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Investigating Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Instruction Strategies

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ABSTRACT:

Despite being one of the pillars of learning any language, lexical knowledge has always been a challenge for foreign language learners. The present study seeks to uncover the attitudes of first year students of English towards implicit and explicit vocabulary learning strategies and to identify the challenges encountered when learning English vocabulary. The study mainly relies on a questionnaire taken by a selected sample of 46 first year students at the Department of English, Constantine 1 University during the academic year 2022/2023. The results reveal that the participants have positive attitudes towards explicit and implicit vocabulary teaching strategies. Participants mentioned some difficulties when learning new words and provided their strategies to learn them. Concerning the explicit strategy, only a few of the respondents are familiar with the branch of etymology as a vocabulary teaching strategy while almost 94% of them are not. As for the implicit strategy, most of the participants displayed poor inferencing skills despite their appreciation of context clue tasks.

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Introduction

Learning and mastering a language requires learning all its components and one of these essential components is vocabulary. Despite the fact that vocabulary is crucial in language acquisition, it only started to gain popularity in language teaching research in the 1980s. English has the lion's share in vocabulary research as it is an international lingua franca; thus, the focus on vocabulary in EFL contexts is becoming substantial worldwide. Studies on vocabulary instruction, therefore, started to be emphasized in the ESL/EFL context (Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Ellis, 1994; Meara, 1980; Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2000). These studies have stressed on the importance of vocabulary learning in this era and have concentrated on the acquisition, description, and assessment.

Vocabulary research in EFL contexts has thrived in the last decades and evolved around the world to include a variety of orientations which can be cognitive, contextual, lexical, pedagogical, and even technological. The current study is of a pedagogical nature as it focuses on practical strategies and techniques to teach vocabulary effectively. Many methods and techniques have emerged to facilitate vocabulary instruction; two main approaches can be categorized as explicit and implicit vocabulary teaching. Explicit vocabulary teaching includes all the direct and explicit methods of teaching vocabulary. Examples of explicit instruction strategies are: mnemonic devices, semantic mapping, flashcards, and etymology which is the instruction of a new word tracing its historical origin. Implicit vocabulary teaching, on the other hand, relies on teaching new words implicitly through reading and listening tasks. Each of these two main approaches gained advocates as they both have their points of strength and points of weakness when it comes to teaching vocabulary. Therefore, there has been sustained academic interest in this field and many studies have investigated and compared the two contrasting approaches (Fainman & Tokar, 2019; Khamesipour, 2015; Martin-Sanchez, 2019; Pittman, 2008; Yaghoubi & Seyyedi, 2017). It can be argued that research has been thriving in this field since the debate about the two approaches has not been settled. This situation encourages more research especially with the new teaching methods and the technological advancement.

In the case of Algeria, very few researchers have explored the explicit versus implicit vocabulary teaching field (Arab, 2015; Benyahia, 2020; Tobbi, 2023) as the focus has always been on the methods of teaching English vocabulary rather than comparing the explicit and the implicit vocabulary teaching approaches (Negadi, 2015; Sadek, 2022; Sarnou and Sarnou, 2023). This gap represents an opportunity for

valuable research in the explicit and implicit instruction of English vocabulary as Algerian academic investigations in this aspect have been limited. Eventually, addressing this gap would offer meaningful insights and contribute significantly to the domain of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in the Algerian context.

In light of what has been stated, the paper at hand is an attitudinal study that aims at investigating Algerian EFL students' perceptions of vocabulary explicit and implicit teaching strategies. It also explores students' familiarity with the etymology technique as an explicit vocabulary teaching strategy and as well as context clues as an implicit strategy and the techniques they use to acquire new vocabulary. It is hoped that this study will initiate more in-depth comparative research on explicit and implicit approaches to vocabulary teaching in the Algerian context.

I. Literature Review

There have been several attempts to find the best approach to teach vocabulary as it is an important element in language acquisition. Two main approaches have prevailed in the literature: explicit and implicit teaching. Explicit vocabulary teaching refers to the approach of teaching new words in a direct and clear style. According to Schmitt, "Explicit learning focuses attention directly on the information to be learned, which gives the greatest chance for its acquisition" (2000, p.18). On the other hand, implicit vocabulary teaching is the instruction of new vocabulary in an indirect and implicit way. The learner acquires new vocabulary unconsciously from the context and focuses on understanding the general content; consequently, vocabulary acquisition comes naturally (Fainman & Tokar, 2019). However, unanimity among researchers has not been achieved when it comes to the best approach to adopt for vocabulary instruction.

A number of researchers support the view that explicit vocabulary instruction is the most effective approach to teaching vocabulary as it can provide valuable outcomes and that vocabulary should be studied to reinforce acquisition (Barcroft, 2015; Gallagher et.al, 2019; Kusumawati & Widiati, 2017). Examples of intentional vocabulary teaching in SLA are: dictionary use, mnemonic devices, translation, etc. Learning words through etymological elaboration is a neglected example of explicit vocabulary teaching. It revolves around teaching a new word through tracing its origin and presenting its history and timeline, which helps in improving students' retention of words (Baleghizadeh & Naeim, 2011; Boers et al., 2004).

Conversely, advocates of the implicit approach argue that it is the best approach to adopt as rich contexts and exposure to language input help develop the learner's vocabulary knowledge automatically without the need to devote a great amount of time to teach it explicitly (Khamesipour, 2015; Nagy, 1988; Shany & Biemiller, 2010).

An example of implicit teaching is inferencing or guessing word meaning from the context through reading tasks. Inferencing improves both vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension, thus, they deserve to be given more importance in vocabulary instruction (Greenwood & Flanigan, 2007).

A great number of research studies have examined and compared the aspect of explicit and implicit vocabulary learning. For instance, in a study by Waring and Takaki (2003), 25 words of different frequencies of occurrence were taught implicitly to 15 Japanese female B1 students through reading a story. After reading, three tests were run to assess meaning recognition. Results showed that the participants learnt new words but most of the words provided implicitly were not learnt. The latter suggested that implicit vocabulary teaching is partially effective because new words are less to be remembered from graded reading. Additionally, in her thesis, Pittman (2008) studied the merits of explicit vocabulary instruction over implicit vocabulary instruction in 15 ESL learners of fourth grade. They were taught reading from different books ; some units were presented using the explicit strategy and other units were taught using the implicit one. Her findings revealed that the explicit strategy has a positive effect on the participants vocabulary acquisition as they performed slightly better in the units taught through the explicit strategy. In another study,Yaghoubi and Seyyedi (2017) compared the effects of the explicit and implicit teaching strategies in Iranian secondary EFL students. The findings were in favor of the explicit strategies as there was a significant difference in the post test between the explicit group and the implicit group. The former learnt much more vocabulary than the latter. However, the study of Martin-Sanchez (2019) on the effectiveness of implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction demonstrated that the implicit strategy was the one that proved success in 26 first grade participants when it comes to vocabulary acquisition.

The literature indicates that various studies have explored both the explicit and implicit vocabulary teaching strategies, often drawing comparisons between their effectiveness in the teaching context. However, there remains a notable gap, in the Algerian EFL context specifically, concerning learners' perceptions towards these two instructional approaches. This study, therefore, seeks to address this issue by investigating students' attitudes towards explicit and implicit vocabulary learning strategies.

II. Method

The survey targeted first-year EFL students at Frères Mentouri Constantine 1 University during the academic year 2022/2023. We opted for freshmen because they are in a transitional period from high school to university, which involves great changes in vocabulary learning strategies. They were also selected since they can

provide a starting point for understanding and tracking vocabulary acquisition. With the total number of students being 461, a sample of 46 participants was selected using convenience sampling.

Data for the study was collected via a questionnaire of 22 questions within three sections. The first two questions are about the participants' background information. The first section consists of eight general questions about vocabulary learning. Section two comprises eight questions about etymology as an explicit vocabulary learning strategy. The choice to use etymology as a teaching strategy is informed by schemata theory which suggests that new information is understood and retained when it is connected to prior knowledge. This is precisely what occurs when we explore the origin and historical development of a word (Soleimani & Azizmohammadi, 2015). The last section provides five questions about inferencing as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy which was chosen because it exemplifies implicit vocabulary teaching effectively. The questions combine 9 multiple-choice questions, four yes/no questions, four ranking questions, and six open-ended questions distributed throughout the three sections.

III. Results

The results of this survey revealed key findings about students' perceptions of explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction. The data obtained from the questionnaire is presented in the following sections.

The first two questions gather general information, including gender and age to clearly describe the sample. The data demonstrated that the majority of the respondents (89.1%) are aged between 17 and 20 years. The majority of the participants are females (76.1%) while males constitute 23.9% of the sample reflecting the general characteristics of the population of the study.

1. Section One

This section inquires about students' attitudes towards learning English vocabulary. The third question aims to find out whether students focus on vocabulary or grammar when speaking or writing in English.

Table n° 01: Vocabulary vs. Grammar: What Matters More in Language Production

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Vocabulary	38	82.6
Vocabulary and grammar	3	6.5
Grammar	5	10.9
Total	46	100

According to table 1, 82.6% of the participants focus on vocabulary when producing spoken language rather than the syntactic structure of the utterance. The focus on vocabulary suggests that most participants may still lack lexical knowledge which is part of basic communication and therefore vocabulary teaching needs to be emphasized in the curriculum.

The fourth question aims at exploring the frequency of teachers' instruction of new vocabulary in class. The responses ranged from rarely to always, with the majority of students (47.8%) selecting sometimes. The remaining distribution was as follows: 26.1% of them opted for always, 15.2% chose often, and 10.9% selected rarely. The results indicate that participants who experience vocabulary instruction often, sometimes, or rarely are unaware of the fact that vocabulary instruction is integrated through context implicitly. They acquire new vocabulary in each content-based course they take. This encourages the integration of explicit vocabulary teaching.

The fifth question in this section was open-ended to know which courses students find enriching in terms of vocabulary teaching. The answers varied and included almost all the modules, however, 12 answers included oral expression as the module in which they learn more vocabulary. 11 students said that they learn more vocabulary in written expression module and ten said that language culture is the module in which they learn new vocabulary.

The sixth question aims to know the strategies used by teachers to teach new vocabulary. The highest percentage belonged to inferencing (37%), followed by giving synonyms and antonyms (35%). Giving the dictionary meaning came third with a percentage of 15% and the least used strategy was the translation (13%). The findings imply that teachers rely on inferencing as it encourages students to deduce meaning from the context. The second most used strategy is the use of synonyms and antonyms, which reflects the emphasis on vocabulary building. Concerning the dictionary meaning, it is less frequent because of its rigid and unengaging nature. As for translation being the least used strategy, the reason is probably because teachers avoid the heavy reliance on the first language in EFL settings.

The next question inquires about the strategies used by students to learn new English words. As it is a multiple-choice question, participants had the option to select more than one answer. As a result, the total number of responses amounted to 80 rather than 46 since this figure represents the percentage of all responses given. Table 2 demonstrates that 26 (32.5%) participants use the strategy of guessing from the context. The second most frequently used strategy was translating into Arabic (23.8%).

Table n° 02: Strategies Used by Students to Learn New English Words

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
I use the dictionary	12	15
I guess from the context	26	32.5
I translate the word into Arabic	19	23.8
I make a list of words and memorize them	7	8.8
I ask my teachers or friends about the meaning	16	20
Total	80	100

The findings in Table 2 indicate that, similar to the strategies used by teachers, most students use context clues to find the meaning of new words probably for practical reasons. However, unlike teachers, the second most used strategy is translation, which highlights students' dependence on their first language. A less frequent strategy, asking for teachers' feedback, implies students' lack of confidence and their fear of being perceived as less capable than their peers.

The eighth question is open-ended. It seeks to know about the words the students find difficult to remember. While six students provided no answer, 40 of them said that they find difficulty in remembering scientific words (37.5%), multisyllabic words (22.5%) technical words (7.5%), compound words (7.5%), historical words (7.5%), political words (5%), words with a difficult pronunciation (5%) rarely used words (low frequency words) (5%), and double letter words (2.5%).

The ninth question aims at knowing whether the participants support the idea of separating vocabulary teaching as a course or not. Half of the participants think that vocabulary should be taught separately while the other half think it should be integrated in other courses. A possible explanation of the first choice is that these students pay great attention to the necessity of focusing on enriching their vocabulary, while other students would acquire vocabulary easier in natural contexts. This can be confirmed by the results of the subsequent question.

The next optional open-ended question aims at finding the reasons behind choosing either of the previously mentioned options. While 14 participants provided no justification, the main reasons for selecting the first option are displayed in the following responses:

- Participant 1: " because the majority of us we don't have enough vocabulary"
- Participant 2: " always we face problems in using words, we must have a module to develop and get reach vocabulary"

- Participant 3: " it is going to be very interesting to have a module the enrich our vocabulary, in a well organized program, not like when it is all mixed up with other modules"
- Participant 4: " Because it is very important especialy in writing paragraphs"

For the students who chose that vocabulary teaching should be integrated in other modules, their main explanations are displayed in the following:

- Participant 1: " because when it is integrated in other modules you can understand it better"
- Participant 2: " Because it will be difficult and stressful to memorize words as a module"
- Participant 3: " words are needed to be in context even if you memorize a word, you won't be able to use it because you don't know the subject it is used"
- Participant 4: " so I can remember the field of the word"

Based on the responses gathered, it can be summarized that participants who support the idea of teaching vocabulary in a separate course demonstrate an interest in the importance of vocabulary in their curriculum. They also acknowledge their lack of vocabulary knowledge and recognize the necessity of enhancing it. On the other hand, participants who support integrating more vocabulary in other courses emphasize two main reasons. They believe that words are most effectively learnt when presented in context. Additionally, incorporating vocabulary within other subjects can save both time and energy.

2. Section Two

This section seeks to deal with etymology as a vocabulary learning strategy. The section consists of six questions. The eleventh question aims at finding out whether the participants are familiar with the term etymology. Reponses indicate that 93.5% of the participants are not familiar with the term etymology.

The three students who answered positively provided definitions of the term:

- "It is the origin of the language we speak."
- "It is the study of history of the form of words and their origin."
- "It is the history of a word or a word element, including its origins and derivation."

Question number twelve seeks to explore students' motivation to learn the origins and roots of English words. The reason behind asking such a question is to raise students' awareness about the origins of words.

Figure n° 01: Students' Motivation to Learn the Origins of English Words
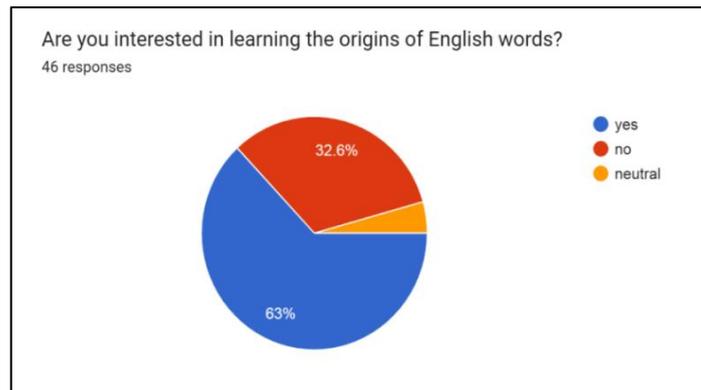
As shown in Figure 1, 63% (29) of the participants are interested in learning word origins and have a positive attitude towards learning the origin of words. Two participants (4.4%) are neutral about it and 15 (32.6%) are not interested in learning the origins of words in English. The findings encourage incorporating etymology in the curriculum as a strategy to enhance vocabulary teaching.

Question number thirteen inquires about whether the participants are aware of the origins of the words "mattress" "sugar" "lemon" and "Algorithm". Results reveal that the majority of the participants (80.4%) have background knowledge about the origin of the words mattress" "sugar" "lemon" and "Algorithm". However, 19.6 % of the participants did not know that.

The aim of the fourteenth question is to know whether students know and pay attention to English words with Arabic or French origin. Twenty-five respondents answered positively while 21 (45.7%) answered negatively. For the 25 who said yes, they were asked to provide examples of words of Arabic or French origin. Their answers are provided in the following:

1 helicopter
2 Algebra, camel, alcohol, camera, bazaar.
3 Camera, alcohol.
4 Oblige
5 camera, camel, alcohol.
6 Camera, soda, octopus.
7 alcohol, ghoul, coffee.
8 bizarre, blonde,garden, garage, plume, ballon, contour.
9 garbage.
10 table.
11 castle.
12 Entrepreneur, deja vu, alcohol, cotton, coffee.

13 alcohol, deja vu, camera, cotton, camel.

14 camera, camel, romance, technologie.

15 cave

16 matrix originated from the word مصفوفة and also most of Algebra terms.

17 genre, literature.

18 like the verb choose in French is choisir and sometimes the words are the same in English and French.

19 genie

20 nation

21 information, separation

22 police ,environment,photo (french)

23 alcohol, candy, coffee

24 stable, yacht, tail ذيل

25 algebra, assassin

Notably, 12 respondents provided 24 words with French origin, demonstrating a moderate awareness of French linguistic influence on English. In contrast, 14 respondents mentioned 17 words of Arabic origin with "camera", "camel", "coffee," and "alcohol" being the most frequent examples. This narrower range of examples aligns with the fact that English words from French significantly outnumber the Arabic-derived ones. One student mistakenly provided the word "tail" assuming that it is originally from the Arabic word [ðeil] when in fact it has Germanic roots. This finding highlights folk etymology where perceived similarities between words lead to false assumptions about their origin. It is worth mentioning that some participants provided more than two words while others provided only one word, which reflects the different levels of students' awareness of word origins.

The sixteenth question uses a Likert scale to assess whether students agree or disagree with the statement "learning word origins is very interesting". In this case, the one used is a five-point scale consisting of the following options: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The data shows that the majority of the participants (41.3%) neither agree nor disagree about etymology being interesting, 15 of them agree that etymology is interesting, and 10 strongly agree that etymology is interesting. Only two participants disagree with the statement. The participants have no background knowledge about the topic which can explain the neutrality of 41.3% of them.

The next question in section three is also a Likert scale question. It aims to explore whether the participants agree with the statement "Learning about the history of a word in English and its origin would help me retain and remember it better." The

data shows that 18 (39.1%) participants agree with the statement and 12 (26.1%) of them strongly agree with it which shows their willingness to study etymology. Nine (19.6%) students were neutral and seven (15.2%) disagree with the statement. This suggests a positive perception of explicit vocabulary teaching through etymology by most of the participants. Some students (19.6%) are indifferent to the statement probably because of their unfamiliarity with word origin. As for those who disagree with the statement, it may be because they prefer other vocabulary teaching strategies.

3. Section Three

This section is devoted to context clues as an example of implicit vocabulary instruction strategy. It seeks to find out whether students prefer to use this strategy and whether they master it or not. In the eighteenth question, participants were asked to choose which technique they use the most when they face a new word. It has been found that 12, 43.3% of the participants choose to guess the word from the context, 35.8% say that they look up the translation, and 20.9% look it up in a dictionary. It can be deduced that contextual guessing is the most common strategy and translation is the second common one among first year students.

The nineteenth question aims at raising students' awareness about how their inferencing abilities work. The findings show that when guessing the meaning of a word from the context, 25 students choose to focus on the logical development in the text, 16 of them use their background knowledge, while five students choose to rely on grammar to find the meaning. This suggests combining textual clues and background knowledge when teaching inferencing.

The twentieth question seeks to know whether students use dictionaries to check whether their guesses are right or not. The majority of the participants (41.3%) sometimes verify the guessed word in a dictionary. 26.1% never verify in dictionaries while only seven participants often use the dictionary to double check the guessed word. The data shows that most participants verify their dictionaries occasionally but lack consistency. This is probably because of their overconfidence in inferencing skills, their ignoring of unknown words, or lack of dictionary access.

The aim of question number twenty-one is to know which inferencing techniques students use to identify a new word they hear. As demonstrated in Table 9, the majority of the participants (29) rely on the teacher in understanding the meaning of a new word. 25 of them try to understand the word from the context, while 18 guess it from the teacher's body language. The question offered students to choose more than one option. Therefore, many participants selected two techniques.

Table n° 03: Inferencing Techniques Used by Students in Listening

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
I try to guess it from their body language	18	25
I try to guess it from their intonation and stress	0	0
I ask my teacher about its meaning	29	40.3
I try to understand it from the context of the sentence	25	34.7
Total	72	100

The data provided by Table 3 demonstrate that contrary to question number 18, the most common strategy is the direct reliance on the teacher. This is namely because it is a listening task and teachers provide clear answers. About one-third of the participants try to guess the word from the surrounding speech indicating good listening skills. Guessing from the body language is the least used strategy as it cannot be used for all types of words.

The last question is an exercise of inferencing. Participants were asked to identify the meaning of the word egret from the context. As shown in figure 2, While 13 participants left the question unanswered, 14 of them said it is an animal and 14 gave the correct answer "bird". Three participants answered incorrectly writing "clothes", one wrote "plant", and one answered "plumage".

Figure n° 02: Students inferencing attempts
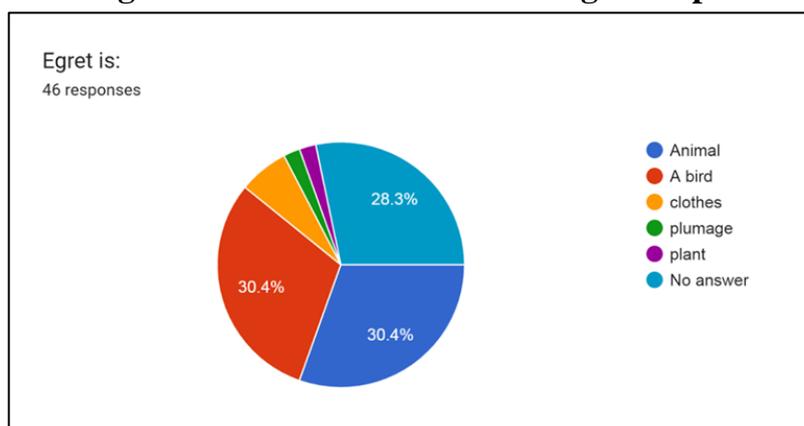
While one-third of the participants could successfully derive the word from the context, another one-third demonstrated that they recognised the word as referring to a living creature even if they did not pinpoint the exact classification. This implies that participants had some level of understanding about the word in context. The incorrect

answers and the significant amount of unanswered questions suggest the need to focus on teaching inferencing skills and include more context clues tasks in the curriculum.

IV.   Discussion

This research work seeks to highlight students' perception of implicit and explicit vocabulary teaching strategies. It aims at discovering students' familiarity with the branch of etymology as a vocabulary learning strategy.

The data revealed that the participants' ages ranged between 17 and 25, most of which are females. In the first section, it has been found that Oral and Written Expression are the modules in which much vocabulary is acquired. Although students acquire new vocabulary in every course they take, as vocabulary teaching is more explicit in writing and speaking modules, students believe that more vocabulary is learnt in them. That indicates the power of explicit vocabulary teaching. Thus teachers need to treat vocabulary as a core skill not an addition and encourage teaching it explicitly either in a course or devote a special course for it. Moreover, 50 % of the participants support the idea of creating a separate vocabulary teaching module and that indicates their willingness to learn vocabulary. This suggests that structured explicit vocabulary instruction could be beneficial. The aspect of difficult words needs more attention as probing into difficulties in learning new words helps in finding ways to facilitate that. It has been found that guessing from the context and translating into Arabic are the most used strategies to learn vocabulary. This suggests that learners rely on implicit learning which aligns with contextual language acquisition. Translating into Arabic indicates students' dependence on their mother tongue. This strategy is helpful for beginners but may hamper the learner from thinking in the target language. The second section tackled etymology as an explicit vocabulary teaching strategy. 93% are not familiar with the term of etymology; however, 80% are aware that there are English words from Arabic and French origin. The majority of respondents have positive attitudes towards learning etymology. This entails that etymology is rarely formally taught in class, yet, there has been an informal exposure to it through some famous words with Arabic or French origin. It is important to integrate etymology teaching in the curriculum to improve learners' vocabulary retention and metalinguistic awareness. Also, almost 44% of the participants prefer inferencing as a strategy to guess unknown words; yet, most of them do not have good inferencing skills and need more practice in this strategy. In a nutshell, it can be deduced that the majority of the participants have positive perceptions towards both explicit and implicit teaching strategies.

Consequently, prioritizing these two approaches in vocabulary teaching is highly recommended.

Conclusion:

Vocabulary teaching requires integrating different effective strategies that can be explicit or implicit. Thus, some educators opt for the explicit strategies as they provide better retention of the acquired words. Others, however, argue that implicit vocabulary teaching offers a better natural process of vocabulary acquisition. The aim of this attitudinal study was to seek students' perceptions towards the two main approaches

The findings indicated that although most of first year students of English do not test their vocabulary level, they have positive attitudes towards learning new words and support the idea of learning vocabulary in a separate course. Participants highlighted some difficulties faced when learning new words and provided their strategies to learn and memorize new words. When it comes to etymology, most students proved their unfamiliarity with the field yet had some ideas about word origins and showed positive attitudes towards it. As for the implicit strategy, most of the participants displayed poor inferencing skills despite their appreciation of context clue tasks. Therefore, it is recommended that students should be made aware of the explicit vocabulary learning strategies and trained to have better inferencing skills with regard to the implicit strategy.

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