language acquisition.

Task-based learning, with its emphasis on learner engagement and real-world application, offers a valuable alternative to regular methods. Ellis (2003) highlights that TBL can effectively identify learner needs and facilitate the creation of goal-oriented courses. As an alternative to communicative language instruction, TBL prioritizes meaning, real-life language use, and integration of language skills. Nunan (2004) emphasizes that TBL promotes learner autonomy, fosters recognition of individual differences, and supports learner-centered learning. This approach empowers pupils to design tasks, explicitly defines the goal of each activity, and incorporates ongoing assessment.

The Significance of the Research

Studies exploring the enhancement of vocabulary skills among sixth graders through task-based activities offer valuable insights for both researchers and instructors. However, a lack of research utilizing TBL to develop targeted vocabulary skills among primary school pupils underscores the significance of the current study. This research distinguishes itself by employing diverse task types to enhance specific vocabulary skills, potentially contributing to bridging this knowledge gap.

The research holds significant implications for various stakeholders:

- **Primary school pupils:** Enhancing vocabulary skills, fostering active learning, and strengthening communication skills.
- **English language teachers:** Providing a guide for integrating TBL into English instruction, particularly for vocabulary development. This guide will offer numerous tasks, activities, and worksheets to improve pupil performance, saving teachers time and effort by shifting the focus to learner-centered learning.
- **Supervisors:** Encouraging the use of TBL in English language teaching.
- **Curriculum designers:** Incorporating a variety of TBL-based activities and tasks into English language curricula.
- **Teacher trainers and specialists:** Stimulating interest in conducting training courses on TBL techniques.
- **Other researchers:** Opening new avenues for research related to this problem.

Delimitations of the Research

This research has the following delimitations:

1. **Participant Selection:** The study included 80 sixth-grade pupils randomly selected from Nazlet El Barqi Primary School and Besfa Primary School. The researcher chose these two schools due to the small class size at Nazlet El Barqi Primary School, which was insufficient for dividing into two groups. Besfa Primary School was chosen as an alternative under similar conditions, with both schools providing facilities and support.
2. **Time Frame:** The study covered the entire first semester of the academic year 2021/2022.
3. **Vocabulary Sub-Skills:** The study investigated vocabulary sub-skills such as identifying word meanings, matching words with pictures, classifying word types, grouping words semantically, determining antonyms, spelling words correctly, creating new words from learned vocabulary, and using words to form meaningful sentences.
4. **Task Types:** The study included various task types such as focused tasks, unfocused tasks, jigsaw tasks, sharing personal experience tasks, matching tasks, comparing tasks, listing tasks, classifying tasks, ordering and sorting tasks, creative tasks, problem-solving tasks, crossword puzzles, word searches, riddles, mnemonic devices, task generators, and interactive tasks.

Research Variables

The two variables included in this research were a task-based learning approach (independent variable) and English vocabulary skills (dependent variable).

Definitions of Terms

Vocabulary

Vocabulary, as defined by various sources, encompasses the ability to understand and use words for meaning acquisition and communication (Sheehan, 2002), the knowledge of words and their meanings (Nash & Snowling, 2006), the collection of words known or used by an individual, particularly within a specific subject (Hornby & Cowie, 2000), and the complete set of words employed in a given language (Oxford Dictionary, as cited in Brysbaert et al., 2016). For the present study, the researcher operationally defines vocabulary as a list of words and expressions that sixth-grade pupils are familiar with and use when communicating.

Task

A task, as defined in language learning contexts, can be understood as a classroom activity that engages learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language, with a primary focus on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). Willis (2021) defines a task as a goal-oriented activity that utilizes language to achieve a concrete outcome. Operationally, the researcher defines a task as an objective-oriented activity aimed at enhancing sixth-grade pupils' vocabulary acquisition and use skills.

Task-Based Learning (TBL):

Richards, Platt, and Weber, as cited in Zhang (2018), define it as an activity or action that arises from language processing or comprehension, such as listening to instructions and executing commands, and typically involves a teacher-defined criterion for successful task completion. Operationally, the researcher defines TBL as an instructional approach that centers the learning process on tasks performed in specific stages, emphasizing meaningful communication and real-world applications to build vocabulary skills for sixth graders.

Research Conceptual Framework

The profound importance of vocabulary in language is underscored by various perspectives. Crystal (2011) emphasized both the construction and utilization of words, while Vygotsky (2012) viewed words as microcosms of human consciousness, and Nietzsche (as cited in Maginot, 2015) highlighted their symbolic nature representing relationships. Huxley (2022) likened words to X-rays, capable of penetrating deeply when used effectively, and Freud (as cited in Vintean, 2015) recognized their immense power in shaping emotions, knowledge, and actions. Ultimately, vocabulary serves as the foundation of language, enabling communication and expression of thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

The concept of a task in language learning has also been extensively studied. Ellis (2003) defined them as work plans requiring pragmatic language processing for assessable outcomes. Nunan (2004) viewed tasks as classroom activities requiring engagement with the target language, and Edwards & Willis (2005) described them as activities with defined outcomes and non-linguistic purposes, simulating everyday language use.

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The conceptual framework of this research, depicted in Figure 1, positions task-based vocabulary learning as a pedagogical framework that fosters a dynamic and comprehensive learning environment through learner engagement, real-world application, and communicative competency.

Figure (1)

The Research Conceptual Framework

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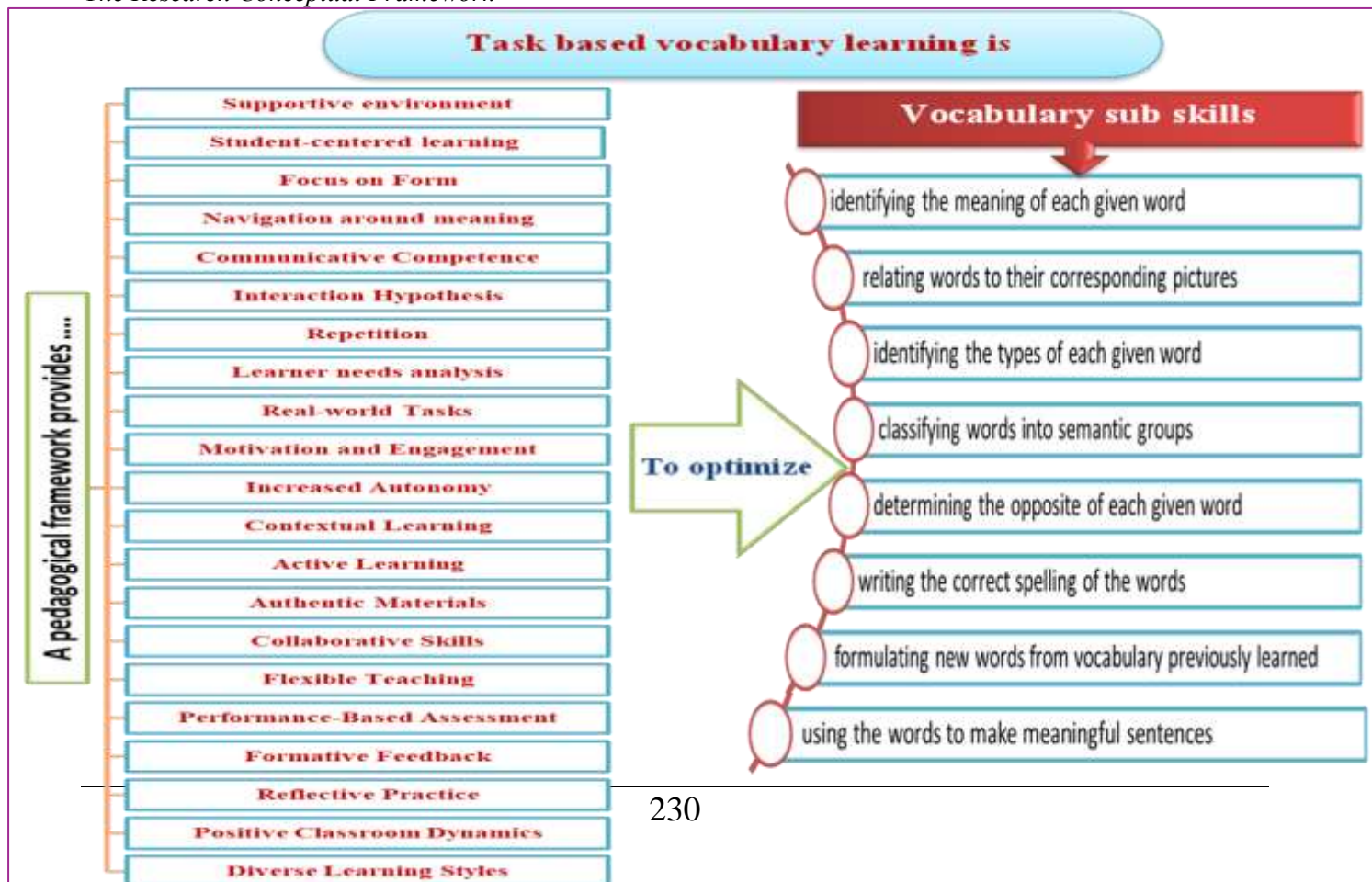
Literature Review

While the terms "words," "vocabulary," and "lexis" are often used interchangeably, they possess distinct nuances and are used in specific contexts within the field of language learning and teaching. McCarthy (1990, pp. 5-11) defines a "word" as the smallest element or unit of language that has meaning, whereas "vocabulary" refers to the total number of words a person knows and uses in a particular language. He further clarifies that vocabulary encompasses phrases, collocations, and idiomatic expressions in addition to individual words. "Lexis" refers to the entire stock of words and word combinations in a language. It is not merely a static set of words but also includes how these words are used in context.

In this context, Richards & Schmidt (2010) agreed with McCarthy that "vocabulary" refers to a group of lexemes, including single words, compound words, and idioms. Barcroft, Schmitt, & Sunderman (2011) expanded on this, stating that lexis encompasses all words in a language. They differentiate between lexis and vocabulary, suggesting that vocabulary is associated with words and their meanings, while lexis refers to the broader system of words. Van Vlack (2013) clarified that lexis extends beyond individual words, encompassing various layers of lexical knowledge, such as polysemy, ambiguity, collocation, frequency, and synonymy. Furthermore, Szudarski (2017, p. 36) summarized the difference between these terms defining a "word" as any group of letters separated by punctuation or space. "Lexis" and "vocabulary" are often used interchangeably and encompass all lexical items found in a language. However, "lexis" may be more precise as it includes both individual words and various combinations.

The case being so, Read (2000) highlighted the dependence of language comprehension and production on vocabulary, stating that words are the smallest units of meaning, forming the basis for phrases, sentences, and other larger units of meaning. Richards & Renandya (2002) emphasize the importance of vocabulary in achieving language competency, considering it a crucial factor in learners' ability to listen, speak, read, and write effectively. They emphasize that without a broad vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new words, learners often fall short of their potential and may lose interest in language learning. Schmitt (2010) underscores the importance of vocabulary, citing high correlations between vocabulary knowledge and linguistic competence, suggesting that individuals with larger vocabularies achieve higher levels of language proficiency.

As such, vocabulary plays a crucial role in communication. A robust vocabulary repertoire is essential for demonstrating competency in the four key language skills, enabling effective communication, comprehension, and performance. Words act as the building blocks of effective listening, speaking, reading,

and writing skills. A strong vocabulary not only facilitates clear communication of ideas and thoughts but also enhances the ability to interpret and understand others' messages accurately. A lack of vocabulary represents a significant barrier to learning English as a foreign language, hindering learners' ability to find the right words for expressing concepts verbally or in writing (McCarthy et al., 2010).

Consistently, Folse (2003) agreed with Wilkins' previous assertion about the significance of vocabulary, stating that while a lack of syntax can hinder meaning and understanding, insufficient vocabulary makes it impossible to express complex ideas or communicate fully. Yusuf (2018), quoting Jim Rohn, stated that "vocabulary enables us to interpret and express. If you have a limited vocabulary, you will also have a limited vision and a limited future." (p. 9). In other words, an individual's ability to understand their environment and connect ideas creatively increases with the number of words and concepts they know. Without a robust vocabulary, their ability to interpret and express is limited, potentially impacting their future vision and goals. Many studies have addressed the significance of vocabulary (Hyso & Tabaku, 2011; Marzano, 2012; Alqahtani, 2015; Scheepers, 2016; Susanto, 2017; Mekheimer, 2018; McKeown, 2019; Brooks et al., 2021), providing comprehensive summaries of its importance in language acquisition. These studies highlight the relevance of vocabulary instruction in relation to other language skills and its significance for academic performance and success, offering valuable insights into teaching vocabulary effectively.

Learning Theories Applied to Vocabulary Instruction

Effective vocabulary teaching is central to constructivism, a theory that advocates for student-centered instruction. In vocabulary learning, constructivism suggests that teachers provide students with meaningful and authentic experiences to interact with words in various contexts. This may involve using real-life examples, multimedia resources, and interactive exercises that encourage critical thinking and active participation (Gao,R., 2021).

Social Constructivism theory posits that vocabulary learning is a social process where learners actively participate in meaning construction through cooperation and scaffolding. Cooperation involves learners recognizing new vocabulary through social interactions with others and exposure to real-language usage. Heuristic tasks or activities that encourage students to work together, share ideas, negotiate word meaning, create new words, and participate in group discussions about new vocabulary are rooted in social constructivism. Scaffolding refers to the assistance provided by a more knowledgeable individual, such as a teacher or peer, to guide students toward a deeper understanding of concepts. This can be achieved through contextual cues, visual aids, and guided or facilitated discussions (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a key concept in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, holds significant implications for educational practices, particularly vocabulary learning. This theory emphasizes

not just academic performance but also the development of collaborative abilities and social growth among learners. The ZPD helps learners select appropriate words that are slightly more challenging than their current vocabulary, but not so difficult that they cannot grasp them without assistance. It promotes learner autonomy by empowering them to take charge of their vocabulary development within their ZPD. Learners can keep track of their progress with support from a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), who can provide feedback to ensure they stay on the right track. Implementing ZPD in the classroom supports learners' vocabulary growth by providing suitable challenges and support to bridge any linguistic gaps or barriers (Alkurtehe & Dzakiria, 2018).

Schema theory, with broad and substantial effects in psychology and education, explains how individuals perceive and interpret information in diverse contexts. This theory is crucial for both vocabulary learning and acquisition. Schemas help learners understand and recall words. When encountering unknown words, learners can activate their existing schemas related to similar concepts and link new vocabulary to previously learned words through association and contextualization. Schemas help learners move beyond rote memorization and effectively integrate new vocabulary into their long-term memory (Kafipour & Jahansooz, 2017).

Psycholinguistic theory significantly influences learners' vocabulary learning and acquisition. It sheds light on how learners comprehend, organize, retain, and modify words in their mental lexicon, revealing the intricate interplay of cognitive processes during vocabulary learning, such as attention, working memory, and semantic processing. This theory provides a framework for various mechanisms, including morphological structures, syntactic patterns, concept maps, graphic organizers, and semantic linkages that affect vocabulary learning. Drawing upon psycholinguistic theory allows for the development of effective interventions and remediations for learners experiencing vocabulary difficulties or language impairments (Moody et al., 2018).

Motivation theory is fundamental for vocabulary learning as it acts as a catalyst for learners, fueling their desire to learn and master vocabulary. Tseng & Schmitt (2008) explain that for language learners encountering unfamiliar words, motivation helps them overcome challenges by fostering a passion for vocabulary learning and empowering them to engage in activities.

Behaviorism theory, emphasizing imitation, repetition, practice, reinforcement, and association, proposes that learners acquire new words by repeated exposure in relevant contexts, receiving reinforcement and praise for correct responses (Schmitt, 1997). Behaviorists highlight the importance of practice through drill activities or exercises to enhance memory retention. This theory emphasizes quick feedback and error correction. Frequent exposure to a word along with its definition or context strengthens neural associations, leading to increased vocabulary retention and retrieval (Decarrico, 2001). Kaypova (2021) explains that from

a behaviorist perspective, the most effective method for learning vocabulary is repeated exposure to a word. Behaviorism theory remains influential in learning situations due to its focus on methodical practice and observable results.

Cognitivism, in terms of vocabulary instruction, focuses on the role of the mind in learning and using new words. It emphasizes the importance of understanding cognitive mechanisms to improve vocabulary acquisition. Cognitivism encourages active learner engagement with the language, creating meaning and drawing connections between new words and previously acquired knowledge. It acknowledges that language learning involves more than memorizing word lists. Cognitivism offers various approaches and strategies, including mnemonics, chunking, visualization, and context-based learning, to enhance information processing, improve word recall, and facilitate integration into a learner's lexicon. Cognitivism also highlights the importance of metacognition, where learners monitor their own thought processes as they learn new words and evaluate their progress. Overall, cognitivism provides a valuable framework for understanding how learners acquire and recall new vocabulary (Zhang,J., 2019).

Interactionism theory in vocabulary proposes that both internal cognitive processes and external social interactions influence learners' vocabulary acquisition and growth. Learners develop a deeper understanding of word usage, connotations, and pronunciation through these interactions. Interactionists emphasize the importance of context and interpersonal communication in vocabulary development. Individuals acquire new words through exposure to meaningful contexts where they can engage in discussions, ask questions, and receive feedback. This theory underscores the significance of social factors like culture, socioeconomic status, and identity in shaping learners' lexical repertoires (Denzin, 2001).

The incidental learning theory plays a critical role in vocabulary acquisition. This theory stresses the importance of authentic or realistic communication scenarios where learners interact with rich linguistic input and infer the meaning of new words or phrases based on context. While engaging in linguistic activities, particularly reading and listening, learners can unconsciously expand their vocabulary. Nation asserts that the more frequently a word appears in context, the more likely it is to be learned, with context providing clues to infer the meaning of unknown words. Vocabulary size affects the density of unfamiliar words in a text, which is crucial for effective guessing. This theory highlights the importance of repetition and frequency in learning new vocabulary as repeated interactions with new words improve recall (Hulstijn, 2013).

Semantic theory in vocabulary is a crucial aspect of understanding language and meaning construction. It examines elements of word meaning, including denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associative meaning). This theory assists in constructing word sense relations, such as hyponymy, synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, homonymy, and meronymy, to enhance vocabulary instruction. Semantic

theory provides insights into disambiguating word senses based on context as understanding these relationships is vital for expanding vocabulary and comprehending the intricacies of word usage (Weinreich & Labov, 1972).

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Task-based learning (TBL) is an approach to language teaching that heavily emphasizes the practical application of linguistic skills in real-life situations. Unlike regular methods, TBL accommodates the demands of language acquisition and provides teachers with an effective teaching framework that meets learners' needs in terms of language use, prioritizing learner engagement in tasks. While TBL is globally recognized for its effectiveness in promoting valuable language learning, it remains a debated topic, with much of the controversy stemming from a lack of clarity regarding this educational approach.

Some individuals mistakenly equate tasks, exercises, and activities, leading to confusion and misinterpretations. These terms have distinct meanings and are often used interchangeably in the field of language learning. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify their differences. According to Widdowson (1998), "exercise" and "task" are not interchangeable in terms of their meaning, purpose, and intended outcomes. An exercise focuses on mastering communicative abilities as a prerequisite for developing linguistic skills, whereas a task is based on the idea that language skills are acquired through communication. Skehan (1998) further distinguishes between "exercise" and "task" in five aspects: orientation, focus, goal, outcome evaluation, and real-world relationship. Table 2 presents a comparison of these terms, outlining the key differences.

Table 2

Differences between Exercise and Task According to Skehan (1998)

Aspects	Exercise	Task
Orientation	Linguistic skills are viewed as a prerequisite for learning communicative abilities.	Linguistic skills are developed while engaging in communicative activity.
Focus	Linguistic form and semantic meaning (primary focus on form)	Propositional content and pragmatic communicative meaning (primary focus on meaning)
Goal	Manifestation of code knowledge.	Achievement of a communicative goal.
Outcome evaluation	Performance is evaluated in terms of conformity to the code.	Performance is evaluated in terms of whether the communicative goal has been achieved.
Real-world relationship	Internalization of linguistic skills serves as an investment for future use.	There is a relationship between the activity that arises from the task and the way language is used in the real world.

Richards (2014) differentiates between three terms: **exercise**, **task**, and **activity**. Exercises are highly structured and focus on specific linguistic features. Tasks, in contrast, are less constrained, aiming for specific objectives while emphasizing both form and meaning. Activities are the most comprehensive, encompassing multiple tasks and resources to achieve a larger goal. They often involve collaboration, extended practice, and coordination between different groups or individuals. The figure below illustrates these distinctions.

Figure (2)

Richards' (2014) distinction between an exercise, an activity, and a task

Task Stages and Components: A Framework for Task-Based Learning

Task-based learning (TBL) employs a structured approach with three primary stages: pre-task, during-task (task cycle), and post-task (language focus). This model, inspired by Willis (1996), is further elaborated upon by other researchers like Nunan (2015).

Pre-task focuses on task presentation and familiarizing learners with the objective. Task Cycle involves three steps: task completion, planning, and reporting, promoting learner fluency and collaborative learning. Post-task emphasizes language analysis and practice, focusing on specific linguistic features encountered during the task.

Beyond the stages, Nunan (2004) identifies six key task components:

- Goal: The overarching purpose of the task, connecting it to the curriculum and addressing learners' communicative needs.
- Input: Verbal, written, or visual information used during the task.
- Procedures: The specific steps learners take to complete the task, catering to individual preferences and learning styles.
- Teacher Roles: Facilitator, participant, and observer, guiding learners and ensuring task completion.
- Learner Roles: Inventor, risk-taker, and group participant, actively engaging in the task.

- Setting: The environment where the task takes place, influencing the learning experience.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Task-Based Learning

TBL aligns with various theoretical perspectives:

- Input Hypothesis: Learners acquire language by actively negotiating meaning and communicating in tasks.

- Output Hypothesis: Tasks encourage learners to produce language, promoting fluency and accuracy.

- Cognitive Approach: Tasks influence language acquisition by engaging learners in various production activities.

- Sociocultural Theory: Tasks are seen as tools that facilitate collaborative learning and co-construction of meaning.

Furthermore, Activity Theory emphasizes the role of tools and cultural context in mediating human activity, connecting task-based learning to broader social and cultural frameworks.

Personal Investment Theory highlights the importance of learner motivation and engagement in the success of task-based learning.

Research Focus: This study investigates the effectiveness of TBL in developing English vocabulary skills among primary school students. The research hypothesis posits that the experimental group, utilizing TBL, will outperform the control group in vocabulary sub-skills assessment.

Method

The study employs a quasi-experimental approach with two groups: experimental (TBL instruction) and control (regular instruction). Both groups receive pre- and post-vocabulary tests.

Figure (3)

The current research design
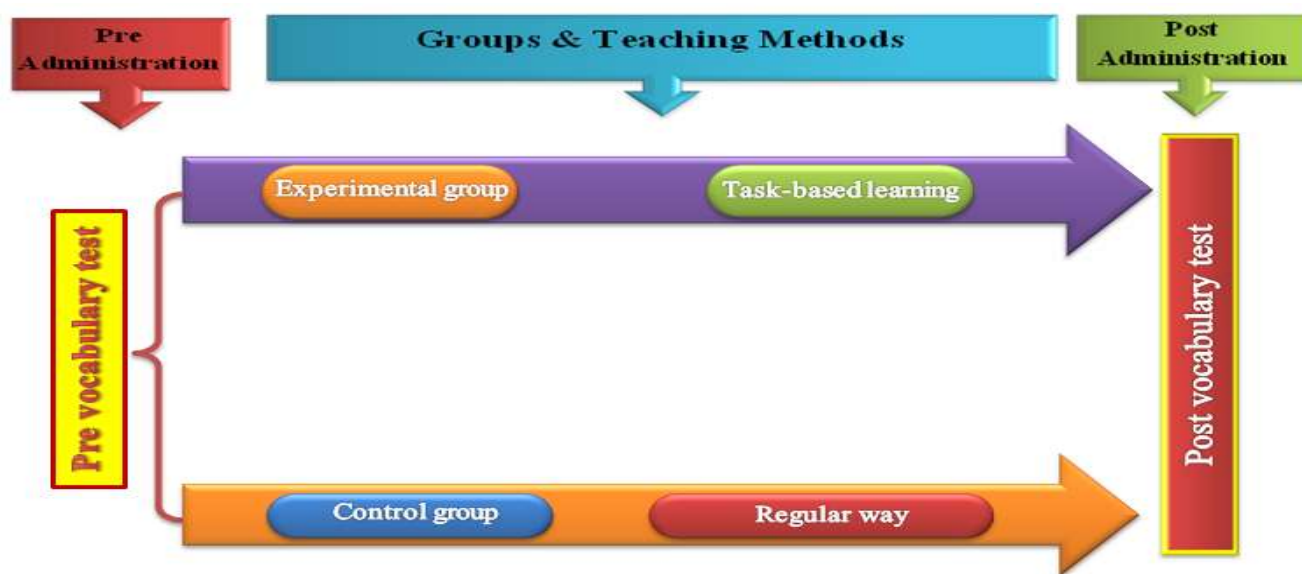
The chosen participants for the present research were eighty female pupils enrolled in the sixth grade from Nazlet El Barqi Primary School and Besfa Primary School in El Fashn district, Beni Suef. To control for potential confounding factors, the study ensured that both groups had similar characteristics: participants were 12 years old, 80 female pupils, all studied English at the same school for five years, exhibited equivalent English proficiency levels, came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, had comparable prior experience in English vocabulary, studied the same vocabulary course (English for Everyone: English Vocabulary Builder), and were taught during the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year.

This study employed two primary instruments to gather data:

1. **Vocabulary Knowledge and Skills Assessment:** This comprehensive assessment, designed to evaluate learners' understanding and application of English vocabulary, included multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and sentence-completion tasks. The assessment was validated by a panel of expert language educators, achieving a content validity coefficient of 0.92, indicating strong alignment with relevant vocabulary standards and curriculum objectives.

2. **Vocabulary Learning and Retention Measure:** This pre-post test was administered before the intervention, immediately following the intervention, and again several weeks later. The test included a variety of tasks, such as matching words with definitions, using words in context, and identifying synonyms and antonyms. A reliability coefficient of 0.85, determined using the test-retest method, demonstrated the instrument's consistent measurement of vocabulary learning and retention over time. Additionally, interrater reliability analysis, conducted by two independent raters scoring a random sample of responses, yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.90, indicating high agreement in scoring.

These instruments were chosen for their alignment with the research questions and their ability to provide reliable and valid measures of vocabulary development.

The present study model emphasizes real-life connections, personal experiences, and learner autonomy. It aims to create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that promotes vocabulary development, retention, and life skills.

Figure (4)

The study instructional model of task-based vocabulary teaching

conducted to compare the post-test scores of the experimental group (n = 40) who received TBL instruction with the control group (n = 40) who received regular instruction. The independent samples t-test results revealed statistically significant differences (p < .01) in favor of the experimental group who received task-based learning (TBL) instruction across all vocabulary sub-skills, compared to the control group who received regular instruction. This indicates that TBL significantly improved vocabulary skills in areas such as spelling, sentence formation, word formation, picture matching, word meaning, word classification, antonym identification, and word type identification as is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Independent Samples T-test for Post-Vocabulary Test Scores

Vocabulary Sub-skill	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t value	df	p
Spelling	Control	6.45	2.50	13.53	78	< .01
	Experimental	14.80	2.99			
Sentence Formation	Control	6.02	2.42	17.81	78	< .01
	Experimental	15.10	2.13			
Word Formation	Control	5.70	2.33	16.01	78	< .01
	Experimental	15.05	2.86			
Picture Matching	Control	6.75	2.11	19.48	78	< .01
	Experimental	16.75	2.47			
Word Meaning	Control	6.80	2.11	17.67	78	< .01
	Experimental	15.80	2.43			
Word Classification	Control	6.05	2.38	19.92	78	< .01
	Experimental	15.98	2.07			
Antonym Identification	Control	7.00	1.92	14.91	78	< .01
	Experimental	14.75	2.67			
Word Type Identification	Control	6.84	2.01	16.35	78	< .01
	Experimental	14.81	2.34			
Total Post-Vocabulary Test	Control	51.61	10.72	30.80	78	< .01
	Experimental	123.04	10.00			

Table 3 reveals statistically significant differences ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in favor of the experimental group on all vocabulary sub-skills, indicating that TBL effectively improved vocabulary skills. To further analyze the impact of TBL, effect size (η^2) was calculated using eta-squared technique (Richardson, 1996): $\eta^2 = t^2 / (t^2 + df)$. The effect size was substantial ($\eta^2 = 0.92$), suggesting a strong and significant influence of TBL on the experimental group's performance.

Table 4

Paired Samples T-test for Pre and Post Vocabulary Test Scores (Experimental Group)

Vocabulary Sub-skill	t value	df	p	Effect Size
Spelling	23.08	39	< .01	0.93
Sentence	30.74	39	< .01	0.96

Formation				
Word Formation	39.20	39	< .01	0.98
Picture Matching	35.63	39	< .01	0.97
Word Meaning	29.49	39	< .01	0.96
Word Classification	30.27	39	< .01	0.96
Antonym Identification	26.19	39	< .01	0.95
Word Type Identification	27.50	39	< .01	0.95
Total Vocabulary Test	68.72	39	< .01	0.99

Table 4 shows statistically significant improvements ($p < .01$) in the experimental group's performance on all vocabulary sub-skills from the pre-test to the post-test, highlighting the efficacy of TBL in enhancing vocabulary proficiency.

Table 5

Paired Samples T-test for Pre and Post Vocabulary Test Scores (Experimental Group)

Vocabulary Sub-skill	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	*t* value	*df*	p	Effect Size
Spelling	9.05	2.48	23.08	39	< .01	0.93
Sentence Formation	9.54	1.96	30.74	39	< .01	0.96
Word Formation	10.80	1.74	39.20	39	< .01	0.98
Picture Matching	11.55	2.05	35.63	39	< .01	0.97
Word Meaning	10.45	2.24	29.49	39	< .01	0.96
Word Classification	11.08	2.31	30.27	39	< .01	0.96
Antonym Identification	9.60	2.32	26.19	39	< .01	0.95
Word Type Identification	9.61	2.21	27.50	39	< .01	0.95
Total Vocabulary Test	81.66	7.52	68.72	39	< .01	0.99

Table 5 confirms statistically significant improvements ($p < 0.05$) in the experimental group's performance on all vocabulary sub-skills, indicating the effectiveness of TBL in promoting vocabulary learning and retention. The results demonstrate that TBL was significantly more effective than regular instruction in promoting vocabulary development among primary school pupils. The substantial effect sizes across all sub-skills further support the positive impact of TBL on vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of task-based learning (TBL) in enhancing sixth graders' English vocabulary skills. The research hypothesis, which predicted statistically significant differences in post-test scores between the experimental group (receiving TBL) and the control group (receiving regular instruction), was confirmed. The results demonstrate a substantial and positive impact of TBL on vocabulary development, highlighting its efficacy in closing the vocabulary proficiency gap.

The pre-test scores revealed that both the experimental and control groups exhibited significant weaknesses in vocabulary skills. This underscores the importance of addressing vocabulary development in language learning, especially in the early stages. In harmony with the pre vocabulary test scores, neither the participants belonging to the experimental group nor the control group achieved a passing score on the pre-vocabulary test as a whole. The highest score in the experimental group attained was 56.5 out of 160, while in the control group was 59.5. The lowest score recorded was 20 out of 160 in the experimental group, whereas the lowest score documented was 15.5 in the control group .The previous scores emerged the significance of this study and accentuate that sixth graders have weakness in the vocabulary skills. Therefore, the researcher chose to teach with the task-based learning approach to identify its efficiency in amelioration the sixth graders' vocabulary skills.

Consequently, the experimental group, following TBL instruction, achieved a 100% pass rate on the post-test, significantly outperforming the control group, which exhibited no successful participants. The maximum score achieved was 139 out of 160; while the minimum score recorded were 99.5. However, the control group's scores showed that none of the participants had succeeded. The uppermost score obtained on the test was 73 out of 160, and the lowermost documented was 28.5.These results explicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in post vocabulary test as a whole. Figure 5, 6 summarized the results of the study. This superiority may be attributed to the following elements: Task-based learning offers an environment for contextualized learning, scaffolded learning to assist learners in progressively gaining new skills, feedback and error correction on the learners' used language, and the integration of vocabulary skills to provide a more thorough comprehension of words in several linguistic areas.

The specific sub-skill of relating words to corresponding pictures demonstrated the most significant improvement, while antonym identification showed the least impact with TBL. These results align with previous research that highlights the benefits of contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, and the integration of vocabulary skills within a communicative context (Ellis, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002). The results of the present study contribute to a growing body of literature supporting the effectiveness of TBL in language teaching (Nunan, 2015; Richards, 2014).
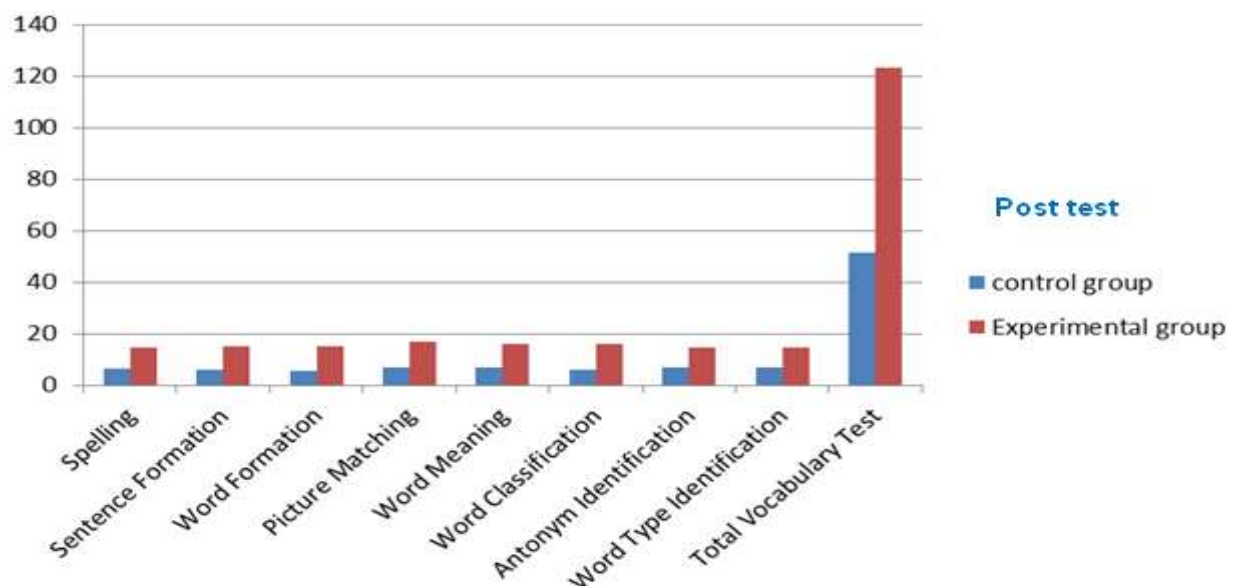
Figure (5)

The results of the pre vocabulary test for both groups
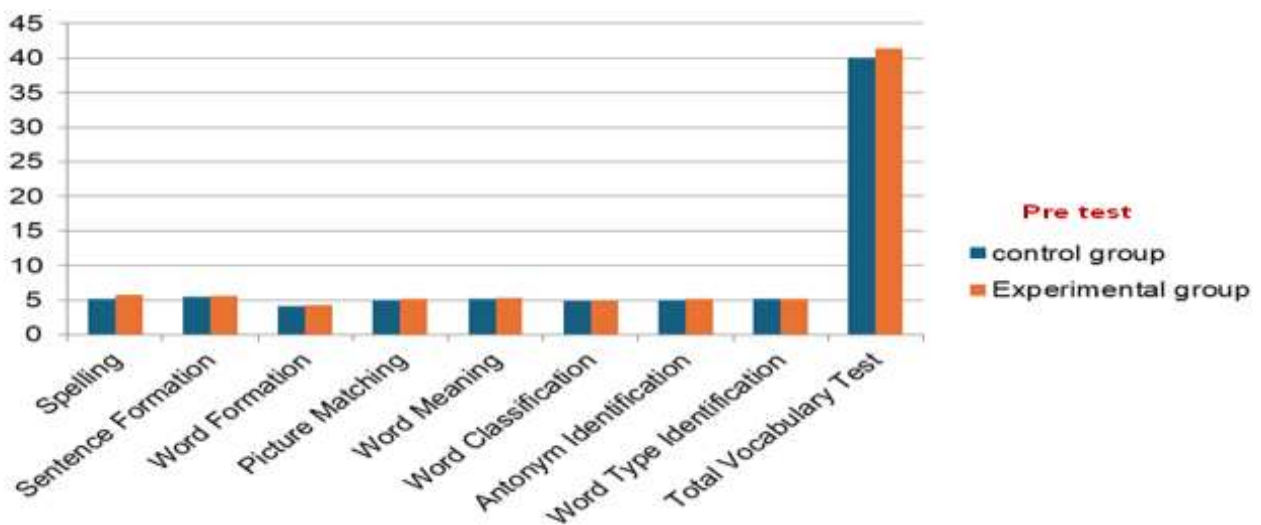
Figure (6)

 The results of the post vocabulary test for both groups

Challenges and Limitations

While this study demonstrates the effectiveness of TBL in enhancing vocabulary skills, it's crucial to acknowledge the challenges and limitations inherent in this approach. These limitations require further exploration and refinement of TBL practices:

- **Time Constraints:** Implementing TBL effectively can be time-consuming, particularly in resource-limited environments. Teachers may need to dedicate more class time to planning, organizing, and facilitating tasks. Finding creative ways to integrate TBL into existing curriculum structures while managing time constraints is essential, the researcher perceived that there was not enough time to hear every pupil's comments. Furthermore, the pupils were not allocated sufficient time to perform assigned tasks.

- **Place Constraints:** The sixth-grade classes at Besfa Elementary School were too tiny, cramped, and claustrophobic for participatory learning and interactive tasks within them. Thus, the researcher was compelled to complete these tasks in alternative places, such as first-grade classrooms, kindergarten halls, and sometimes even in the schoolyard.

- **Lack of resources:** The laptop was used as a device to display the interactive content because Besfa Primary School did not have a computer lab that was adequately equipped, which prevented many of the participants from actively engaging in several interactive tasks on their computers in the school lab.

- **Teacher Training:** Implementing TBL effectively necessitates extensive training for teachers. Educators need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of TBL, master various task types, and develop skills in facilitating group work and providing timely feedback. This requires dedicated professional development programs focused on TBL, including practical workshops and mentoring opportunities.

- **Task Design and Complexity:** Creating engaging and appropriately challenging tasks is essential for TBL success. Teachers must consider learners' age, language level, and learning styles when designing tasks. Balancing task complexity, ensuring tasks are meaningful and relevant to learners' needs, and providing appropriate scaffolding are crucial for promoting vocabulary acquisition.

- **Assessment and Evaluation:** Evaluating vocabulary development within a TBL framework can be challenging. Traditional tests may not accurately reflect the gains in vocabulary proficiency achieved through communicative tasks. Developing appropriate assessment tools that measure form and meaning, as well as learners' ability to use vocabulary in context, is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of TBL.

- **Learner Motivation and Engagement:** Maintaining learner motivation and engagement throughout TBL activities is vital for sustained vocabulary development. Teachers must create tasks that are intrinsically motivating, cater to learners' interests, and encourage active participation. Strategies for fostering a collaborative and supportive learning environment are essential.

While this study highlights the effectiveness of TBL in enhancing vocabulary skills, it's important to acknowledge the limitations. The research was conducted with a specific population and context, and further research is needed to explore the generalizability of these findings to other learners and settings. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators can enhance the implementation of TBL and maximize its potential for promoting vocabulary growth and overall language proficiency.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the present study have significant implications for pedagogical practices in vocabulary instruction. The demonstrated effectiveness of TBL in enhancing vocabulary skills suggests that educators should consider integrating this approach into their teaching strategies.

1. Embrace Task-Based Learning: Incorporate TBL activities into lesson plans, moving away from traditional rote memorization and grammar exercises. Engage learners in communicative tasks that require them to utilize vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

2. Leverage Diverse Task Types: Employ a variety of task types that cater to different learning styles and cater to different sub-skills within vocabulary. Include tasks that involve visual aids, collaboration, problem-solving, and real-world applications to promote engagement and facilitate deeper learning.

3. Foster Collaborative Learning Environments: Encourage group work and peer interaction to create a supportive environment where learners can actively engage in vocabulary acquisition through negotiation of meaning, discussion, and feedback.

4. Provide Scaffolding and Support: Offer appropriate scaffolding to support learners as they progress through tasks. Provide clear instructions, visual aids, and contextual clues to facilitate understanding and help learners overcome challenges.

5. Emphasize Language Focus: Integrate language focus activities into the TBL framework. Encourage learners to reflect on their language use, analyze patterns, and practice using new vocabulary in a variety of contexts.

By implementing these pedagogical implications, educators can create a more effective and engaging learning environment for vocabulary development, empowering learners to achieve their full language learning potential.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence for the efficacy of task-based learning (TBL) in enhancing English vocabulary skills among sixth graders. The experimental group, receiving TBL instruction, demonstrated significantly improved vocabulary performance compared to the control group receiving regular instruction. This improvement was evident across all vocabulary sub-skills, indicating the effectiveness of TBL in promoting both vocabulary acquisition and retention. The results align with a growing body of literature that supports the use of TBL as a dynamic and engaging approach to language teaching. TBL's effectiveness stems from its alignment with various learning theories, emphasizing the importance of contextualized learning, collaborative engagement, and meaningful language use. The results of the study hold significant implications for pedagogical practice, encouraging educators to embrace TBL approaches and create more effective and engaging learning environments for vocabulary development. Further research is recommended to explore the efficacy of TBL across various contexts, investigate the impact of different task types, and analyze the role of learner motivation and engagement in TBL success. By continuing to refine and expand the use of TBL, educators can empower learners to achieve their full language learning potential, equipping them with the vocabulary knowledge and skills necessary for successful communication and academic success.

Research Recommendations

Based on the research results, the researcher suggested the following recommendations, which should be taken into account for the categories below:

Pupils: To work together to achieve a shared goal and focus intently on the vocabulary and retention skills tasks and how well they should be accomplished.

EFL teachers: To enroll in training courses that will allow them to teach vocabulary and retention skills using task-based learning and get ready to take on a variety of roles in the classroom, including the facilitator, advisor, and monitor.

Pedagogical scholars: to do further research on task-based learning and its most recent trends, concentrating more on the correlation between vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Course designers: To apply cutting-edge methods for teaching English language skills, which are dependent on and consistent with task-based learning.

On the other hand, the results of the study highlighted the potential of TBL for vocabulary development; nevertheless, further research and refinement of practice are crucial for optimizing its effectiveness. Therefore, the researcher proposes the following suggestions:

- **Expand the Scope:** Conduct further research exploring the effectiveness of TBL across various age groups, language levels, and subject areas. Investigate the impact of TBL in different cultural contexts and educational settings.

- **Investigate Task Design:** Explore the effectiveness of different task types, complexity levels, and task sequencing. Examine how various task components, such as input, procedures, and learner roles, influence vocabulary acquisition.

- **Focus on Motivation and Engagement:** Analyze the role of learner motivation, intrinsic interest, and engagement in the success of TBL. Investigate strategies for enhancing learner motivation and creating engaging tasks.

- **Explore the Impact on Other Language Skills:** Investigate how TBL impacts other language skills, such as reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and writing. Examine the potential of TBL to promote overall language proficiency.

- **Examine the Role of Technology:** Investigate the role of technology in facilitating TBL, including the use of multimedia resources, digital tools, and online platforms. Explore the potential of technology to enhance task design, engagement, and feedback mechanisms.

   Practice Recommendations

- **Integrate TBL into Curriculum:** Educators should systematically integrate TBL approaches into their curriculum, replacing traditional vocabulary drills and exercises with more engaging and interactive tasks.

- **Provide Professional Development:** Offer professional development opportunities for teachers on best practices for implementing TBL. Focus on task design, classroom management, and strategies for promoting learner engagement and motivation.

- **Utilize a Variety of Resources:** Access a diverse range of materials, resources, and technology to support the implementation of TBL. Explore online databases, textbooks, and digital tools that offer authentic and engaging tasks.

- **Collaborate and Share:** Encourage collaboration among educators to share best practices, resources, and innovative TBL strategies. Create a community of practice for teachers to learn from each other and refine their TBL implementation.

- **Continuously Evaluate and Reflect:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of TBL practices, analyze student data, and reflect on areas for improvement. Adapt and refine TBL approaches based on feedback and ongoing research findings.

By pursuing these research and practice recommendations, we can further refine and broaden the use of TBL to create more effective and engaging language learning experiences that empower learners to develop their vocabulary and reach their full linguistic potential.

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