

## **A Review of Studies on The Potential of Specific Word Instruction (SWI) to Improve Vocabulary Knowledge among Malaysian ESL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Vocabulary knowledge is the cornerstone of effective communication, enabling individuals to articulate thoughts, convey emotions, and engage in meaningful interactions with precision and nuance. Teachers and ESL students in Malaysia often encounter challenges when learning English as a second language vocabulary, including diverse language backgrounds, limited exposure to authentic and specific English contexts, and the need to balance vocabulary acquisition with other language skills. In the context of Malaysian primary level English education, although English is being taught every day in school with a minimum of 4 hours of interaction a week, majority of the primary school English as a second language students still face difficulties in expressing themselves verbally and in written form (Azman, 2016). Choosing the most appropriate methods in teaching and learning English vocabulary for ESL learners seems to be a big issue for educators. This is because when choosing the methods in teaching vocabulary, what is most important is ensuring that the outcome of the approach would benefit ESL learners meaningfully and that the words learned would retain for a longer period of time. One such strategy that has been studied and has been lauded to have good potential to help with ESL vocabulary development is specific word instruction (SWI). Therefore, the purpose of this review is to explore the potential of the use of specific words instructions (SWI) in improving vocabulary knowledge. This literature review encompassed previous studies conducted in relation to the use of SWI in enhancing vocabulary knowledge. This review article serves as a compendium in informing and guiding stakeholders in education, including teachers, policymakers, administrators, and parents on alternative and effective approach in enhancing vocabulary knowledge. By considering the findings from the studies reviewed, stakeholders can work collaboratively to enhance educational practices, improve student outcomes, and create a more comprehensible and inclusive learning

environment for all learners especially in implementing SWI in the current teaching of English to ESL learners in Malaysia.

### **Introduction**

Vocabulary is often used as a surrogate for intelligence. According to Hart and Risley (1995) the amount of vocabulary understanding at school entry was found to be a predictor of later achievement. A similar correlation between language knowledge and academic performance was discovered by (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986).

Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL) face many choices when it comes to helping their students acquire a richer vocabulary. While some educators may assume their students will have little trouble memorising the extensive vocabulary needed for fluency, students of foreign languages consistently struggle with this area of the curriculum. With "tens of thousands of different meanings," of words in a language, Hague (1987) claims that "Vocabulary is by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, whether a foreign or one's mother tongue" (p. 219).

Furthermore, learning and acquiring vocabulary knowledge for those who are learning English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) can be much more challenging. Farjame (2013) claims that most ESL/EFL learners face barriers when they try to learn and assign the vocabularies from the English lessons to their long term memories. This results to the vocabulary acquired to be less meaningful. It is important to take into consideration the problems that revolve around knowledge of vocabulary and improve the ESL/EFL students' knowledge. It is an ongoing problem when it comes to learning vocabulary and enhancing one's vocabulary knowledge. Despite vocabulary knowledge being a crucial part of language learning, in the Malaysian education setting, particularly in the teaching and learning of English as a second language, it is often overlooked and choosing the most appropriate methods in teaching and learning seems to be a big issue for educators. Learning English vocabulary in Malaysia presents a range of challenges for both teachers and students. One significant issue stems from the diverse linguistic backgrounds of Malaysian learners, where multiple languages, including Malay, Chinese dialects, and Tamil, are spoken at home (Ahmad, 2019). This linguistic diversity can lead to interference and confusion when attempting to acquire English vocabulary. Additionally, learners often encounter limited exposure to authentic English contexts in their daily lives, relying heavily on classroom instruction, which can hinder the development of practical vocabulary usage (Ismail, 2017). Furthermore, educators need to strike a balance between teaching vocabulary and addressing other essential language skills, such as grammar and speaking, within the constrained time of the curriculum (Ismail, 2017). These challenges collectively impact the effectiveness of vocabulary learning in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies and resources to enhance vocabulary acquisition.

In spite of many methods that can be used to teach vocabulary, English language teachers should not feel pressured to use any particular one based on directives but rather choose a method or a blend of methods that suits their students' needs and enable the delivery of the lesson objectives (Sani, 2019). When choosing the methods in teaching vocabulary, what is most important is ensuring that the outcome of the approach would benefit ESL/EFL students meaningfully and that the words learned would retain for a longer period of time. Therefore, the strategy in acquiring sight words and productive vocabulary to ensure knowledge of

vocabulary increases must be correctly chosen with putting the interest of the ESL/EFL learners first.

Elizabeth (2017) claims that acquiring sight words as part of vocabulary knowledge in a second language is a process that involves learning skills, learning new vocabulary and patterns, and cultivating the ability to transfer skills from the classroom to the real world, where English may be used. It is often the teachers' responsibility to identify the best technique to aid a learner in acquiring vocabulary knowledge. Teachers act as the greatest source of vocabulary for ESL learners. Every day, teachers discover and uncover different words with learners using different approaches. Some common approaches used by teachers are implicit, through the texts or passages in the textbook and in this 21st century with ICT blooming at a fast rate, exposing learners through ICT tools like online games and online learning platforms are commonly used by teachers. These variances are used to help cater to the different needs of the learners as well as to follow common trends of education. With younger English as a second language (ESL) learners, such as those in primary level education, games would sometimes be used to teach or expose them to vocabulary as it is deemed to be more interesting than most approaches.

There are in fact many techniques and tools to help a learner learn vocabulary – not just implicitly, but also explicitly as sometimes needed by ESL/EFL students. According to Luke (2014) explicit instruction refers to teacher-centred instruction that is focused on clear behavioural and cognitive goals and outcomes. This means that learners are well aware of what will be taught and how it will be taught to them. This, in turn is made learning 'explicit' or 'transparent' to learners. As per mentioned above, there are in fact many techniques and tools to help a learner learn vocabulary – not just implicitly, but also explicitly as sometimes needed by ESL/EFL students.

According to Luke (2014) explicit instruction refers to teacher-centred instruction that is focused on clear behavioural and cognitive goals and outcomes. This means that learners are well aware of what will be taught and how it will be taught to them. This, in turn is made learning 'explicit' or 'transparent' to learners. One of the ways to address primary school English as a second language (ESL) students' lack of vocabulary knowledge is through specific word instruction, which is a type of explicit instruction. Specific word instruction is a type of vocabulary instruction that is explicit in nature in which the teacher would provide direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text, with repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important (Butler et al., 2009).

Specific word instruction is conducted by the teacher engaging with the lesson by using an explicit approach in teaching new vocabulary to the learners. This method focuses on providing clear explanations, examples, and guided practice to ensure a deep understanding of the target words (Beck et al., 2002).

Specific word instruction can be done in ways to which the teacher conducts the lesson through using visual aids in explicitly teaching the learners on new vocabulary that have been chosen. Specific word instruction can be effectively conducted by teachers through the use of visual aids, such as images, diagrams, or graphic organizers, in order to explicitly teach learners the meanings of selected new vocabulary, enhancing their comprehension and retention of the words (Marzano, 2004). Visual supports offer a multisensory approach that reinforces word learning and facilitates connections between the words and their corresponding concepts. Specific word instruction, or explicitly teaching individual words, can deepen students' knowledge of word form, meaning and use. Specific word instruction is an

instruction or method than can be used to teach vocabulary and is part of a direct vocabulary learning. In specific word instruction, the learners learn vocabulary directly when they are explicitly taught both individual words and word-learning strategies and it is through explicit teaching of individual words and word-learning strategies (Baumann et al., 2003), and this enhances their ability to comprehend and utilise unfamiliar terms effectively.

Before students read a text, it is helpful to teach them specific words they will see (i.e., sight words) in the text, explicitly. It is found that with this instruction that it can aid reading comprehension in a long run, and the learners' knowledge of word meanings can be deepened. Teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text better (Beck et al., 2002). Bernstein in Luke (2014) defines that explicit vocabulary instruction features strong classification and strong framing of words and is clearly defined and at most times is teacher-directed interaction. Despite it being a teacher-directed interaction, teachers could always add on subsequent activities that are learner-centered after imparting the new knowledge of vocabulary to the learners.

Graves (2000) found that effective vocabulary instruction includes teaching specific words with rich and robust instruction to support understanding of texts. Specific words instruction can help ESL/EFL learners to acquire English vocabulary effectively. This is because such approach allows in-depth knowledge of word meanings that can help students understand what they are hearing or reading (Lincs, 2019) or even make themselves understood when they are speaking or writing. Butler et al (2009) added that vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement that goes beyond definitional knowledge and that is why this research aims to enhance the three different aspects of vocabulary which are knowledge of meaning, knowledge of use and knowledge of form.

### **Specific Word Instruction**

Specific word instruction focuses on specifically and explicitly teaching words that are contextualized in literature, important to text, and used in many situations (Spencer, 2013). This means that the teacher is explicitly teaching carefully selected words that improves understanding and helps students' vocabulary grow (Spencer, 2013). In addition, it provides rich in-depth knowledge of words and clear student-friendly explanations and examples of word meanings. Specific word instruction is a method that allows a teacher to use multiple explicit exposure to learners in more than one context. With such an approach, it would help learners to engage actively in the lesson and use words in new contexts.

Given the significant impact of vocabulary on reading comprehension, coupled with the limited incidental acquisition of vocabulary words by students, it is imperative to implement explicit vocabulary instruction within educational settings (Daniels, 2009). The utilisation of specific word instruction is considered an explicit instructional approach within the realm of teaching (Beck et al., 2002). The utilisation of specific word instruction refers to an instructional approach employed for the purpose of teaching vocabulary, and is considered a component of direct vocabulary learning. The acquisition of vocabulary occurs through direct instruction, wherein learners are explicitly taught both individual words and strategies for word-learning. The concept of specific word instruction refers to a comprehensive instructional approach that encourages active involvement with vocabulary, leading to enhanced word acquisition (Beck et al., 2002). The primary concept underlying targeted word instruction, particularly in the context of acquiring English language vocabulary knowledge, posits that children exhibit optimal word learning outcomes when they receive instruction

spanning a prolonged duration and actively engage with the words during the instructional process. The frequency of students' utilisation of novel vocabulary and their ability to employ these words across various contexts positively demonstrating the importance of active and versatile word usage for effective vocabulary development (Nation, 2001).

Research has shown that students exhibit enhanced acquisition of new vocabulary when they are exposed to these words frequently and in diverse contextual settings, (Nagy & Herman, 1987), highlighting the significant role of varied and repeated exposure in vocabulary learning. There appears to be a positive correlation between the exposure, auditory perception, and active engagement of children with particular words, and their subsequent learning and retention of said words and their subsequent learning and retention of these words (Huttenlocher et al., 2010), emphasising the role of multisensory experiences in vocabulary development. When educators offer comprehensive instruction that fosters active participation, they afford students with multiple opportunities to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. Comprehensive instruction integrates various pedagogical approaches to create a well-rounded learning environment that supports students' diverse needs and promotes effective learning outcomes (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006).

According to Beck et al (2002), the utilisation of explicit vocabulary instruction can enhance an individual's reading comprehension. This phenomenon arises from the fact that learners can enhance their understanding of word meanings through targeted instruction, which involves teaching individual words. The pre-teaching of specific words prior to engaging in reading activities has been found to have a positive impact on both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. Prior to engaging with a text, it is advantageous to provide students with explicit instruction on the specific vocabulary words that will be encountered within the text. According to Beck et al (2002), it has been observed that introducing significant vocabulary prior to engaging in reading activities can be beneficial for students in terms of acquiring unfamiliar words and enhancing their comprehension of the text. Research has shown that students exhibit enhanced acquisition of new vocabulary when they are exposed to these words frequently and in diverse contexts. There appears to be a positive correlation between the exposure, auditory input, and active engagement of children with particular words, and their subsequent learning outcomes. When educators offer comprehensive instruction that fosters active participation, they afford students with multiple opportunities to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. When students encounter the aforementioned words within their assigned texts, their level of exposure to these novel lexical items is heightened.

In the context of an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, the pedagogical approach known as Specific Word Instruction (SWI) can be employed to enhance students' understanding of word meanings. This instructional method involves the targeted teaching of individual words with the aim of facilitating a more profound comprehension of their definitions. According to Armbruster et al (2001), this intervention is anticipated to facilitate students' comprehension of auditory and written information, as well as enhance their ability to effectively employ vocabulary in both oral and written communication. The pre-teaching of specific words prior to engaging in reading activities has been suggested to have a positive impact on both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. Pre-teaching specific words offers several benefits, including fostering greater text comprehension by providing students with the tools to understand key vocabulary before encountering it in context (Spire et al., 2012). This proactive approach

helps alleviate the cognitive load during reading, enhancing overall comprehension and engagement. In English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructional settings, it is common practice for educators who employ the strategy of Specific Word Instruction (SWI) to proactively introduce and instruct students on the vocabulary they will encounter in a given text prior to engaging in reading activities. This approach ensures that students are better equipped to engage with the text's content and meaning, promoting more effective reading experiences (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the instruction of essential vocabulary will precede the reading activity, thereby facilitating the acquisition of unfamiliar terms and enhancing the students' overall comprehension of the text. As highlighted by Graves (2006), Prior instruction of essential vocabulary will precede the reading activity, facilitating the acquisition of unfamiliar terms and ultimately enhancing the students' overall comprehension of the text.

### **Benefits of Specific Word Instruction**

In order to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge, it is imperative that the instruction provided for specific words is comprehensive and thorough, as suggested by (Beck et al., 2002). A comprehensive understanding of the definitions, structure, and application of words can facilitate students' comprehension of auditory or written information. Furthermore, it can assist individuals in employing words with precision and accuracy in both oral and written communication. Prior to engaging with a text, it is advantageous to provide students with explicit instruction on the vocabulary they are likely to encounter within the text. The pre-teaching of essential vocabulary prior to engaging in reading activities can facilitate the acquisition of unfamiliar lexicon and enhance students' overall comprehension of the text. SWI, or Specific Word Instruction is recognised as an instructional approach that fosters active participation in vocabulary acquisition and enhances word learning. According to Armbruster et al (2001), optimal word acquisition in children occurs when they receive prolonged instruction and actively engage with the words. This implies that students' likelihood of acquiring new words is positively correlated with their frequency of usage and the diversity of contexts in which they employ these words, particularly when the words are explicitly taught to them.

Furthermore, according to Piaget (1972), the process of learning involves a dynamic interaction between assimilation, whereby learners modify new experiences to align with existing concepts, and accommodation, which occurs when learners adapt their concepts to accommodate new experiences. Through the reciprocal interaction of these two processes, they not only facilitate immediate acquisition of knowledge, but also contribute to enduring transformative growth. Piaget's cognitive theory places significant emphasis on long-term developments, which in turn have a positive impact on learners' attitudes towards learning. SWI, or Structured Word Inquiry, is recognised as an instructional approach that facilitates active involvement with vocabulary and enhances the acquisition of words. According to Armbruster et al (2001), optimal word acquisition in children occurs when they receive instruction over a prolonged duration and actively engage with the words during the instructional process. This implies that the greater the frequency with which students employ novel vocabulary and apply it across various contexts, the higher the probability of their successful acquisition of these words, particularly when they receive targeted instruction.

The practice of utilising specific words instruction (SWI), also referred to as repeated exposure of words in various contexts, is commonly implemented in English as a Second Language (ESL)

or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Undoubtedly, the acquisition of new vocabulary by students is enhanced when they are exposed to these words frequently and in diverse settings. There appears to be a positive correlation between the exposure, auditory input, and active engagement of children with particular words, and their subsequent learning outcomes. This aligns with the tenets of the Cognitivist Theory. Cognitive theorists argue that engaging in activities that necessitate learners to retrieve information from memory, commonly known as "retrieval practise," results in enhanced memory retention and ultimately improved learning outcomes (Roediger & Butler, 2011). For instance, it has been suggested that individuals who are acquiring a new language should employ flash cards as a means of honing their vocabulary skills, as opposed to repetitively transcribing or repeatedly perusing a word inventory. This recommendation stems from the fact that flash cards compel learners to retrieve information from their memory. When educators employ the strategy of Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) to foster active participation, they provide students with multiple opportunities to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. When students encounter those identical words within their assigned texts, it results in an augmentation of their exposure to the newly introduced vocabulary.

### **Review of Studies on The Use of Specific Word Instruction in Improving Vocabulary Knowledge among Esl/Efl Learners**

From the review of literature, the researcher found that a number of studies have been carried out to study vocabulary knowledge in the ESL/EFL context, particularly in the primary education context in Malaysia. Most of these studies have been mainly undertaken to understand how an approach could affect the ESL/EFL learner's vocabulary knowledge. While there is a rapid growth in research on vocabulary knowledge and its relationship with the approaches used to teach vocabulary; however, based on the prior studies conducted, there is quite a number of practical, policy-based, research-based and theoretical gaps in the literature.

#### ***i) Gaps in Instructional Practice***

From the review of related literature of a wide number of closely related research done within the last three decades, the researcher found that most of the instructional method used in the earlier decade is mostly grammar translation method. The scopes of most of the existing studies are limited to either a single category of vocabulary and approaches used and it uncovers very limited geographical regions, particularly developed countries. was, however, noted that even though rich instruction was the best way to produce deep and thorough word knowledge that is needed in order to affect comprehension (Beck et al., 1982; McKeown et al., 1983; McKeown et al., 1985), teaching every word in a rich way might not be practical or necessary given the number of words that need to be taught and their role in the story. In addition, out of the literature that were reviewed, a number of researchers have stated that explicit activities help in improving language learning for primary level students and tertiary levels. Specific Word Instruction by Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Teaching Reading Sourcework suggested that specific word instruction that takes off as an explicit approach is better than basic drilling. It added that it increases learners' vocabulary learning & comprehension. Direct Vocabulary Approach promotes word consciousness. Based on the literatures that were reviewed, Sedita (2005) stated that a teacher should always provide direct, explicit instructions in specific words especially key vocabulary prior to reading as it

promotes word consciousness. William and Mary (2001) agreed that different explicit activities can help at risk students to expand their general vocabularies and attach meanings to technical works. Adding on to the above, students are said to learn more words through targeted instruction, and learning exclusively through explicit vocabulary instruction (Feldman & Kinsella, 2004). Ashlie Jack (2015) also declared in her research of language instructions that intentional direct instruction that emphasises on specific vocabulary is more effective than other traditional methods.

Butler (2010) claimed that providing direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text and using specific words will increase vocabulary knowledge of learners. In his research, he also used similar instruments as this research which are questionnaires and tests. In addition, Henry (1989) said it was anticipated that explicit, discussion oriented, and direct decoding instruction based on word origin and structure would result in improved reading and spelling performance. The students with higher vocabulary size use specific strategies more often than the students with lower vocabulary size. Students are able to use an image or picture to remember the word, try to talk native English speakers, and use it in different ways, they make summaries after all the explicit and specific approach used in their English lesson. These were found by Naceraa and Mammeri in their language learning strategies research in December, 2009. In 2011, Schneider claimed that effective vocabulary instruction is explicit. He added that, effective instruction requires careful selection of vocabulary targets and should also be intentionally designed that is linked to assessment.

Besides, researchers in reading have found that knowledge of word meanings has a strong relationship to reading comprehension skill rather than especially when an explicit approach is implemented in teaching (Stahl, 1986). He added that explicit approach of vocabulary teaching involved the students in deeper processing, and gave the students more than one or two exposures to the to-be-learned words. This will directly encourage cognitive development. Explicit instruction is also seen to provide better quality of learning a word (Manyak, 2014). They mentioned that the more the students repeat the word explicitly, the better the quality of learning the word. These researchers suggested that rich instruction is particularly important for words that are necessary for comprehension, for words that turn up in a wide variety of contexts, or for words that are hard to get across with just a brief explanation. More narrow instruction, such as a simple definition, should be used for words that do not need to be well known, providing teachers with the opportunity to increase the number of words introduced to students. One emergent trend in literature on vocabulary instruction is the restructuring of the task (materials and procedures) in various ways to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. One way of doing this is to alter the passage by substituting easy for hard words. Anderson and Freebody (1979) pointed out the importance of unfamiliar vocabulary on text comprehension and suggested a line of research targeting the following two issues: (a) whether substitution of easier or more difficult words in a text makes the text easier or more difficult to comprehend, and (b) whether instruction of unfamiliar words in a text facilitates the comprehension of the particular text.

This, however, is not a common practice in teaching vocabulary or new words in today's English lesson in a common English lesson in Malaysia. In Malaysia's primary school English language curriculum, explicit and specific teaching is not a widely adopted practice (Abdul Hamid, 2020). While the curriculum emphasises language proficiency across four main skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - it often lacks specific focus on explicit instruction. Specific and explicit teaching of words involves direct and systematic instruction of language



concepts and vocabulary, providing clear explanations and demonstrations to enhance students' understanding and language acquisition. However, research suggests that in Malaysian classrooms, instructional methods often tend to be more context-based and experiential, focusing on implicit immersion and communicative activities rather than explicit teaching strategies (Abdul Hamid, 2020). As a result, there is a need for more comprehensive research and teacher training initiatives to promote the effective integration of specific and explicit teaching methods into the Malaysian English language curriculum, ultimately enhancing language proficiency and academic achievement among students. More than often, teachers are asked to implement a more implicit method of teaching vocabulary without choosing specific words to teach throughout the year. Implicit teaching, where concepts are conveyed indirectly through implicit cues or embedded within activities, is a common practice in early childhood and primary education (Anderson, 2019).

### ***ii) Gaps in the Malaysian Policy and Curriculum***

Understanding the preference of the most important stakeholders of education which are the ESL/EFL learners and identifying the factors that affect the results of the learners would help the learners' behaviour of the in strengthening the quality of vocabulary learning of ESL/EFL learners. This study also has implications for schools to produce competent ESL/EFL learners with better grasp of vocabulary knowledge. Recent studies shows that implementation is mostly on only upper elementary grade students (Henry, 2001). Harji et al (2015) reported in their study that student's vocabulary knowledge at the secondary school level is insufficient. This shows that the vocabulary learned in primary years were scarce as well. These researchers also concluded in their findings that there is a need to expand students' vocabulary knowledge at primary level and equal importance should be given to vocabulary teaching as teaching the other components of the language. Although English is one of the compulsory subjects for the Malaysian students, they are still lacking in extensive vocabulary knowledge (Tan, 2016). As reported in the past studies at the tertiary level, fresh graduates tend to struggle to find employment due to their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, to curb this situation for the upcoming young generation, an early intervention in school is vital. This shows that there is a need in terms of providing insights about the needs and requirements of the learners in a fast changing education in the country, especially in Malaysia where English is recognised as a second language.

The current KSSR and educational blue print focuses a lot on the creating learners who are bilingual as well as proficient in more than just 1 language. However, not much focus is given on the importance of vocabulary. Not much focus is given on the importance of vocabulary in KSSR (*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*) according to a study by Azianura Hani Shaari and Ruhizan Mohamad Yasin, titled "A Review on Vocabulary Teaching in KSSR" 2017. The current syllabus outlines the standard that the 4 common skills that a learner should acquire which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. KSSR outlines the standard that learners should acquire the four common language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as detailed in the Ministry of Education Malaysia's document "Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) Bahasa Inggeris Year 4" (2011). However, vocabulary that plays a vital role in language is not explained nor given guidance on what the learners should achieve by the end of the schooling year. This brings the researcher to this research on why vocabulary knowledge could be taught and implemented in a comprehensible manner for young learners at the same time making the lesson more meaningful, which is by choosing words specifically,

and implementing them explicitly to the learners of second/foreign language. Besides, the current syllabus and word list only states a list of words without putting an emphasis on how important a word form, meaning and use are vital in improving vocabulary knowledge of the learners.

### ***iii) Gaps in Previous Research***

Jenkins and Matlock's (1989) research on reading and vocabulary showed a clear research gap, especially on the amount of number of students chosen as participants. With a large number of 125 participants of the same year, the research can be implemented if participants are taken from different school or if the school chosen has a high number of enrolment. With such great number of participants and subjectivity, ensuring balance of differences may be a challenge.

In connection with research on ESL/EFL context, Qian (1998, 1999) and Paribakht and Wesche (1999) point out that few empirical studies have been conducted on the association concerning knowledge of vocabulary depth and reading skill. De Bot et al (1997) find out that varying aspects of knowledge of vocabulary, such as morphological aspect and word associations have close relationship with reading comprehension processes. Qian (1999) reveals that knowledge of vocabulary depth has provided a distinctive contribution to the prediction on the reading proficiency of the learners.

Other researchers have also acknowledged the special role of knowledge of vocabulary depth on reading skill. For example, the research conducted by Nation and Snowling (2004) focuses on the predictive role of knowledge of vocabulary depth which is evaluated by an exercise of meaning aspect for the improvement of academic reading success; also the study shows that the predictive role of vocabulary depth has statistically substantial influence on reading comprehension without considering nonverbal activity, non-word reading and phonological capabilities.

A number of researchers agree that vocabulary knowledge develops at a remarkable rate during the early and middle elementary school years (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Miller, 1977; 1978; 1981; 1986a; 1986b; 1988; 1991; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy & Herman, 1987; Wysocki & Jenkins, 1987). It is, however, not relatively clear if the rapid vocabulary development reported at these years is greater now in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Hence, giving more reasons to conduct the research. The results from L2 vocabulary research have given evidence that a distinct relationship exists concerning knowledge of vocabulary depth and academic reading proficiency. The findings also affirm that vocabulary depth works as an important contributor to success in reading achievement in L2.

In addition, results from the review (National Reading Panel, 2000) showed that: (a) vocabulary words can be learned through incidental learning and indirect ways (Leung, 1992; Nicholson & Whyte, 1992; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal & Cornell, 1993) and that b) when teachers need to teach specific words, instruction should include both direct teaching, active engagement in learning tasks, repetition of vocabulary items in learning and many contexts, as well as multiple exposures to those vocabulary items; (c) the more connections between the unknown word and familiar words the better the acquisition of that word; (d) pre-instruction of vocabulary in reading lessons can have significant effects on learning outcomes; (f) there is not a single "best" method of vocabulary instruction, but any instruction on vocabulary is better than no instruction at all. There is however a lack in the number of research that could show the effectiveness of specific word instruction (SWI) especially in

conducting a research of quantitative nature with intact groups involved. This scarce fact is another factor to why this research should be implemented in English classrooms, especially in Malaysia.

Based on the related literature, various ability levels and age differences were also found to significantly influence learning gains from vocabulary instructional methods (National Reading Panel, 2000). Specifically, Tomesen and Aarnoutse (1998) found that poor 4 -grade readers gained better scores in word meaning tests than average readers through reciprocal teaching and direct instruction. This research shows that direct approaches may be significant in enhancing vocabulary knowledge of learners. Of all the literature that were reviewed, Biemiller (1999) found that children can acquire and retain two or three words a day through instruction involving contextualized information and explanation of new words, whereas direct approaches were found to work better for less verbally fluent or lower vocabulary children and adolescents than approaches involving word meaning inferences from context. That being said, though there is research conducted on direct and explicit approach, there is a notable lack of research specifically focusing on the specific teaching of vocabulary in educational settings.

Despite its significant impact on language development and comprehension, studies examining the specific strategies and methodologies for explicitly teaching vocabulary are relatively scarce. This dearth of research hinders educators from accessing evidence-based best practices and limits the understanding of how to optimize vocabulary instruction for diverse learner populations. As a result, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research in this area to inform and enhance instructional practices and curricula in schools (Johnson, 2018; Thompson, 2019). The lack of robust research on explicit vocabulary teaching calls for increased attention and investment in research initiatives to address this critical gap and foster the advancement of effective language instruction. In the context of the current research that is set to take place, it would involve less verbally fluent learners and lower vocabulary children and implementing the SWI could yield positive result. It also provides the researcher more reasons to implement this research in the future as there is a lack of it.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the review of past studies provides valuable insights into the uncharted territories of knowledge within a given field. Identifying these gaps serves as a foundation for future research endeavours, enabling scholars and researchers to devise innovative studies that address unanswered questions and expand the boundaries of understanding. These gaps represent not only areas where information is lacking, but also opportunities for intellectual growth and advancement. By acknowledging and investigating these gaps, the academic community can foster a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex phenomena. As the body of knowledge continues to evolve, the recognition and bridging of literature gaps will undoubtedly remain a fundamental driving force behind the progress of human understanding and the development of new paradigms within various disciplines.

Recognizing and addressing gaps in research methods used in enhancing vocabulary knowledge is essential for effective communication and cognitive development. Identifying these gaps empowers individuals to enhance their linguistic proficiency and express themselves more precisely which will also help learners in performing better in assessment and daily classroom tasks. Moreover, acknowledging vocabulary issues is a crucial step toward bridging educational disparities and promoting inclusivity, as a strong vocabulary is often

linked to academic success and social mobility. By actively seeking to close these gaps, educators and learners alike can cultivate a deeper appreciation for language's nuances and its role in shaping thoughts and ideas. Embracing the task of expanding vocabulary knowledge is not merely an exercise in memorization, but a journey towards enriched self-expression, improved comprehension, and ultimately, a more eloquent and empowered engagement with the world.

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