

## STRESSING VOCABULARY IN THE ALGERIAN EFL CLASS USING THE LEXICAL NOTEBOOK AS A VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY

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**Abstract.** *It is a fact that Algerian EFL pupils face difficulties in learning English as a foreign language. This is clearly mirrored by their poor outcome during the official exams, particularly at the 'Baccalaureate Exam' where English is often identified as one of the major teaching subjects causing pupils' failure. From our modest experience as an EFL teacher at the secondary education, we noticed that our EFL pupils usually face difficulties in the four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing, and we noticed that the main cause behind such difficulties was, in most cases, the limited vocabulary knowledge of the pupils. In this respect, the current paper assumes that there is a causal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the overall level of Algerian EFL pupils. Accordingly, it tries to demonstrate the importance of vocabulary instruction in our EFL class relying on a quasi-experimental research which involved the use of a pre-test/post-test design. The experiment aimed to reveal the usefulness of the lexical notebook as a vocabulary learning strategy and the positive impact of vocabulary acquisition that may result, on the writing skill. Besides, two sets of questionnaire were used to scrutinize the causes behind the weak level of Algerian EFL pupils from teachers' as well as pupils' perspective and to analyze the quality of vocabulary instruction in the Algerian EFL class.*

**Key words:** *vocabulary, vocabulary knowledge, explicit vs. implicit vocabulary instruction, lexical notebook, writing skill, Algerian secondary school pupils*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning another language, besides ones mother tongue has become a necessity in an international community where transactions in the different domains of life are becoming increasingly important. Obviously, such interconnected community seeks to find means that facilitate communication between its dissimilar members. For several reasons, English seems to be the de facto international language that holds the required characteristics to fulfill this objective.

The last five decades or so have witnessed a fundamental shift in the beliefs concerning foreign language learning. Results concerning the traditional teaching methods were unsatisfactory and scholars started to target communicative competence as the primary objective of foreign language learning in response to the needs of the globalized society. Understanding and speaking any language entails using a whole system of communication which means knowing the morphology, phonology, syntax and discourse as well as the vocabulary of that language (Grauberg, W., 1997:2). In first language acquisition, listening and speaking are the first activated skills. Vocabulary is

undoubtedly the first language component a child starts to acquire, and grammar follows spontaneously (Bates, J., 1999, cited in Tomasello, M., 2003:31). Conversely, in learning a foreign language, importance is generally given to the reading and writing skills and hence to grammar as a means to assure their accuracy.

Nevertheless, things started to change. Dissatisfaction in the FLL field and the raising interest in speaking the foreign language effectively rather than only accurately, i.e., using it as a means of communication, ended up by integrating the four skills in the same way language is used in real life. In other words, conveying meaning is the reason behind using the target language. As such, interest in vocabulary started to spread among language specialists as the key component in learning any language. The role of vocabulary is more accentuated in foreign language learning. This belief is justified by the difficulties encountered by the EFL learners in using the target language for efficient communication due to their limited vocabulary knowledge, the case of Algerian EFL secondary school pupils.

Different researches have been conducted in an attempt to solve or at least explain the challenges facing Algerian English teachers and learners. Most of these studies focused either on the productive skills or the receptive skills as a tentative explanation to pupils' failure in English. However, the four skills are interconnected and improvement in one skill generally leads to enhancement in the other skills. Therefore, when investigating learners' low achievement in English, the focus would be rather on what makes learners face difficulties in using their four skills. The common element shared by these skills is meaning, which is conveyed mainly through vocabulary. Accordingly, vocabulary knowledge is the cornerstone in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this context, the current study aims at exploring new possible perspectives that can offset the absence of a natural linguistic environment by enlightening the significant role of explicit vocabulary teaching as well as the use of the vocabulary learning strategies, namely the lexical notebook, in improving ELT in the Algerian context.

## 2. VOCABULARY

A considerable amount of literature has been published on vocabulary, describing the noteworthy role it plays in both first language acquisition and foreign language learning (Laufer, B., 1997:20). Though, it has been neglected for a long time, it is now widely recognized to be the pivot on which the other components of language revolve. So, what does the term vocabulary stand for?

Based on the different explanations suggested in the literature vocabulary definition is tightly linked to the elucidation of the term "word". However, As Plag, I. explained there is a certain paradox concerning the concept "word" when stating that: "it is sometimes not easy to decide whether a given string of sounds (or letters) should be regarded as a word or not" (2007:9). To avoid the ambiguity raised by Plag, I., the current study adopted the definitions suggested by two accredited English dictionaries. Then, the term 'word' is defined in the Concise Oxford English dictionary as "...a single distinct meaningful element of speech or writing, used to form sentences with the others" (2008: 1660-1661). Similarly, in the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, it is defined as "...a single unit of language which has meaning and can be spoken or written" (2003: 1471). While, vocabulary is defined as: "...the body words used in a particular language or in a particular

sphere of activity” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008, 1617), or as: “...all the words used by a particular person or all the words which exist in a particular language or subject” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary: New, 2003: 1423). As such, words are fundamental meaningful units in every sentence and vocabulary, therefore, may be defined as the sum of the meaningful units a person knows in a language which, unlike grammar, develops continuously as affirmed by Grauberg, W.:

“The rules of grammar and the patterns of pronunciation are relatively few and the total is finite, ... The third level, vocabulary, is open, containing a large number of words for productive use, another large number for receptive use and a further number which varies with the interests and occupation of individual speakers” (1997:2)

This explains the great amount of vocabulary in a language and the need to be concerned with it. Apparently, language development is basically related to the incessant change in the vocabulary open class. Transformation in the different aspects of human life leads to the emergence of new concepts and ideas which are expressed by means of new invented words or derivation from existing ones. Although, the relation between the concept and the label or the word is described as arbitrary and symbolic (Saussure, 2001, cited in Duan, M., 2012: 54), every community succeeds to assimilate the new words through social interaction and meaning negotiation which emphasizes again the vital role of the natural linguistic environment for the effective acquisition and learning of any language. Because of the absence of this natural linguistic environment, achieving success in foreign language learning, though possible, is a difficult task. This goal maybe carried out by stressing means and techniques that enable FL learners to attain at least “successful language rather than accurate language” (Rhalmi, M., 2009). This implies that the emphasis should be on how to learn English effectively so as to use it for communicative purposes.

In this respect, recent findings (Lewis, M., 1993: 89; Laufer, B., 1997: 20; Grauberg, W., 1997: 5; Lackman, K., 2001: 3; Schmitt, N., 2010: 4) have stressed vocabulary as a key component in communication. This latter is based on meaning and meaning is, as stated previously, conveyed through words, the smallest meaningful units in a language. These units link the four skills and enable interlocutors to understand each other and exchange ideas, and provide the writer with the means to share his/her thoughts with the reader. Vocabulary is hence prerequisite to achieve success in the four skills. It is the fifth skill that the language learners need to develop so as to promote the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Besides, vocabulary is needed to teach grammar and pronunciation. Lackman, K. (2001:3) went further to argue that even with a poor command of grammar one is often able to communicate effectively because grammar mistakes do not prevent understanding whereas using the wrong word will certainly lead to misunderstanding of the message. So, even if language cannot be abridged to vocabulary (Campilo, R.M.A., 1995: 36), the role of vocabulary learning in enhancing FL learners’ proficiency level cannot be overestimated.

### 3. TYPES OF VOCABULARY

According to Gale Encyclopedia of Education (GEE), human language is based on interaction or message exchange i.e.: receiving and producing messages. Owing to

Macwhinney, B (2002), receptive, also called passive language includes the listening and reading skills, and takes place during the comprehension or interpretation of the oral or written message. On the other hand, productive or active language consists of idea production in writing and the verbalization of words in speaking (Macwhinney, B. 2002).

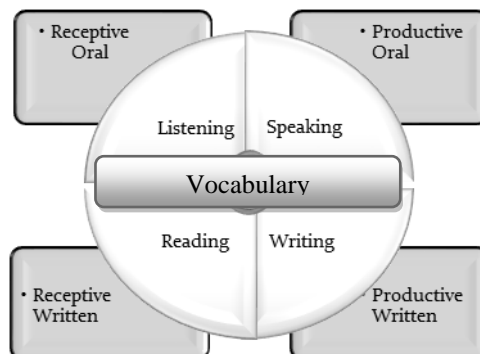


Fig. 1 Vocabulary Types (Adapted from Pikulski, J. *et al*, 2004: 2)

The above figure shows the different types of vocabulary that make up any language and which may be defined as follows:

- Listening vocabulary or the receptive vocabulary in the oral/ spoken form refers to words that can be recognized when heard.
- Reading vocabulary or the receptive vocabulary in the written form refers to words that can be recognized when read.
- Speaking vocabulary or the productive vocabulary in the oral/ spoken form refers to words that can be orally produced in appropriate contexts.
- Writing vocabulary or the productive vocabulary in the written form refers to words that can be appropriately produced in written contexts.

(Nation, I.S.P., 2001:24-26; Pikulski, J., 2004:1)

While trying to decipher the process of vocabulary learning, researchers (Nation, P., 1990:43-45; Schmitt, N., 2010: 81; Sedita, J., 2005:3) revealed that words are known first receptively and only after different experiences with these words; through intentional or incidental learning, they become accessible for productive use. Therefore, as explained by Zhou, S.: “vocabulary knowledge should be regarded as a continuum on which a word grows from receptive to productive status” (2010: 15). This may explain the researcher’s assumption concerning the large size of the learners’ receptive vocabulary compared to the size of their productive vocabulary (*ibid*).

#### 4. VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Linguists have made it clear that lack of vocabulary considerably hinders the learners’ proficiency achievement in the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the same line, Xu, F., quoting Candlin (1988), acknowledged that vocabulary teaching should be at “the heart of language teaching” with respect to the syllabus design, the assessment

of learners' achievement and the supply in learning materials ( Xu, F. et al, 2011: 649). The renewed interest in vocabulary has led to an increasing amount of studies in the field of vocabulary instruction. The studies resulted in identifying different methods and techniques for teaching vocabulary. Likewise, in its final report on Teaching Children to Read ,the American National Reading Panel (2000: 24) identified two important methods; explicit/direct vocabulary teaching as opposed to implicit/indirect vocabulary instruction. To assure learners' vocabulary growth, the panel argues that teachers need to design a balanced programme combining both implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction.

#### **4.1. Incidental vocabulary learning**

Indirect/implicit instruction or incidental learning is regarded by many researchers such as Nation and Waring (Waring, R. et al, 1997:12), as the most important vocabulary learning method that should be at the core of any vocabulary learning programme. This belief is mainly related to the new linguistic trends which advocate learning foreign languages the same way people acquire their first language. In L1, children acquire most of their vocabulary without receiving any instruction, i.e. incidentally through contact and experiences with their native language (Yopp, H.K. et al, 2009: 20).

Incidental learning is defined by Trong Tuan, L. as: "acquiring new words while being involved in different language activities without any specific intention to focus on vocabulary" (2011: 1688). In foreign language context, incidental learning involves exposing learners to a large amount of new words through the four language skills inside the classroom as well as through extensive reading that takes place outside the educational setting. This method has the potential to prepare FL learners to figure out word meaning from context in the same way they do with their native language. Indeed Nagy stated that:

"...experiences with rich oral language are critical for vocabulary growth...and wide reading is the primary engine that drives vocabulary growth" (2005, 29)

This implies that repeated exposure to words is the key principle of incidental learning. In other words, effective techniques to learn vocabulary differ from one learner to another (Schmitt, N., 2008:343), yet the common factor to learn efficiently is the need to use the new words repeatedly till they become natural parts of the learners' communication (Webb, S., 2008: 233-234). In the same line, Nation, P. (1990:43) declared that learners have to encounter the target words from 5 to 16 times before they are admitted to their long-term memory. On the other hand, Webb S. warned from the negative impact of the long intervals between exposures to lexical items, which would slow down the learning process (2008: 232). In spite of that, he firmly stated that incidental vocabulary learning "should be encouraged and incorporated into L2" (ibid).

#### **4.2. Explicit vocabulary learning**

Direct instruction, also called explicit, intentional or deliberate vocabulary learning, means teaching specific words explicitly, such as pre-teaching vocabulary before reading texts (National Reading Panel, 2000: 17). This method requires learners to concentrate on activities that target immediate vocabulary acquisition (Trong Tuan, L. 2011: 1688). Though, regarded as a traditional method, direct instruction is significantly important in teaching foreign languages particularly for three reasons.

The first reason is the size of the vocabulary which does not correlate with the actual time devoted to foreign language teaching. While an English native speaker for instance, is surrounded by his native language every minute of his life as stated by Folse, K. (2004:1), an EFL learner meets English only in classroom for 3 or 4 hours per week, the case of Algerian EFL pupils. This is a very limited time even for learning the minimal vocabulary size while incidental learning is proved to be time consuming (ibid). In addition to the constraint of time, Schmitt, N. stated that many foreign language learners fail to accomplish even modest vocabulary learning objectives simply from exposure to the target language in the educational setting (Schmitt, N., 2010: 8). Gairns, R. went further to argue that vocabulary cannot take care of itself because as she succinctly explained:

“In a school learning situation with limited time available, conflicting student interests, and the constraint imposed by other syllabus demands, we cannot leave lexis take care of itself in this random fashion and assume that students will acquire the vocabulary which best suits their needs”(Gairns, R. et al, 1986:1)

This means that to overcome all the constraints mentioned by the researcher, teachers need to assist their learners and even look for shortcuts that may help accelerate the learning process. The third reason is that to learn from context, beginning learners should have already reached a vocabulary threshold. In other words, they should have acquired enough vocabulary (at least 3,000 words) that enables them to understand about 95% of the selected text, and only then they can infer the meaning of the remaining vocabulary from context. This suggests that learners have to acquire the needed threshold explicitly before they could start learning vocabulary indirectly. As such, explicit or direct vocabulary teaching is required for the beginning level while implicit instruction is more adequate for advanced levels. Furthermore, some researchers such as Folse, K. (2004:3), found that many learners fail in inferring the correct meaning of unknown words from context. Therefore, direct instruction would be one of the most promising methods as it assures appropriate inference and save time in favour of more vocabulary practice.

##### 5. SELECTING WORDS TO TEACH

Keeping in mind that vocabulary comprises two word classes; a closed and an open class which develops endlessly, this would suggest that the total amount of vocabulary in English is definitely huge. Accordingly, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to learn all those words, not only for foreign language learners but even for native speakers. Therefore, the rational question would be ‘what words to teach in the context of English as a foreign language?’ In all languages, native speakers tend to use some words more frequently than others, in speech as well as in writing. Hence, the logical answer to the previous question should be to start by teaching the most frequent words since they are repeatedly used in daily communication. This would help the EFL learner to understand a considerable part of the target language, as explained by Rider, A.:

“Vocabulary study should be based on common words, not obscure words that students will encounter only once or twice in a lifetime.” (2003:5)

In this respect, and to identify these frequent words, different studies have been conducted on the British National corpus (BNC). For instance, McCarten, J. (2007:4) stated that the analysis of the BNC confirmed that some words are more frequent than others and revealed findings such as:

- 'I' is the most frequent word,
- 'know, think, get, go and mean' are the most frequent verbs( apart from be and have),
- 'people, time and things' are the most frequent nouns,
- 'good' is the most common adjective,
- 'Yeah' is more common than 'yes'. (McCarten, J.,2007:4)

Other researchers such as Nation, P. (1983:10-11), divided the English vocabulary into three classes according to the degree of word frequency in the corpus.

1. Class one: contains a limited number of words that are very frequent, and then Nation called them high frequency words.
2. Class two: contains some words that are not frequent in the language as a whole, but in specialized areas they are quite frequent, they are called special purpose vocabulary.
3. Class three: a very large number of words are very infrequent, that is why he called them low frequency vocabulary.

In a similar study conducted by Hutton, T. L. et al (2008:1), they grouped the English vocabulary into three that largely known as 'vocabulary tiers':

1. Tier one: called basic vocabulary and contains words of everyday speech, usually learned in the early grades by the native speaker.
2. Tier two: called high frequency/multiple meaning vocabulary and contains general academic words.
3. Tier three: called low-frequency/context-specific vocabulary and contains words that are specific to a domain or a field of study.

Most researchers agree upon the significance of this classification. This is clearly explained by Nation, P., (2006: 494) who states that the distinction between high and low frequency words, at least from a teaching perspective, is important as it helps the EFL teacher to select the words to start with when planning a vocabulary programme. He even suggests starting with high frequency vocabulary, moving to special purposes vocabulary and ending with low frequency vocabulary (2006: 498). Furthermore, Nation declares that high frequency, more than low frequency words deserve classroom time because of their wide occurrence and therefore should be taught explicitly, and instead of teaching low frequency words, he suggests to provide learners with vocabulary learning strategies that can help them learn this class of words alone after learning class one (2006:494).

Though the choice of vocabulary in EFL teaching is usually decided by the textbook designers, teachers may supplement those textbooks with the missing vocabulary to fill in the gaps that emerge during the classroom activities due to the learners' needs. McCarty (1990: 90) strongly advises educators to allow learners to suggest words, within a given limit of time, for the sake of motivation and to encourage them to be aware of their own needs.

So, expanding pupils' vocabulary repertoire is one of the main objectives of vocabulary teaching since this will support their comprehension and communication when using EFL in different situations. Fortunately, owing to Schmitt, N., foreign language learners are not required to learn the same size of vocabulary as native speakers

in order to use English successfully. Non-native speakers could communicate with a smaller amount of English vocabulary (Schmitt, 2010:7). Thus, the urgent priority is to start by learning the most high frequency words which act as facilitator and mediator to enable mainly the beginning learners acquire the advanced vocabulary afterwards (Waring, R. et al, 1997:11).

## 6. VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES (VLS)

Proponents of the learner-centered class approach seek to achieve pupils' autonomy and to make them share responsibility for their learning. For that reason, EFL learners need to be trained in using strategies that enable them to eventually promote their autonomy and optimize their engagement in the learning process. Such learning strategies have been identified only recently by researchers like Rubin, J. when attempting to find out what makes some learners succeed and excel while others fail or struggle to attain meager outcomes (1975:43). Later on, several studies have been conducted, using different research tools like interviews, questionnaires and think aloud protocol, in order to deepen the researchers' knowledge in this fresh field. Accordingly, language learning strategies (LLS) have been defined in different ways in literature. For instance, Wenden, A. and Rubin, J. defined LLSs as:

“any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information”  
(1987: 19)

Believing in the positive effect of LLS, O'Malley, J.M. et al considered a learning strategy as “an extremely powerful learning tool” (1985: 43). This tool enables learners to take responsibility for their own learning since “learning begins with the learner” himself (Nyikos, M. et al, 1993:11). Similarly, Cook, V. defined a learning strategy as a decision made by the learners on the adequate ways that can facilitate the learning and use of another language (1991:126). As such, the type of the strategy may reflect the extent of the learner's engagement in the learning process. In line with this belief, O'Malley and Chamot identified learning strategies as: “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (O'Malley, J.M. et al, 1990:1).

Then, defining strategies as ‘choices’, ‘plans’, ‘operations’, ‘techniques’, ‘behaviours’ or even ‘thoughts’ implies that they are conscious and intentional actions made by learners to promote and accelerate their learning (Allen, 2003:321 cited in Al-Ghamdi, M.M.E., 2012:31). Consequently, these strategies can be enhanced and taught mainly to those learners who are identified as weak or poorly performing learners, and to all learners because as Brown, put it “teaching learners how to learn” is the best way to engage them in an active learning and improve their self-confidence (1994:124).

Recognizing the role of vocabulary in learning foreign languages urges researchers to investigate the strategies that can be used in learning vocabulary. To achieve this goal, researchers based their work on observing foreign language learners who are, as such, the main source for gathering information. Hence, the close scrutiny of the attitude and behaviour of the successful language learners revealed that most of the general language learning strategies (LLS) were, in fact, strategies used to learn vocabulary (Martinen, M.,



2008: 29) which may be again, an evidence in favour of the supremacy of vocabulary over the remaining language components.

So, vocabulary learning can be achieved using different strategies. Yet, the findings of several studies carried in different places demonstrated the widespread use of note taking in general and vocabulary notebooks in particular as advocated strategies among foreign language learners. Furthermore, Schmitt asserted that the commonly used VLS among FL learners were 'memorization', 'repetition' and 'keeping vocabulary notebooks' (Schmitt, 2000:132, cited in Uzun, L., 2013: A2).

## 7. VOCABULARY NOTEBOOK

Language learners are often observed to record new words so as to reuse them when needed (Uzun, L., 2013: A-1; Schmitt et al, 1995: 133). These records may be done in the form of a bilingual list, a detailed explanation in a notebook or as notes written on the margins or near the target word (Gu,P.Y., 2003:9). Keeping vocabulary notebooks is considered by many researchers as a useful VLS (Gairns and Redman, 1986; Schmitt and Schmitt, 1995; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Walters and Bozkurt, 2009) because first note taking has the benefit of increasing learners' attention, making learners get involved in the lesson while recording the remarks, preserving the recorded information for later use and serving learners in revising and preparing for their exams (Boyle, J.R. et al, 2001:132). The second reason is that the vocabulary notebook is a kind of "a personal dictionary" (Walters et al, 2009: 404) where learners not only record the words they come across for their personal need but also organize these dictionaries in a personalized way. They are their own creation. Besides, keeping vocabulary notebooks requires the learners to assume more responsibility for their own learning that may enhance their autonomy which is, in turn, needed to ensure continuity in studying vocabulary over time. The most significant advantage of keeping a vocabulary notebook besides the benefits of note taking is particularly linked to the possibility to practise most of the VLS included in Schmitt's taxonomy through the use of this single strategy (Walters, J. et al, 2009:404).

## 8. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research work is mainly to find out the primary causes of first-year secondary pupils' low achievement in English. Therefore, it tried to provide satisfactory answers to the following questions:

1. Is pupils' low achievement in learning English, in secondary school, caused by their limited vocabulary knowledge?
2. Do the vocabulary learning strategies; namely the vocabulary notebook, have a positive effect on the pupils' acquisition of vocabulary?
3. Does the acquisition of vocabulary enhance the pupils' writing skill?

Accordingly the following hypotheses have been put forward:

1. There is a causal relationship between the poor performance of pupils in the four skills and the lack of English vocabulary.
2. The lexical notebook has a positive effect on pupils' vocabulary acquisition.
3. The acquisition of vocabulary leads to the enhancement of pupils' performance in the writing skill.

## 9. METHODOLOGY –SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted in two public secondary schools in the province of Sidi Bel-Abbes, situated in the North West of Algeria. 121 first year secondary school pupils were engaged in this research. They were representing the four scientific classes of Benmaissa Bachir secondary school with 2 classes, namely 1SS1 and 1SS2, acting as treatment groups and two classes; 1SS3 and 1SS4 acting as control groups. The classes participating in this research, were chosen because they were from the same stream, they had got the same EFL teacher and nearly the same class size which is believed to contribute to the validity of the research results. Besides, during the observation phase the literary stream pupils seemed disturbed by the researcher's presence while the scientific pupils were motivated to undertake the experiment. In addition, 7 teachers have participated in the current study; because the number of the English teachers is quite limited in schools compared to the pupils' number; we have selected teachers from two schools; 3 teachers from Benmaissa Bachir and 4 teachers from Okbi Ali.

## 10. RESEARCH TOOLS

To demonstrate the causal relationship between pupils' vocabulary knowledge, the use of the vocabulary notebook and pupils' achievement in EFL, the researcher has opted for a quasi-experimental design where all participants were assigned a vocabulary pre-test to measure their vocabulary knowledge before the treatment. The treatment consisted of incorporating a vocabulary notebook into two EFL classes acting as treatment groups (TG) for a period of three weeks. After that period, all the participants were again assigned a vocabulary post-test to measure their vocabulary knowledge after the treatment and the results of the two tests were compared. The experiment was followed by a written expression assignment meant to check the impact of vocabulary acquisition on the pupils' overall level through the writing skill. Additionally, two questionnaires were administered to the participants, teachers and pupils, aiming at eliciting their opinion regarding the causes behind pupils' failure in EFL as well as the quality of vocabulary teaching in our EFL classes.

### 10.1. The questionnaire

Questionnaires are often employed as devices to gather information about people's feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Kothari, C.R. describes the questionnaire as "the heart of a survey operation" (2004:97). As such, questionnaires may be an appropriate tool for collecting data in educational research. So, all participants in this study, were submitted a questionnaire which was a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The pupils' questionnaire contained seventeen questions while the teachers' questionnaire comprises twenty one questions. It is worth mentioning that the pupils' questionnaire was written in English but explained in Arabic to assure the participants' understanding. The main objective of the two questionnaires was to investigate the causes of the pupils' poor achievement in the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing from the teachers' as well as the pupils' perspective. Besides, they were meant to examine the quality of vocabulary teaching within the Algerian EFL class.

### 10.2. Post-test and pre-test

Pre-tests and post-tests are techniques used by researchers to evaluate the participants' knowledge before and after the administration of a specific treatment. They are also used by educators to guide their teaching as they help them to assess the knowledge attained by their pupils before and after a particular subject is covered and to check the efficiency of their teaching. In the current study the researcher administered all the participants i.e. the four classes, a vocabulary pre-test which included forty vocabulary items, selected from the didactic units that were covered before the incorporation of the treatment. This pre-test was modeled on Wesche and Paribakht (1996) Vocabulary Knowledge Scale which used a five point Knowledge Scale test to assess levels of word knowledge. The original scale is listed in the table below:

Table 1 Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (Wesche et al, 1996:25)

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I. I don't remember having seen this word before
II. I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means
III. I have seen this word before and I think it means..... (Synonym or translation)
IV. I know this word. It means..... (Synonym or translation)
V. I can use this word in a sentence. E.g.....

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Whereas, in this study the researcher decided to use only a four point scale by eliminating the third point which seemed to cause ambiguity to the participants during the piloting phase. Participants faced difficulty to distinguish between the third and the fourth point. They considered them as the same because they are approximate in meaning. After a three-week period of treatment, the participants were assigned a post-test, using the same model of the pre-test (Wesche and Paribakht, 1996). Similarly, the post-test included forty vocabulary items but they were selected, this time from the units covered during the implementation of the treatment, i.e. the vocabulary notebook (VNB). These two tests were used to assess levels of word knowledge of the vocabulary acquired by the participants before and after the treatment. They were aimed at demonstrating the effect of the VNB on pupils' vocabulary retention.

### 10.3. Implementation of the vocabulary notebook

The treatment consisted of incorporating a vocabulary notebook programme into two out of four classes acting as experimental groups, while the remaining two classes served as control groups. The programme lasted three weeks and during this period, the English teacher instructed 1SS1 and 1SS2 to keep a vocabulary notebook. In each session, she provided the pupils with a set of words selected previously with the researcher's collaboration, from the course book units that were scheduled according to the annual planning. Another set of words was supplemented, during the English sessions, in response to the pupils' needs, but were not included in the vocabulary post-test as the pupils' needs differed and then the supplied words also differed between the experimental groups.

The pupils were required to record the selected words along with different aspects of word knowledge such as meaning, written and oral forms, use, synonym, antonym, an L1 translation besides an example sentence. The notebooks were regularly controlled by the teacher and the researcher to make sure that all the pupils, in the experimental groups, had recorded the chosen words with the necessary information. In the following sessions, the teacher started each lesson by reviewing the recorded words to incite the pupils to use their notebooks for revision. Besides, at the end of every session, pupils were assigned a homework that necessitated the use of the notebooks, having as objective to make pupils study vocabulary over time. The two control groups; 1SS3 and 1SS4, received the same programme, emphasizing the same words, but without any instruction on the use of the vocabulary notebook, yet, it was found out that some of the pupils in these groups were keeping notebooks without being asked to do so. These pupils explained that they were used to the vocabulary notebook since they were in middle school and because they found it helpful they decided to keep on using it in English, French and even Arabic (L1).

#### **10.4. Written expression**

By the end of each didactic unit, pupils are required to achieve a project where they are expected to “re-invest, in an integrative way, the functions and skills acquired earlier” (Riche, B. et al, 2011:9). In order to not disrupt the teacher’s schedule, as she had to make up for the programme delay caused by the teachers’ strike, and at the same time to allow the accomplishment of the researcher’s experiment, the researcher and the teacher agreed with the participants’ consent, to replace the group project by a written composition assignment achieved individually. Unlike group work, individual work permitted a better assessment as every participant had to write his/her own essay.

Thus, after the three week- period, all participants, from experimental and control groups, were assigned a free composition. They were asked to write a short essay related to a pedagogical unit covered during that period, using the information and the vocabulary they have learned in the different sessions. The objective of this assignment was to investigate the usefulness of the vocabulary notebook by comparing the results of the experimental and the control groups, and to examine its effect on the pupils’ writing skill, since writing is the common form of testing in the Algerian schools. In other words, the aim was to check whether pupils had actually learned the selected vocabulary and if they could use these words effectively in their written production.

### **11. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **11.1. Questionnaire**

The analysis of the results revealed that there was an agreement among teachers as well as pupils upon the weak EFL level of the pupils. But, in spite of this weak level, the findings showed that the pupils participating in the study have got a positive attitude towards English as 73% declared that they like studying English and 58% claimed that they consider English an essential teaching subject. Besides, there was an agreement among teachers and pupils upon the supremacy of vocabulary over grammar and pronunciation in learning English as a foreign language, as the majority of the pupils reported that their limited vocabulary was the major cause behind their weak level in the four basic skills (figure 2).

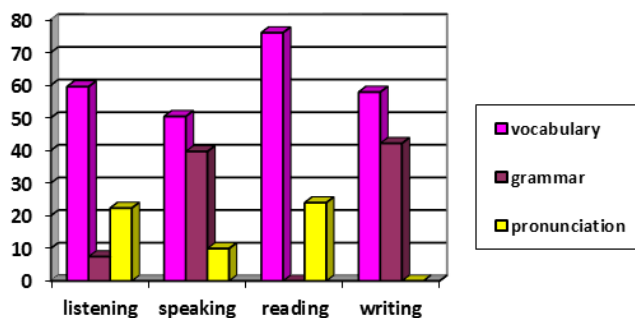


Fig. 2 Pupils' opinion about the causes of their low achievement in the basic language skills

Likewise the majority of the teachers stated that vocabulary contributes, much more than grammar and pronunciation, to effective comprehension and communication in EFL (figure 3). More importantly, the majority of the teachers believe that vocabulary should be taught to all learning levels with a particular emphasis on the beginning level. Pupils also confirmed their interest in vocabulary as the majority of them reported that they study vocabulary over time as a means to enhance their overall level in English.

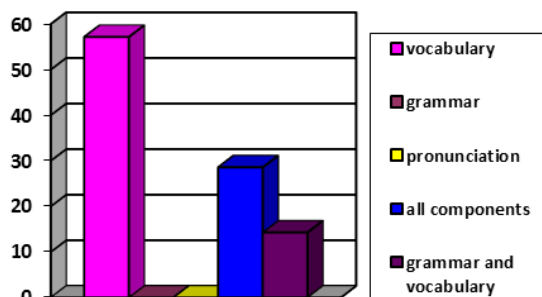


Fig. 3 Teachers' opinion about the important language components in comprehension and communication

However, the findings revealed that teachers' interest in vocabulary was not actually reflected in their practice .When investigating the techniques used by teachers when introducing new vocabulary items, the results showed that six out of seven teachers (86%) chose the use of objects or pictures to explain the meaning of words. The second most selected techniques were the use of synonyms and opposites as well as the use of example sentences. In that case, five teachers (71%) stated that they used these techniques to illustrate the meaning of the word in context. Four teachers (57%) chose to give quick demonstration and three (43%) opted for the use of L1 translation. The same number of teachers (43%) reported that they draw their learners' attention to the form as well as to the use of the word. Two respondents (29%) opted for word formation and only one teacher (14%) reported his/her interest in providing pupils with numerous encounters with the studied words. However, research has proved the significance of repeated exposure in vocabulary acquisition. Teachers' abandon of this technique reflects either their unawareness about the importance of repeated exposure to the target words for

retention, or their deliberate neglect of this technique because of the difficulty to apply it due to the constraint of time. For example, during this study, the EFL teacher expressed her concern about the difficulty to continue with the vocabulary notebook programme. She explained that the sixty minutes session does not allow the effective achievement of the lesson objectives, let alone the disciplinary issues and the control of the pupils' learning material

In addition, the majority of the respondents (71%) recognized not teaching their pupils how to use a VNB effectively. They also stated that they do not control the VNB to see if pupils recorded all the studied words. They even reported that they do not rely on the VNB to test pupils' vocabulary nor to assign them homework. It has also been demonstrated, through teachers' answers that they (100%) do not test their pupils' vocabulary size. Teachers were interested mainly in testing vocabulary depth (meaning, form and sometimes use). This means that it is not possible for teachers neither to estimate their pupils' vocabulary size nor to check whether they have reached the expected objectives. Besides, the findings revealed that vocabulary teaching was limited to some aspects of word knowledge, mainly meaning and oral/written form. Providing pupils with the strategies that assist their learning and enhance their autonomy is an important role of the language teachers, yet teachers' questionnaire revealed that the respondents made use of a very limited number of strategies. Consequently, one would say that vocabulary instruction as well as the vocabulary notebook is not given much importance in our EFL classes which may explain pupils' neglect of the VNB and may even justify pupils' irregular and unsystematic interest in vocabulary learning.

### 11.2. The experiment

As it can be seen from the bar- graph below (figure 4), there was no significant difference between the mean scores of both the control groups and the treatment groups in the pre-test, whereas, in the post-test the mean scores of the treatment groups were much higher than those of the two control groups. In other words, the groups using the vocabulary notebook (VNB) as a VLS achieved better results in acquiring the target words than the remaining groups.

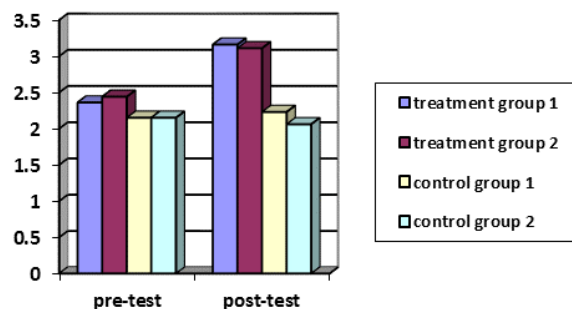


Fig. 4 Pre-test and post-test results

### 11.3. Written expression assignment

The results in the bar-graph 2 clearly show that the performance of the treatment groups in the written expression was better than the performance of the control groups. Besides, the teacher claimed that writings of the treatment groups were richer in vocabulary than those of the control groups. The participants of the treatment groups also seemed to have a better understanding of the vocabulary used in their productions. This may be explained by the fact that the participants in the treatment groups were required to record different aspects of the target words including meaning, spelling, grammatical behaviour of the word, use, etc. Therefore, these findings confirm the correlation between the rich vocabulary and the positive performance of the EFL learners in the writing skill which maybe demonstrated, through further research, between vocabulary and the other language skills.

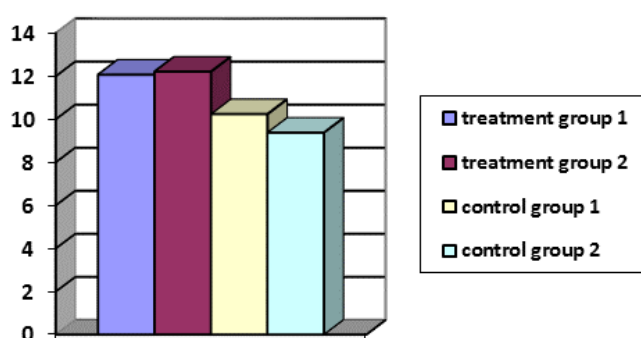


Fig. 5 Written expression assignment results

## 12. CONCLUSION

The quantitative and qualitative analysis and interpretation of the collected data provided some valuable insights as far as the actual situation of ELT in the Algerian secondary education. The first important finding is that EFL teachers as well as EFL pupils are highly aware of the low level of the English subject reflected in the pupils' results during the official testing. Second, both of them recognize that they share responsibility for the current situation. Third, EFL teachers seem not well-versed in the contemporary linguistic trends concerning ELT. In other words, they need to be more informed about the lexical tendency in the foreign language field. The findings of the questionnaire showed clearly the shortage in the teachers' knowledge as regards vocabulary instruction, aspects of word knowledge as well as vocabulary testing which is negatively reflected on the quality of vocabulary instruction in the Algerian EFL class.

Nevertheless, teachers' intuition, experience as well as expertise in the teaching field would enable them to understand the teaching situation and to contribute to the enhancement of the EFL classes. This is reflected in their belief concerning the significant role of vocabulary in learning English as a foreign language. Similarly, the EFL pupils who are at the heart of this problematic situation, showed a great interest in vocabulary learning. Both teachers and pupils agreed that the limited vocabulary knowledge was behind the low performance of pupils in the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

They both gave supremacy to vocabulary over the remaining language components. Yet, this interest in vocabulary was not supported by their practice.

Last but not least, the findings revealed the usefulness of the VLS, namely the Vocabulary notebook as demonstrated in this study. The experiment used in this research demonstrated the correlation between pupils' vocabulary acquisition that was enhanced by the use of the vocabulary notebook and their writing skill. As such the VNB could be an adequate means to boost the proficiency level of the EFL classes mainly in the long-term use provided that both teachers and pupils engage actively in applying this VLS. It is worth mentioning that this investigation has got some limitation as it was restricted to the writing skill due to the constraint of time imposed by the teachers' strike which co-occurred with the present study.

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