

## Second Language Vocabulary Teaching and Learning: Inspecting Alternatives and Analyzing Results

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*For a long time now, the teaching and learning of L2 vocabulary has been underrated in second language acquisition (SLA). However, in the last three decades, there has been a reemergence of interest in this field and different proposals and perspectives have arisen that strengthen and encourage due attention. The purpose of this paper was to inquire into the effectiveness of the implementation of an array of vocabulary tasks to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Three teachers of English at a private secondary school in Mar del Plata, Argentina, participated in this action research. Data were gathered by means of field notes, teaching activities, self-assessment reports and evaluation meetings. The results obtained shed some light on L2 vocabulary teaching and some new viewpoints are discussed that could help other language teachers develop conceptual knowledge to tackle lexical instruction. The decision to embark on this action research study led these three teachers to reflect upon their own teaching practice with regard to L2 vocabulary instruction and thus take cognizance of the importance of the inclusion of L2 vocabulary teaching on a regular basis in their classes. Finally, some suggestions for further research in this area were given.*

**Keywords:** *vocabulary teaching/learning, L2 vocabulary, action research*

### Introduction

For a long time, the teaching and learning of L2 (second language/foreign language) vocabulary was a neglected and underestimated area in the field of Applied Linguistics. Instead, a great number of second language researchers and teachers alike have centered their attention on syntax thus disregarding the critical aspects related to vocabulary learning and teaching and their pedagogical implications.

However, for the last three decades, researchers began to direct their attention to lexis and its role leading to a reemergence of interest in the area of vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies. Appreciation of the significance and implications of these areas has paved the way to a considerable amount of research in their place of intersection: vocabulary learning strategies. However, the issue of whether vocabulary learning strategies should be implicitly or explicitly taught is still debatable. While some researchers argue that the best predictor of vocabulary learning strategy use is previous vocabulary learning strategy instruction, others believe that we should not be carried away in our enthusiasm for strategy training since its improvement is relatively weak and not all strategies appear to be used

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spontaneously. Barcroft et al. (2011) make reference to this and express that lexis, from the old Greek for *word*, denotes all the words that exist in a language, that is to say, the vocabulary of a language. Similarly, Caro and Mendinueta (2017) state that lexis, vocabulary and lexicon are synonymous. This same concept is reinforced when Larsen-Freeman and DeCarrico (2010, p. 18) mention that lexis and vocabulary involve "... not only syntax and morphology but also phonetics, phonology, semantics and lexis (that is, vocabulary)". At this point, it seems necessary to clarify that, in the present study, the concepts of lexis and vocabulary will be used interchangeably.

This paper describes an action research carried out by three teachers along with their own groups of learners in a private secondary school in Argentina in which they explored the area of vocabulary learning and teaching. In the first section, some findings related to already existing theories and other research studies on vocabulary acquisition will be presented. In the next part, the research area, the instruments employed to collect data and the participants will be described. In the last section, some suggestions for further research in the area will be made.

## Literature Review

In 1985, Krashen introduced the Input Hypothesis, and postulated that L2 acquisition takes place when learners understand input that offers grammatical forms that are at " $i + 1$ ", which means that the grammatical forms are slightly more advanced than the present state of the learner's interlanguage (Ellis 1997, Lightbown and Spada 1993). In the same year, Long extended Krashen's theory (Lightbown and Spada 1993). His interaction hypothesis highlights the position of comprehensible input but asserts that it is most effective when modified through the negotiation of meaning. Long's perspective was rebutted by many other linguists and theorists such as McLaughlin (1987) for being too vague and imprecise to provide an account of the process of second language acquisition, contending that modified teacher input facilitates comprehension, and this, in turn, serves to promote acquisition.

The main point in this argument focuses on the adaptation of the teacher's input to enhance comprehension instead of on the way in which learners process the input. In this way, by drawing the attention on the teacher, the learners' conscious processes are overlooked as well as their use of learning strategies for comprehending, processing, learning and retaining concepts in academic settings. If the goal of learning strategies is to affect the learners' motivational or affective state, or the way in which students select, organize, acquire, or integrate new knowledge (O'Malley JM, Chamot 1990), then, by providing students with the tools to self-regulate their own learning (Dörnyei Z, Skehan 2002), students will be able to develop autonomy by exerting control over their own learning operations, and thus have the possibility of managing their own achievements through specific beliefs and procedures aiming at the enhancement of their own learning processes.

Research on training second language learners to use learning strategies has been restricted almost exclusively to vocabulary tasks reporting interesting improvements in vocabulary learning. Paradoxically and quite polemically, Zimmerman (1997, p. 6) has pointed out that “the teaching and learning of vocabulary has been undervalued in the field of second language acquisition throughout its varying stages and up to the present day.” In fact, a number of other linguists and theorists who advocate her position also contend that the field of vocabulary acquisition has been neglected from L2 instruction in favor of syntactic development ignoring the crucial role that lexis plays in SLA. On the same grounds, Coady (1997) argues that language teaching methods have paid limited attention to vocabulary since it is very difficult to teach an organized syllabus of both grammar and lexis simultaneously.

Indeed, some researchers and language theorists have emphasized aspects of language learning such as syntax far more than vocabulary learning. Yet, towards the end of the 80s, Lewis (1997), Willis (1990), Sinclair and Renouf (1988) and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) began to focus their attention on the importance and implications of the inclusion of lexis in language teaching. In fact, research on vocabulary teaching reports that explicit teaching of vocabulary results in better retention than incidental learning from natural text-based input (Folse 2006).

At this point, it is worthwhile mentioning that lexis is often misinterpreted in language teaching because there is a false assumption that grammar is the basis of language and that proficiency of the grammatical system is a precondition for effective communication. Back in 1997, Lewis coined the term lexical approach and suggested that lexis is the basis of language. One of the central organizing principles of his proposal is that language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar; thus, lexis should be the focus of any meaning-centered syllabus. The main distinction between the vocabulary (traditionally understood as a group of individual words with fixed meanings) and lexis is that the latter includes not only single words but also word combinations that are easily stored in the mental lexicon (Lewis 1997). In this way, language is seen as a set of combined meaningful chunks that produce continuous coherent text, and just a few spoken sentences that are entirely new creations.

This perspective to language teaching challenges traditional views of word boundaries, emphasizing the language learners’ need to perceive and use patterns of lexis such as polywords, collocations, institutionalized utterances, sentence frames and heads. That is, rather than trying to break language into small units, the idea is to make a conscious effort to see things in a larger, more holistic perspective. More significant is the underlying claim that language production is not a syntactic rule-governed process, but is instead the retrieval of larger phrasal units from memory (Zimmerman 1997).

Memory training can contribute to retaining vocabulary studied in English lessons through the implementation of a set of strategies (Martin and Ellis 2012). Channell (1988) makes a distinction between acquiring and learning vocabulary and states that learning is a process, while acquisition is the end result. She also presents a difference between productive and receptive use of vocabulary, explaining that learners gain access to new words before they can actually use

them. On these same grounds, Jordan (1997) reported that the learners' L1 and L2 vocabulary knowledge is linked together in their mental lexicon phonologically and semantically. This researcher also claimed that learners can make conscious the connections among them and concluded by providing a set of implications for classroom practice:

1. Since the lexicon appears to be an independent entity in processing, there is justification for teaching approaches which make vocabulary work as a separate learning activity. It is not essential to always integrate vocabulary with general communication.
2. Presentation of vocabulary should pay specific attention to pronunciation, in particular word stress. So visual presentation and reading may not be the best ways to introduce new vocabulary.
3. Learners should be encouraged to make their own lexical associations when they are actively learning new vocabulary. However, at present we do not know which kinds of associations are the most useful in aiding retention.
4. Semantic links play an important role in production. This suggests the use of semantic fields based presentation methods on the lines of that exemplified (Jordan 1997, p. 154).

Channell asserts that the vocabulary of a language is made up of an array of interconnecting networks of words, which creates a semantic field. Worded differently, words belonging to the same groupings share the same semantic aspects and constitute a systematic structure. The mind employs semantic similarity in categorizing words, and this, she explains, is beneficial for vocabulary acquisition. As a result of this, some researchers advocate the use of semantic groupings, though others such as Tinkham (1993) believe that new lexical items are learned most effortlessly if they are not clustered together for presentation in prefabricated semantic chunks. This researcher claims that learners may find a number of similar or semantically related words confusing, especially when they are introduced together and at once.

Up to date, in the area of second language acquisition, a widely varying number of approaches, methods, and techniques dealing with vocabulary instruction and/or acquisition have been presented. In fact, Coady (1997) proposes four main positions on a continuum of methods for teaching vocabulary that should be born to mind:

- a) Context alone: It proposes that there is no need for direct vocabulary instruction since learners will learn all the vocabulary they need from the context by reading extensively, provided it is presented in the form of comprehensible input.
- b) Strategy instruction: This position sustains that context is the major source of vocabulary learning, however, there is considerable emphasis on teaching specific learning strategies to students so that they can

successfully learn from context; for instance, summarizing a text, finding the main idea, identifying rhetorical structures, all of them require some sort of instruction.

- c) Development plus explicit instruction: It argues for explicit teaching of certain types of vocabulary using a variety of techniques and methods including direct memorization of some high-frequency words. This position upholds the idea that contextualized learning through reading is effective but contextualized reading plus instruction is superior; that is, reading plus interactive vocabulary instruction.
- d) Classroom activities: It advocates the teaching of vocabulary words without following a particular methodological approach. Coady (1997) suggests that vocabulary is best learned in classroom situations when learners simply need to use it. To cater for learners' linguistic needs, Skehan (1996) suggests that students should be engaged in interactional tasks in which meaning is crucial, there is some kind of relationship with real-life like situations, task completion is the primary goal, and the assessment of task performance is related to task outcome. Students' linguistic needs, then, could be created by hiding the linguistic focus of the task from the learners. Within a task-based pedagogical framework, tasks of the type meaning-form-meaning progression provide an ideal semantic space in which learners may be pushed by operations carried out on the task input data to notice holes in their current interlanguage repertoire (Samuda 2001). Thus, by "noticing" or "noticing-the-gap", according to Schmidt (Ellis 2001, p. 56) learners are able to identify how the input to which they are exposed differs from the output they are able to produce, which are essential processes for second language vocabulary acquisition to occur.

Hairrell et al. (2011) established that vocabulary instruction promotes increased word knowledge at early stages and listed the most frequently used strategies to build vocabulary. The three strategies mostly reported in experimental studies were: contextual analysis, semantic strategies (e.g., dictionaries, discussions, etc.), and repeated exposure (Moody et al. 2018). Similarly, Awaludin (2013) investigated vocabulary teaching in young EFL learners, and reported that translation, real objects, meaning definition, presentation through context and learners' active involvement seem to be the techniques frequently chosen when presenting word meaning. Regarding older students, who often struggle with vocabulary, research suggests that middle- and high-school learners should be given multifaceted instruction on the use of context hints, and morphology, in addition to opportunities for frequent use of new words (Moran and Moir 2018). It is important to note that Moir and Nation (2008), in their study of metacognitive strategies, found that metacognition and autonomy play an important role in learning vocabulary. Muhaimin et al. (2018) expressed that to learn vocabulary effectively, students must not only have the ability to do the learning, but they also

must be able to reflect on their own ways of learning. All in all, and despite other techniques, new trends in vocabulary learning lay considerable emphasis on strategic vocabulary learning as passport to develop more active and autonomous language learners (Ahmad et al. 2018, Lou and Xu 2016)

In analyzing the different standpoints as regards the formal teaching of vocabulary, it could be true to say that the most effective way for learners to enhance their active vocabulary repertoire is for them to be centrally involved in their own learning process. Initially, this will involve some kind of learner training under the direction of a teacher, working in groups with other students, or on a self-access basis, in a systematic way rather than by incidental learning. Through a direct approach to vocabulary teaching, students will be able to pay explicit attention to vocabulary, and this, in turn, will eventually help them develop their own strategies, thus, becoming more independent learners.

The proposals considered in this section will be partly used throughout this study as the foundation to analyze and interpret the data collected. In the next section, we will set out to conduct the action research, present the puzzle area, briefly describe the participants and analyze and interpret the information gathered. Finally, some recommendations will be given.

### **Action Research**

Burns (1999) defines AR as the use of fact finding to practical problem solving in a given social situation with the aim to improve the quality of action within it, including the collaboration and cooperation of researchers, practitioners and laymen. Burns states that “AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts” (Burns 2010, p. 13). Although collaboration is desirable, Nunan (1992) does not consider it as a restrictive characteristic of AR. A feature that also applies to this paper concerns its being situational, that is concerned with the identification and solution of problems in specific contexts (Cohen and Manion 1985). AR relies on exploratory and interpretative methods which are often appealing to the classroom teacher. These methods enable teachers to explore the realities of practical situations without the need of controlling the variables of their classroom contexts. The flexible and eclectic nature of AR implies that teachers are able to modify the questions or issues guiding their research, to take on different research methods or to take their interpretations in new directions as the need arises, a variant that would not be suitable in quantitative research.

However flexible and eclectic, this research method requires systematic and rigorous data collection and analysis. In fact, it fulfills essential research requirements in that it comprises a researchable question or the identification of a puzzled area, planning, collecting data, information analysis, reflection and interpretation, hypothesizing, intervening, observing, reporting, writing and presenting. These features do not necessarily need to be clearly delineated and separate points in the research. The crucial aspect of AR lies in the participants’ collaborative discussions that occur regularly throughout the process.

This research method enables researchers to take on interpretations that are motivated by data derived from the actual social situations - in this case the teachers' own classroom settings - rather than by theoretical concepts alone. It is a highly flexible research process which can respond rapidly to emerging political, social and educational questions as they impact on practice (Burns 1999).

## **Method**

### *Context and Participants*

The context where the experiment was conducted was a private secondary school in Mar del Plata, Argentina. In this school, the students are organized into ten different groups according to their English proficiency level. Each level is equivalent to the proficiency scale provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>). In each group, there are approximately 25 students and their ages range from 13 to 17. They receive six hours of instruction of English a week. As one of the institutional requirements, the students have to take and pass three term tests (written and oral) which are administered after each academic quarter (May, September and November) in order to get access to subsequent courses. The written test consists of a reading comprehension section, a grammar part and a written production task. For the oral test, the students are interviewed in pairs where they have to answer a set of questions relating to a set of stories or novels dealt with in class. Besides, using the content of these stories as a trigger to give their opinions, the students are often made to complete a spontaneous speech task. From the group of ten teachers, only three were randomly selected to conduct this experiment (Teacher A, B & C). The decision to cut down the number of participants was made given the amount of data available to analyze and interpret coming from each teacher.

### *On Identifying the Problem*

By the end of June 2019 and after the first term test was administered and rated, the three selected teachers held an evaluation meeting with their supervisor (one of the authors of this paper) whereby they analyzed, in particular, the oral test results in relation to their students' speaking skills and the instructional objectives set at the beginning of the academic term. At the meeting, they became conscious that the students' current level of oral language proficiency and the instructional objectives set for their courses had not been well-matched. While their course objectives aimed at enabling the students -at each corresponding level of proficiency- to become trained competent speakers in English, it was agreed that their oral productions, at that stage, revealed not enough vocabulary knowledge to express their ideas clearly in English, a fact that repeatedly hindered their intelligibility and comprehensibility. Several researchers agree on the fact that fairly large vocabulary sizes are essential to operate effectively in English (Nation

2006, Schmitt and Schmitt 2014, Gyllstad et al. 2015). In an attempt to overcome that problem, after that meeting, the three teachers, along with their supervisor, decided to embark on an AR to explore in depth that particular instance with the intention of increasing their understanding of it and providing a description, explanation and, above all, some judgment about their existing assumptions.

#### *On Finding a Solution to the Problem*

Once the problem was identified, these teachers decided to embark on the implementation of the AR project. The first step consisted in becoming acquainted with some updated literature related to the teaching and learning of L2 vocabulary. After having read and explored this material, they held another meeting with their supervisor where they discussed some possible ways of implementing some fresh ideas with each group. At that meeting, it was agreed that based on the thematic unit and contents covered for the upcoming term, they would design a battery of comprehensible tasks aiming at teaching vocabulary explicitly.

After the intervention period, teachers and supervisor got together again to evaluate results. They all agreed to write a semi-structured self-assessment report after the instruction period whereby they should include the topic taught, aims of tasks implemented, a brief description of them and their perceptions regarding the results obtained.

### **Implementation of the Action Research Project**

In this section, the self-assessment reports presented by the three teachers in charge (A, B & C) will be described:

#### *Teacher A*

Students' language proficiency level: A2 (Common European Framework (CEFR), see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>)

Topic: Anecdotes in the past

Materials used: Oral input in the form of an oral account of a personal anecdote & a reading text about someone's weekend.

Aim of task/s: To elicit and provide lexical chunks including past tense forms.

Description of the sequence of tasks: The teacher opened the class asking her students about their weekend (*Did you have a good time last weekend? What did you do?*). The aim of these questions was to elicit from the students what they had done during their last weekend, and in so doing have them use the simple past tense. As the students had never been introduced to this tense, they answered the

questions using their L1 and/or L2 verbs in the present form. Then, the teacher wrote down a list of phrases on the board in which she included past forms. Next, she told the class what she had done during her weekend. In her account, she included some of the chunks she had written on the board and one piece of false information which the students had to guess. Although some students claimed that they could not understand everything that the teacher said, they managed to complete the task successfully. After her anecdote, the teacher gave the students a reading task. The students were asked to read the description of the weekend spent by a famous person and complete a chart using past forms. Later, the students were made to work in pairs to complete another chart, similar to the one employed before, but this time, she challenged them to use their own information. They also had to include one piece of false information for their partners to find out. Finally, they were arranged in two groups to play TIC-TAC-TOE. They took turns to provide the past form of a chosen verb and use it in a meaningful sentence.

Results of implementation of the task sequence: The students were exposed to the past tense of various verbs (both regular and irregular forms) in a range of ways, through different channels, and focusing on form as well as on meaning. At all times, the tense presented was taught in the context of a lexical phrase; that is, the teacher put lexis, not grammar, at the center of the classroom in order to help learners develop their ability to use English for real communication. Both comprehension and production were required during the sequence of tasks. In the following classes, the teacher checked the extent to which the objective of the class –that the students could retrieve and use the past form of some verbs– had been achieved.

Teacher's beliefs: Most of the students were quite enthusiastic throughout the two classes spent on the above sequence of tasks, especially, when they talked about their weekends and they had to guess the odd bit of information in their teacher's or their partners' accounts. They also looked interested when completing their own chart for the guessing activity; even some of the weakest students who had presumably failed to understand some of the instructions given by their teacher seemed to be highly motivated. They appeared to be interested in the TIC- TAC- TOE game because they said they had enjoyed it and had been able to use some of the phases and chunks, containing the verb forms they had been exposed to, to convey genuine communication. Appendix I includes Teacher A's lesson plan as a sample of the activities done with that group of learners.

### *Teacher B*

Students' language proficiency level: B1 (Common European Framework (CEFR), see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-referen-ce-languages/level- descriptions>)

Topic: Multi-part verbs

Materials used: Classroom handout (designed by the teacher in charge)

Aim of task/s: To recognize and use multi-part verbs in different contexts

Description of tasks or sequence of tasks: Task 1- After having introduced the different patterns of multi-part verbs, the teacher asked the students to read a short paragraph in their handouts in which they had to recognize and underline the multi-part verbs. Later, students tried to infer their meanings from the context provided.

Task 2- The teacher wrote a list of meanings and collocations on the blackboard. Students wrote the multi-part verbs from the text next to what they thought were their definitions.

Task 3- Students went back to the short paragraph, took turns to read the sentences that contained the multi-part verbs aloud and confirmed or dismissed their previous guesses paying special attention to the context in which they were used.

Task 4- Students completed new sentences using multi-part verbs.

Task 5- Students chose three multi-part verbs and wrote real or imaginary sentences about themselves. Then, in pairs, they exchanged information with their partner who had to guess if the statements were true or false.

Task 6- Students – once again in pairs – made up the dialogues for a comic strip (the teacher gave them a comic strip with empty speech bubbles), using two multi-part verbs.

Results of implementation of task/task sequence: Students could infer the meanings of the multi-part verbs from the text and relate them to their previous knowledge and personal experiences. The controlled practice stage helped them to see the multi-part verbs used in several contexts and to receive more input. Finally, they were able to use the new lexical phrases in different situations. The following class, most students were able to remember distinctly the multi-part verbs and the contexts in which they had been previously used.

Teacher's beliefs: This group of learners willingly accepted being challenged to use these vocabulary items in different contexts. The gradual complexity of the tasks and constant teacher's assistance facilitated the understanding and completion of the tasks. A week after the students were given a quiz and 16 out of 20 got passing grades with satisfactory results.

*Teacher C*

Students' language proficiency level: B2 (Common European Framework (CEFR), see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-> descriptions)

Topic: Enhancing vocabulary acquisition

Materials used: A short story

Aim of the task/s: To identify unknown words in the text given, match them to their definitions and select those words that would help them summarize the portion of the story given.

Description of sequence of tasks: Students were asked to read two pages from a short story (material included in the course syllabus), and underline those words that were unknown to them. Then they were given a long list of possible definitions and asked to match them to the words they had selected. After checking the results with the group as a whole, students were challenged to choose only three to five words that would explain the main ideas and summarize that part of the story.

Results of implementation of task sequence: These tasks took longer than expected as some students selected words with definitions that were not in the list and the teacher had to refer them to the text again. The choice of key words at the end did not pose much difficulty for them and students gave positive feedback about the activities done.

Teacher's beliefs: In spite of the students' positive feedback and the fact that the aim of the task was fulfilled, the teacher felt that working with the list of definitions was too time consuming. She admitted she would have profited from getting more acquainted with updated and specific techniques to embark on teaching vocabulary. Regarding the task, she admitted that if she were asked to repeat the experience, she would encourage students to use dictionaries instead of providing them with definitions. This would contribute to the overall organization and flow of the task.

Table 1 shows a brief summary of some of the teachers' perceptions regarding their students' attitudes in class, the tasks and activities done and some considerations about their practice.

**Table 1.** *A Recap of Teachers' Perceptions*

Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
*most students expressed enthusiasm mainly when: -sharing personal information -guessing the odd bit of information in their teacher's and partners' accounts -completing their own chart for the guessing activity -playing the TIC-TAC-TOE game	*students showed willingness to participate *despite the effect of gradual task difficulty, teacher's assistance facilitated students' understanding and task completion *a follow-up task after 7 days revealed that 80% of the class could remember key concepts	*students' feedback: positive *aim of the task: fulfilled *teacher's afterthoughts: -the list of definitions: not practical nor effective -in case of repeating the task in the future, the use of dictionaries will replace the list used -the importance of being acquainted with updated techniques on vocabulary teaching

There are various ways in which vocabulary can be dealt with in the classroom. An approach which combines frequent and contextualized exposure with a focus on awareness-raising tasks proves to work well for L2 vocabulary acquisition. Presenting memorable lexicalized chunks, in the context of meaningful situations, through pedagogical tasks, and devising ways to generate a need for students to learn a given word can also be beneficial for L2 vocabulary learning.

## **Discussion and Results**

On looking at Teacher A's self-assessment report, we observe that she engaged her students in tasks in which meaning was essential. By making her students talk about their weekends, she pushed them to share more personal information and in so doing use the linguistic resources they had at hand (L1 and present tenses). She made her students notice gaps in their interlanguage storage and, immediately afterwards, she filled in those linguistic gaps using lexical chunks, containing the tense forms she intended to teach. The design and implementation of tasks of this type might have served to make a particular L2 word combination (a lexical pattern containing a grammatical item) more salient by drawing attention to phrasal units, resulting in the student noticing the target word. The combination of a contextualized oral account and a reading text with formal instruction might have helped the students complete successfully the tasks set as they were able to retrieve and later use properly the new lexical patterns presented. In this class, it may be assumed that grammar is given higher priority over lexis. However, this teacher puts vocabulary, not grammar, at the forefront of her class by lexicalizing grammar. Lexis is essential in the creation of meaning and grammar should be subjected to it and not vice versa. So, teachers should begin with lexical units and show how they need to be grammatically modified to be communicatively effective.

The Teacher B's self-assessment report and the selection of tasks disclosed that this teacher gave due attention to the context and did not disregard explicit instruction. This array of tasks revealed that form and meaning were equally important and the meaning-form-meaning progression offered variety and reassured students' performance along the different tasks.

The teacher C's dissatisfaction with the overall organization and development of the tasks set was easily perceived in her self-assessment report. After a study carried out on problems of vocabulary teaching techniques, Oljira (2017) found out that instructors often face trouble in adjusting their teaching techniques and style to specific classroom situations and there are those who fail at applying effective and varied techniques in their English classes simply because they lack continuous professional training of teaching methodology. Unfortunately, the variety and scope of unknown words for this group of learners proved to be unforeseen, never taken into consideration during the planning stage and, consequently, the original time set for the development of the tasks proved to be not enough forcing the teacher to modify it. Although results were checked in

groups, it should not be overlooked that the first part of the task was done individually. It would have helped to have arranged the students in groups from scratch. It is well known that students tend to help one another when they are asked to work in groups; having taken this aspect into account would have most probably reduced not only the number of unknown words but also the time spent on the task.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study poses limitations that point to several directions for future research. To begin with, data were gathered by the end of October, not a good idea considering it was close to the end of the academic term when teachers have to assess their students' performance and decide on their promotion to subsequent courses. That final assessment period left no chance for teachers to think of new interventions and thus make possible adjustments.

This research clearly depicts instances whereby vocabulary is taught explicitly, with some hints of learner training under the direction of the teacher in a systematic way. Yet, incidental learning –referred to above– seems to be catching more and more attention in vocabulary acquisition. Indeed, incidental vocabulary learning through different input, such as audio support, listening to songs, viewing L2 television together with frequency of occurrence and prior vocabulary knowledge is being highly encouraged by researchers due to the significant benefits it seems to offer (Tang 2020, Zhou and Day 2020, Webb and Chang 2015, Peters and Webb 2018, Pavia et al. 2019). Thus, in the future it would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study with two groups of students: treatment and control, to compare and contrast the effects of both explicit and incidental vocabulary learning.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to describe an action research conducted by three teachers along with their students in a private secondary school in Argentina. These teachers, assisted by their supervisor, explored the importance of vocabulary teaching/learning as a vital linguistic aspect for L2 acquisition. In view of the results obtained, a number of assumptions can be made.

For some teachers, grammar should be given more importance than vocabulary in their classrooms. Nonetheless, an L2 program should not be simply based on a linear syllabus planned around grammatical items and some associated vocabulary but on lexis, specifically, on word combinations or lexical phrases, which may include some grammatical items. Ideally, the approach should be communicative whereby intentional vocabulary instruction through pedagogical tasks, with a focus on lexical chunks, function as a pivot for language learning. These tasks should be contextualized and thus display that form and meaning are by the same token important for SLA to occur.

Another assumption is based on the notion that selected collaborative techniques for L2 vocabulary acquisition are essential. Collaborative learning, that is, learners working in pairs or small groups to achieve shared learning goals, offers many advantages. It increases self-esteem and motivation among students, improves complex and cognitive learning, develops interpersonal skills and promotes students' responsibility.

Despite some of the limitations addressed before, the study offers valuable insight into L2 vocabulary teaching and has some implications for L2 education. First, regarding L2 education, it provides support for the view that vocabulary instruction should not be underestimated. Teachers should be made aware of the importance of word building and the battery of vocabulary learning strategies conducive to SLA. Second, the data analyzed show that there is some tension between teachers' beliefs about teaching vocabulary and their reported practice, generating the need for teachers to be acquainted with the latest trends on vocabulary teaching/learning and reflect about their practice. These findings also suggest that in-service teacher development focused on both incidental and intentional vocabulary development is necessary.

We hope the present action research serves to provide a better understanding of the teaching and learning of L2 vocabulary. Indeed, this linguistic aspect is vital for SLA, and as such it should be regarded as central to foster communicative competence. Based on our findings, we encourage other teachers and researchers alike to continue exploring future directions in this field.

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## Appendix I

### Stage I

Warm-up sample questions:

Did you enjoy the weekend? What did you do last weekend? Did you sleep till late last Sunday? Did you play video games with friends on the weekend? Where did you go last Saturday afternoon? Did you visit your friends last Sunday?

**Note:** The word “last” is stressed while using nonverbal cues, such as hand signals and gestures. The teacher elicits contributions from students.

### Stage II

Teacher’s own previous weekend:

*My last weekend was great! I got up at 9AM. on Saturday and went to the beach with my two daughters and my son. In the evening, I watched my favorite Netflix series and I cooked pizza. On Sunday, I didn't wake up early, I slept till late. I got up at 10:30AM. and I had my breakfast at 11:00AM. Then, I visited my parents and I stayed with them the rest of the day.*

**Note:** The word “last” is stressed while using nonverbal cues, such as hand signals and gestures. The verbs in past tense are also stressed while speaking. The piece of false information added is the second sentence (students know their teacher is single and does not have children).

### Stage III

#### Reading Task

Instructions: Read the text about Selena Gomez’ last weekend and complete the chart using the past forms of the infinitive verbs.

*Last Saturday morning Selena took her Pilates class. In the afternoon, she practiced her Spanish and learned phrases, such as: “...Es complicado para explicar.” In the evening, she had a romantic dinner on a rooftop. Finally, on Sunday she cooked a chocolate cake. At 6PM. Selena watched her favorite film “The Wizard of Oz” and she listened to some royalty free elevator music before going to bed. That was an exciting weekend in Selena's life!*

Infinitive Verbs	Past Tenses
Take	
Practice	
Learn	
Have	

Cook	
Watch	
Listen	
Is	

**Note:** Passage written by the teacher after retrieving information from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_GFkHA5EZdE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GFkHA5EZdE) 73 Questions With Selena Gomez (Vogue). It is about Selena Gomez – popular actress and singer among students – who takes a shot at answering 73 unexpected questions.

#### *Stage IV*

##### Writing Task:

In pairs elaborate your own last weekend chart. Be ready to use your chosen past forms in sentences and include one piece of false information for your partners to find out!

#### *Stage V*

Game: TIC- TAC- TOE

COOKED	HAD	LEARNED
WATCHED	LISTEN TO	WAS
PRACTICED	TOOK	GOT