



Word Work Instruction Across EFL and Native English Classrooms

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Abstract. Vocabulary development is a central concern in language and literacy education, as it underpins reading comprehension, academic writing, and communicative competence. However, approaches to vocabulary instruction vary considerably across learning contexts. In EFL classrooms, learners often have limited exposure to English beyond formal instruction, which increases their reliance on explicit, structured, and systematic word work practices. In contrast, native English classrooms typically offer literacy-rich environments where vocabulary is acquired through authentic texts, meaningful interaction, and task-based activities. Against this backdrop, this paper examines word work instruction in both EFL and native English classrooms through a literature review and a small-scale case study. The findings suggest that explicit and structured strategies are particularly beneficial for EFL learners, while authentic and task-based practices are more effective in native contexts. The paper concludes that a balanced approach, integrating explicit instruction with authentic literacy tasks, can optimize vocabulary learning across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: word work, vocabulary acquisition, EFL, literacy instruction

1 Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as a foundational component of second language learning, playing a decisive role in learners' communicative ability and overall language competence. The effectiveness of vocabulary development is closely related to instructional strategies, learning contexts, and the degree of learner engagement. Despite its importance, relatively few studies have directly compared vocabulary instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms with that in native English classrooms.

In EFL contexts, learners often experience restricted exposure to authentic language use and therefore rely heavily on structured, teacher-directed instruction. By contrast, native English classrooms tend to emphasize fluency development, communicative practice, and engagement with authentic literacy tasks. These contextual differences raise important questions regarding how instructional design influences vocabulary development across learning environments.

Previous research has provided valuable insights into effective vocabulary learning. Nation [1] argued that vocabulary acquisition depends on repeated encounters with lexical items and deep cognitive processing, highlighting the importance of spaced repetition and contextual variation for long-term retention. Soleimani and Esmaceli [2] demonstrated that explicit strategy instruction, particularly thematic vocabulary clustering supported by digital tools, significantly enhances retention among EFL learners. Similarly, Chiang et al. [3] found that sustained vocabulary learning strategy instruction improved both the breadth and depth of EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge over time.

Building on this body of research, the present study adopts a combined literature review and case study approach to compare word work practices in EFL and native English classrooms. It aims to explore how instructional design interacts with learning context to influence vocabulary development, with particular attention to the role of morphological awareness. By addressing the lack of cross-contextual comparisons, this study seeks to contribute to vocabulary acquisition research and offer pedagogical implications for diverse educational settings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Learning in EFL Contexts

For second language learners, vocabulary acquisition is often constrained by limited lexical input and restricted exposure to authentic language environments. Unlike native learners, EFL students have fewer opportunities for natural communication and extensive reading, which makes incidental vocabulary learning difficult [4]. As a result, they tend to rely more on explicit instruction, where teachers intentionally draw attention to word form, meaning, and use [5]. In such contexts, the development of morphological awareness—the ability to recognize and apply roots, prefixes, and suffixes—has been shown to play a particularly effective role in supporting vocabulary growth [4,6]. By understanding how words are constructed, learners can infer meanings, expand word families, and make meaningful connections among related items [6].

A study involving 120 Iranian EFL learners compared the effects of explicit, implicit, and modified-implicit instruction [5]. The explicit group received vocabulary awareness-raising and output-focused tasks, while the modified-implicit group experienced input flooding combined with output practice. Results indicated that both the explicit and modified-implicit groups significantly outperformed the implicit group in vocabulary acquisition and retention, emphasizing the value of active engagement and consciousness-raising activities in EFL contexts [5].

In practice, EFL teachers commonly employ root-and-affix analysis, contextualized vocabulary practice, and tiered vocabulary instruction to enhance students' lexical knowledge [4]. These approaches compensate for the lack of authentic language exposure and promote deeper processing and long-term retention [5]. A recent systematic review further confirmed that morphological and semantic awareness-based strategies are among the most effective and frequently used instructional approaches in EFL settings [4]. Therefore, explicit and structured vocabulary instruction remains central to EFL pedagogy, particularly where opportunities for natural language input are limited.

2.2 Vocabulary Learning in Native English Classrooms

In native English classrooms, vocabulary instruction is usually embedded within broader literacy activities rather than taught as an isolated component. So-called “word work” typically integrates phonics and morphological instruction, enabling learners to explore relationships among sound, spelling, and meaning [6]. Vocabulary learning naturally occurs through reading and writing tasks, where students encounter and manipulate words in meaningful contexts [7].

Because native English classrooms are situated in literacy-rich environments, learners are continuously exposed to abundant language input from books, media, and everyday communication [7]. Empirical evidence suggests that language input and lexical processing efficiency both play important roles in predicting vocabulary growth, with processing efficiency exerting a particularly strong effect [7]. This finding reflects the implicit nature of vocabulary learning in native settings, where repeated exposure and meaningful use promote deeper and more durable lexical acquisition [6,7].

Research in elementary classrooms further indicates that systematic morphological analysis—through activities such as Word Family Grouping or Affix Games—can significantly enhance students’ ability to infer and retain new words [6]. Such practices foster deep cognitive processing and support long-term retention. Overall, vocabulary development in native contexts is closely intertwined with authentic literacy experiences, allowing learners to internalize vocabulary naturally and flexibly. Despite the differing learning conditions, both EFL and native English settings underscore the importance of morphological awareness as a core mechanism for understanding and using words effectively [4,6].

2.3 Comparison and Research Gap

A comparison between EFL and native English classrooms reveals both shared principles and distinct differences. In both contexts, morphological awareness functions as a key cognitive mechanism for expanding and organizing vocabulary knowledge [4,6]. However, their learning pathways diverge: EFL learners depend on explicit, teacher-led instruction [4,5], whereas native learners acquire vocabulary implicitly through natural exposure and literacy-based activities [6,7].

Despite increasing interest in vocabulary pedagogy, cross-contextual comparative studies remain limited. Few investigations have explored how instructional design, linguistic input, and learning environment interact to influence vocabulary development across these two settings [4]. Existing research tends to examine explicit or implicit instruction in isolation, offering little insight into how both approaches might be effectively integrated to enhance vocabulary breadth and depth [4,5]. Moreover, findings on lexical processing efficiency in native contexts [7] and morphological instruction frameworks in L1 classrooms [6] have rarely been adapted or evaluated in EFL environments.

Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how vocabulary learning practices differ and overlap in EFL and native English classrooms, with particular attention to the role of morphological awareness as a unifying factor in both contexts.

3 Case Study

3.1 EFL Classroom Case

This case is based on an open-access study conducted by Feng et al. [8], which investigated Chinese secondary school EFL learners with limited exposure to English outside the classroom. The study examined the effectiveness of mind-mapping as a vocabulary learning strategy, addressing the common problem of rote memorization and its limited impact on long-term retention.

The instructional design followed a structured and guided approach. Teachers first introduced curriculum-aligned vocabulary lists and modeled the mind-mapping process, demonstrating how a central concept could be linked to related words, word families, and contextual cues. Students then created their own mind maps and engaged in group discussions to refine semantic connections. For instance, when mapping the word environment, learners generated related concepts such as pollution, conservation, and sustainable, often using visual symbols or colors to reinforce meaning.

The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in both immediate and delayed post-tests, indicating that mind-mapping significantly enhanced short-term and long-term vocabulary retention. However, the study also revealed limitations: vocabulary input was largely textbook-based, and opportunities for authentic listening and speaking practice were minimal. These findings align with earlier discussions that EFL classrooms often lack sufficient authentic input, which constrains learners' ability to use newly acquired vocabulary in real communicative contexts.

3.2 Native English Classroom

The second case describes a fifth-grade native English classroom in the United States, focusing on a morphology-based instructional intervention [9]. Although the students possessed basic language proficiency, the instruction aimed to enhance vocabulary depth and improve written expression.

Morphological instruction was embedded within reading and writing activities rather than taught in isolation. Teachers selected texts containing morphologically complex words and guided students to analyze word parts and their semantic or grammatical functions. Students then applied this knowledge in writing tasks, such as forming new words through affixation or transforming verbs into nouns. Peer review and teacher feedback further reinforced accurate usage.

The findings indicated clear improvements in students' use of morphologically complex vocabulary and greater lexical diversity in writing. These results support the view that literacy-rich environments, combined with embedded morphological instruction, promote deep vocabulary learning through repeated exposure and meaningful application.

4 Discussion

The comparison between EFL and native English contexts highlights complementary strengths in word work instruction. In EFL classrooms, explicit and structured approaches provide essential scaffolding for learners with limited language exposure. In native English contexts, authentic input and task-based learning foster deeper semantic understanding and flexible vocabulary use. These findings suggest that effective word work instruction should integrate explicit guidance with authentic literacy practices rather than privileging one approach exclusively.

Future vocabulary instruction would benefit from greater pedagogical exchange between EFL and native English contexts. EFL classrooms could incorporate more authentic materials and communicative tasks, while native English classrooms might strengthen explicit instruction in morphological awareness to support learners facing academic vocabulary challenges. A balanced approach combining structure and authenticity is likely to address diverse learner needs more effectively.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how instructional designs influence vocabulary development in EFL and native English classrooms, and the findings indicate that morphological awareness serves as a core unifying mechanism for vocabulary growth across both contexts; The analysis revealed that EFL learners benefit significantly from explicit, structured instruction (e.g., mind-mapping), while native learners thrive on implicit acquisition through authentic literacy activities, which supports the initial hypothesis that integrating appropriate instructional approaches with contextual characteristics enhances vocabulary outcomes.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by addressing the cross-contextual comparison gap identified in the literature review, providing empirical evidence for the interaction between instructional design, linguistic input, and learning environments. The findings extend previous theories by demonstrating that morphological awareness-based strategies are effective in both settings when tailored to learners' exposure conditions.

This study has practical significance for EFL and L1 vocabulary pedagogy: EFL teachers can adopt mind-mapping and morphological analysis to compensate for limited authentic input, while native English educators can strengthen embedded morphological instruction in literacy tasks.

This study is limited by its reliance on two specific case studies (Chinese secondary EFL learners and U.S. 5th graders), which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the EFL case lacked extensive listening and speaking practice, limiting insights into vocabulary application.

Future study could focus on larger and more diverse samples across different age groups and regions, and explore the integration of authentic communicative tasks into EFL instruction. In the future, researchers could also examine the long-term effects of combined explicit and implicit approaches.

Overall, this study provides new insights into cross-contextual vocabulary learning and highlights the importance of aligning instructional strategies with learning environments. By shedding light on the role of morphological awareness and contextual adaptation, this research paves the way for more effective vocabulary pedagogy in diverse educational settings.

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