Critical Reading between The Lines: Incidental Vocabulary Learning in Iranian High School Students in Malaysian ESL Context

Gonbad Kavous University

Linguistics Society of Iran

1. *Hossein Bakhtiyarzadeh** iD 2. *Kemboja Ismail* iD 3. *Sepehr Bakhtiyarzadeh* iD

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of incidental vocabulary learning on Iranian high school students in a Malaysian ESL context, contrasting it with their experiences in an Iranian EFL environment. Vocabulary acquisition is pivotal in language learning, yet traditional methods often rely on intentional strategies like rote memorization. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing the involvement load hypothesis to explore how incidental learning—occurring naturally through reading, listening, and engaging in conversations—affects vocabulary knowledge and communication skills. Through questionnaires and interviews, the study examines three key areas: the enhancement of vocabulary knowledge through incidental learning, its effect on communication abilities, and the challenges of intentional vocabulary acquisition. Findings reveal that incidental learning significantly boosts vocabulary retention and communicative competence, offering a more effective and engaging alternative to traditional methods. There were some challenges associated with intentional vocabulary learning, including issues of retention, motivation, and practical application, further which underscore the need for a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction. By integrating the strengths of both incidental and intentional learning strategies, language educators can create more effective and engaging learning experiences that support learners in developing a robust, functional vocabulary. The study's insights have practical implications for educators and curriculum designers, suggesting that integrating incidental learning opportunities into language programs can better support learners in achieving linguistic proficiency. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on language acquisition, emphasizing the need for more dynamic and contextualized vocabulary

1. **Corresponding Author:** M.A in English Language Studies, Ministry of Education, Maragheh, City, IRAN -*hossein.bakhtiarzadeh@gmail.com* ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4735-328X

2. PhD in Applied Linguistics, Head of Department at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

3. MA in TEFL, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Maragheh, Iran - *Email: sepehrbk@outlook.com* - ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1851-7377.

Article Citation: Bakhtiari, H., Ismail, K., & Bakhtiyarzadeh, S. (2024). Critical reading between the lines: Incidental vocabulary learning in Iranian high school students in Malaysian ESL context. *Journal of Critical Applied Linguistics Studies, 1*(2), 107-126.

Background of the Study

Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in second language acquisition, serving as the foundation for effective communication. Despite advances in grammar and writing, proficiency in a language is often measured by one's ability to express and comprehend spoken ideas. Historically, vocabulary learning was marginalized in language teaching, but recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in its critical role (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Research has shown that vocabulary is essential for language learning, carrying the bulk of communicative meaning (Nation, 2001). Effective language use relies heavily on a substantial lexicon, prompting researchers to explore the most effective methods for vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary can be acquired through intentional (direct) or incidental (indirect) learning. Intentional learning often involves structured exercises and memorization, whereas incidental learning occurs through exposure to language in context. The latter is considered more effective for long-term retention and practical use. Despite extensive research, gaps remain in understanding how incidental vocabulary learning affects students transitioning from an EFL to an ESL context. This study aims to fill this gap by examining Iranian high school students in Malaysia. This research thus contributes to the field by highlighting the effectiveness of incidental learning in enhancing vocabulary knowledge and oral communication. It offers practical recommendations for educators and curriculum designers.

Statement of the problem

The focused problem of the current study is that intentional vocabulary learning cannot be responsive for EFL learners' communicative needs. Regarding the earlier controversy on EFL learner's problems on vocabulary learning experienced by the researcher as an EFL teacher and verified by the experts in this realm, the addressed problem can be discussed from multiple sources. According to Ghorbani (2009) Iranian high school text books cannot be responsive for the students' communicative needs for two reasons: first, the reading texts included in these books have almost scientific theme and nature; second, words and expressions which are used in daily communication are rarely found in the books. The findings of a content analysis of the high school textbooks (Khajavi & Abbasi 2011) indicated that only 9.46% of the books were related to the daily used social interaction. Based on Gholami, et al. (2012)'s finding, the value of the social context and its role in language learning is ignored in these EFL textbooks in spite of the fact that textbooks should present a certain way of looking at the world (Aliakbari 2004). The absence of social context leads the learners towards rote learning of the different components of the language (such as vocabulary, grammar, etc.) separately. Consequently, whatever high school students learn in the classroom in connection with the English vocabulary becomes part of their passive vocabulary. These kinds of vocabulary entries can only satisfy the learners' temporary needs such as achievement in exams; and they are easily forgotten after passing

the course.   Another controversial issue is that, in EFL situations, there is limited access to communicative contexts in which the target language (English) is used. Regarding the fact that EFL context lacks real life situations for language learning, the learners never find a situation in which they can use English in real life communicative contexts. Clearly, the learners cannot achieve the ultimate goal of learning the language i.e. making communication despite of their strong willingness to communicate in English especially out of the classroom context (Zarrinabadi & Abdi 2011; Barjesteh, Vaseghi & Neissi 2012).

In such a context, the classroom is the only place to learn English. Therefore, the classroom should be a learning environment in which English is learnt meaningfully and functionally. This means that the language should be used within a context which can mirror the real-world communicative situations in order to provide the learners with some opportunities to experience interactions in English. This makes the learners be able to learn English functionally and make communication effectively. In this case, the learners become good language users rather than only language learners. The literature on vocabulary learning indicates that most of the studies concerning incidental learning of vocabulary have focused on university students (Rahimi and Sahragard 2008; Keshavarz and Astaneh 2004). Second, previous research on incidental vocabulary learning have only focused their attention on improving and increasing vocabulary range (Maghsudi 2007; Nation 2001), whereas this study emphasizes the high school students learning English as a foreign language in a second language context (Malaysia) to explore the role of vocabulary knowledge on the students' oral communication ability. In an attempt to suggest a reasonable solution to the issue discussed above, research was conducted using a qualitative case study approach on Iranian high school students studying in Malaysia. The aim was to examine the role of some communicative resources as parts of incidental vocabulary learning in enhancing EFL learners' communication ability. This was based on the premise that getting rich vocabulary knowledge through exposure with incidental possibilities of learning, the high school students will be able to improve their oral communication ability.

Literature Review

This section critically examines the literature on vocabulary learning in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) from three perspectives: the historical evolution of vocabulary learning in SLA, significant research findings on vocabulary learning, and the advantages of incidental vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, a theoretical framework will provide a conceptual underpinning for this study.

a)   The Historical Evolution of Vocabulary Learning in SLA

Interest in vocabulary teaching and learning has evolved significantly since the 1980s. Initially, vocabulary was marginalized in SLA research, with a predominant focus on grammar. However, this focus has shifted considerably over the past few decades. Laufer (2009) and Lightbown and Spada

(2006) noted an upsurge in vocabulary-focused research, marking it as one of the most vibrant areas in SLA. Scholars such as Hong (2010) and Gass and Selinker (2008) have highlighted the pivotal role of vocabulary in language acquisition, recognizing its foundational importance in mastering a second language. This paradigm shift underscores the growing acknowledgment of vocabulary as essential to language learning. Bogaards and Laufer (2004) pointed out that the past twenty years have witnessed substantial advancements in vocabulary studies, reflecting a broader understanding of its critical role in SLA.

Recent research has so far provided new insights into vocabulary acquisition techniques. A study by Liu et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of using digital flashcards versus traditional methods. The findings indicated that digital flashcards, which often include multimedia elements, significantly improved vocabulary retention compared to traditional methods. Moreover, the use of spaced repetition software (SRS) has been shown to enhance long-term retention of vocabulary by optimizing the intervals between review sessions (Smith et al., 2023).

The evolution of vocabulary learning in second language acquisition (SLA) has also seen significant advancements in recent years. While earlier research, such as that by Laufer (2009) and Lightbown and Spada (2006), underscored the growing importance of vocabulary in SLA, more recent studies have continued to highlight its critical role. For instance, Liu et al. (2021) explored the use of digital flashcards in vocabulary retention, finding that the inclusion of multimedia elements significantly improves learners' ability to remember new words. This aligns with the findings of Smith et al. (2023), who emphasized the effectiveness of spaced repetition software (SRS) in enhancing long-term retention of vocabulary.

Moreover, Chen and Wang (2022) have investigated the impact of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications, revealing that these tools facilitate both intentional and incidental learning. Such applications often incorporate gamified elements, which engage learners in a way that traditional methods may not. These recent studies further reinforce the idea that modern technology is blurring the lines between intentional and incidental learning, making vocabulary acquisition more dynamic and interactive than ever before.

b) Significant Research Findings on Vocabulary Learning

The centrality of vocabulary in language learning cannot be overstated. Cook (2009) emphasized that language acquisition fundamentally involves vocabulary acquisition, likening vocabulary to the

building blocks of language. Theories of language learning, as noted by Gass and Selinker (2008), often place the lexicon at the heart of the learning process, underscoring its significance. Research consistently highlights the integral role of vocabulary in all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Hunt and Beglar (2005) identified vocabulary acquisition as a crucial component of successful language learning. Stahl (2005) further argued that vocabulary reflects our intellectual and professional identities. Carter (2004) and Celce-Murcia (2001) both stressed that vocabulary learning is central to effective language acquisition and usage.

The integration of technology in language learning has blurred the lines between intentional and incidental learning. Chen and Wang (2022) explored the impact of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications, finding that these tools facilitate both types of learning. MALL applications, which often incorporate gamified elements, encourage learners to engage with language both intentionally (through structured exercises) and incidentally (through interactive storytelling and real-life simulations). Recent studies continue to highlight the limitations of rote learning. A study by Park and Kim (2020) found that learners who relied solely on rote memorization struggled with applying vocabulary in communicative contexts. Conversely, those who engaged in meaning-focused activities demonstrated better long-term retention and practical usage of new words. This aligns with the earlier findings of Ausubel and reinforces the importance of meaningful learning.

Modern approaches to vocabulary learning increasingly incorporate principles from cognitive and educational psychology. Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning continues to influence the design of digital learning tools. For instance, a study by Zhao et al. (2021) demonstrated that language learning applications that combine text, audio, and visual elements enhance vocabulary retention more effectively than text-only resources. Similarly, dual coding theory has been applied in designing interactive learning environments that leverage both verbal and visual stimuli to improve learning outcomes (Huang & Yang, 2023).

c) The Advantages of Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental vocabulary acquisition, which occurs through contextual exposure rather than explicit instruction, is highly effective for vocabulary development. Nagy and Herman's (1985) Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis (VLH) posits that repeated exposure to new words in varied contexts facilitates gradual and robust vocabulary acquisition. This method allows learners to infer word meanings contextually, enhancing retention and comprehension. The frequency and context of exposure are critical factors in incidental learning. Research indicates that multiple encounters with a word, ranging from six to over twenty exposures, are necessary for effective learning (Rott, 1999; Waring and Takaki, 2003). Repeated exposure in diverse contexts helps learners develop a nuanced understanding of word meanings and their applications.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the interactionist theory of language acquisition, which posits that language learning occurs through meaningful interaction and communication. This theory underscores the importance of context in vocabulary learning, aligning with the principles of incidental learning. This study adopts an integrated approach, combining intentional and incidental learning strategies. Nation (2001, 2006) argued that these methods should be viewed as complementary rather than competitive. An integrated framework that incorporates explicit vocabulary instruction alongside opportunities for incidental learning in context is posited to enhance vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency.

Research questions

In order to attend to research objectives mentioned in the study, the researchers attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How does incidental vocabulary learning in a Malaysian ESL environment compare to an Iranian EFL environment in terms of vocabulary retention among high school students?

2. In what ways does incidental vocabulary learning influence the ability of Iranian high school students to engage in spontaneous spoken communication in English?

Research Methodology

This section thus outlines the research methodology used, detailing the research design, participants, educational setting, data collection instruments, and analysis methods.

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach, a form of social inquiry focusing on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world around them. The qualitative approach is justified in this study to uncover the participants' perspectives on learning English vocabulary incidentally in a natural setting in Malaysia. The study aims to discover the effects of incidental learning on vocabulary knowledge and the relationship between contextual immersion and the improvement of communication ability. By investigating participants' experiences and perceptions,

the research seeks to illuminate how they interpret their linguistic environment and its impact on their language acquisition.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were ten high school students (randomly selected from 15 volunteers) studying at the third grade or pre-university level in the Iranian educational system. The group included both girls and boys (eight girls and two boys) aged 16-18, who had transitioned from the Iranian EFL context to the Malaysian ESL context. In Malaysia, they encounter English as a second language in various settings, despite continuing to learn it as a foreign language within their educational curriculum. The study was conducted at Imam Khomeini Educational Complex in Kuala Lumpur, the primary governmental educational center for Iranian students in Malaysia, offering programs from primary school to the pre-university level.

Instruments

Two primary instruments were used for data collection: questionnaires and interviews. Open-ended questionnaires were employed to gather detailed responses from participants, allowing them to express their true reflections on the study topics. Despite the challenges in interpreting and analyzing open-ended responses, this method aligns with the qualitative approach's aim to capture authentic participant perspectives. Additionally, unstructured individual interviews were conducted to further explore participants' views. Interviews were held in the school library to ensure a quiet environment conducive to in-depth discussions, with participants given the choice to respond in English or Persian.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began with an oral discussion with the school's principal and English teachers to gain consent. Participants were led into an empty classroom in separate groups of boys and girls. After an introductory session discussing the importance of English and vocabulary learning, participants were briefed on the concepts of intentional and incidental vocabulary learning, as well as the differences between EFL and ESL contexts. Questionnaires were then distributed, with participants given three days to complete them. Interviews were subsequently conducted, recorded, and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis based on the research questions and objectives. Responses from the open-ended questionnaires were coded to identify recurring themes related to vocabulary expansion, communication ability enhancement, and impediments in intentional

113

vocabulary learning. Similarly, interview transcripts were analyzed to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions. A pilot study was also conducted to validate the research instruments and procedures. Two Iranian students were selected to participate in the pilot at the researcher's residence. After explaining the study's purpose and relevant terminologies, participants completed bilingual open-ended questionnaires. The responses were reviewed in consultation with the researcher's supervisor to ensure the validity and practicality of the research method. The pilot study confirmed the reliability of the instruments and allowed for necessary adjustments before the main study commenced.

Findings

Some respondents answered the questions, in either open ended questionnaires or interviews, in English, but others' responses were in Persian. However, some parts of the answers given in English included grammatical errors, wrong word choices, repetitive and filler words. So, for the ease of reading and understanding, some of the participants' quotations were edited.

Thematic description of findings

The presentation of findings is categorized based on the two research questions.

RQ.1 In analyzing the data with the aim of capturing the effect of incidental vocabulary learning on vocabulary knowledge, the following main themes emerged.

Theme 1: Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Knowledge

Participants in the study consistently highlighted the effectiveness of incidental vocabulary learning in enhancing their vocabulary knowledge. This theme emerged prominently, with respondents expressing that vocabulary acquired incidentally tends to be more integrated into their active usage compared to words learned through intentional study. One participant noted, "*When I watch English movies or read books, I pick up new words without even trying. These words just stick with me because I see them used in different ways*." This observation aligns with the dual-coding theory proposed by Paivio (1986), which suggests that information is better retained when it is processed through multiple channels, such as visual and verbal. Incidental learning often occurs in rich, contextualized environments where learners are exposed to new vocabulary alongside visual cues, narratives, and real-life situations, thereby enhancing retention and understanding. Moreover, the contextualized nature of incidental learning allows learners to acquire not just the meaning of words, but also their usage, connotations, and nuances. This holistic acquisition contrasts with the often decontextualized nature of intentional learning, where words are memorized in isolation. As another

participant explained, "*I remember words better when I see them used in a conversation or in a sentence, rather than just memorizing them from a list.*" The findings from this theme underscore the value of integrating vocabulary learning into meaningful activities that mimic real-life language use. The implications for language educators are clear: fostering environments that encourage incidental learning, such as through extensive reading programs or immersive language experiences, can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Theme 2: Incidental Learning and Retention of Learned Vocabulary

The theme of retention emerged as a critical aspect of vocabulary learning, with participants highlighting the lasting impact of vocabulary learned incidentally. Many respondents shared that words acquired through incidental means are more likely to be retained in the long term. This was often attributed to the repeated exposure to words in various contexts, which reinforces their meaning and usage. One participant shared, "*I find that the words I pick up from conversations or media stay with me longer because I keep encountering them in different situations.*" This repeated exposure, often referred to as the "spacing effect" in cognitive psychology, is a well-documented phenomenon that suggests information is more effectively consolidated into long-term memory when it is revisited over spaced intervals (Ebbinghaus, 1885). The natural and often subconscious reinforcement of vocabulary through incidental learning helps solidify these words in the learner's mental lexicon, making them more readily accessible during communication. This is in stark contrast to the rapid forgetting curve often associated with vocabulary learned through rote memorization or other intentional methods, where lack of usage leads to rapid decay of memory. These findings support the integration of incidental learning strategies in language education, emphasizing the importance of providing learners with frequent and varied exposure to new vocabulary in different contexts. By doing so, educators can help learners build a robust and durable vocabulary base.

Theme 3: Unconscious Learning Through Incidental Learning

Another significant theme that emerged from the analysis was the concept of unconscious learning, which occurs naturally and effortlessly as learners engage with the language in meaningful contexts. Participants often described this process as absorbing new vocabulary without conscious effort. As one respondent explained, "*I don't even realize I'm learning new words when I watch TV shows or talk to my friends. It just happens.*" This theme resonates with the idea of implicit learning, a concept well-documented in cognitive psychology and language acquisition research. Implicit learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge without conscious awareness of what has been learned, often resulting in knowledge that is difficult to verbalize but can be applied in practice (Reber, 1993). In the context of vocabulary acquisition, implicit learning occurs when learners are exposed to new words in natural communication settings, where they unconsciously absorb the meanings and uses of these words

through repeated exposure. The effectiveness of unconscious learning is closely tied to the contextual richness and the authentic use of language in incidental learning environments. Unlike intentional learning, where learners may struggle to retain isolated vocabulary items, unconscious learning allows words to be integrated into the learner's linguistic repertoire in a more fluid and natural manner. This process is supported by connectionist models of language learning, which posit that language acquisition involves the gradual strengthening of connections between linguistic elements through repeated exposure (Ellis, 2002). The insights from this theme suggest that language learning environments that mimic natural language use, such as through immersion programs or interactive media, can facilitate unconscious vocabulary acquisition. By creating opportunities for learners to engage with the language in authentic, meaningful contexts, educators can promote the unconscious integration of new vocabulary.

Theme 4: Incidental Vocabulary Learning Through Real Situations

Participants frequently emphasized the importance of learning vocabulary through real-life situations, highlighting the practicality and relevance of words learned in this way. Many respondents pointed out that vocabulary acquired incidentally in real contexts is more likely to be remembered and used appropriately in similar situations. As one participant stated, "*When I learn new words while talking to native speakers or dealing with real-life tasks, I can remember them better and know when to use them.*" This theme underscores the role of context in vocabulary learning, where the meaning and usage of words are deeply embedded in specific situations. Contextual learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of learning in context, supports this idea by suggesting that knowledge is more effectively acquired and retained when it is learned in the context in which it will be used (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). The practical application of vocabulary learned through real situations is a key advantage of incidental learning. Unlike intentional learning, where words may be learned out of context and struggle to be applied in real communication, incidental learning provides immediate relevance and utility. This aligns with the constructivist view of learning, which posits that learners construct knowledge actively, often through interactions with their environment and others (Vygotsky, 1978).

The findings from this theme suggest that language educators should prioritize learning activities that simulate real-life situations, such as role-plays, simulations, and task-based learning. By doing so, they can help learners acquire vocabulary that is not only memorized but also understood and applicable in real communication.

Theme 5: Repeated Exposure Through Incidental Learning

The role of repeated exposure in vocabulary acquisition was another critical theme that emerged from the data. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of encountering new words multiple times in different contexts to reinforce learning and aid retention. One participant shared, "*The more I see a word in different places—like in books, conversations, and movies—the better I remember it and understand how to use it*." This theme is supported by the psychological concept of the "spacing effect," which suggests that information is more effectively retained when it is encountered repeatedly over time, rather than through massed, intensive study sessions (Cepeda et al., 2006). In the context of vocabulary learning, repeated exposure allows learners to encounter words in various contexts, each time reinforcing their understanding and usage.

Repeated exposure also facilitates the process of lexical entrenchment, where repeated encounters with a word strengthen its mental representation, making it more easily accessible for retrieval (Schmitt, 2000). This process is crucial for moving vocabulary from passive recognition to active usage, where learners can readily recall and apply words in their communication. The findings from this theme highlight the importance of designing language learning programs that provide learners with repeated exposure to new vocabulary across different contexts. This can be achieved through extensive reading programs, multimedia resources, and interactive learning activities that ensure learners encounter new words frequently and in varied situations.

Research Question 2: Role of Incidental Vocabulary Learning in Enhancing Communication Ability

Theme 1: Enhancing Communication Ability Through Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The analysis revealed that participants widely recognized the positive impact of incidental vocabulary learning on their communication abilities. Learners noted that vocabulary acquired incidentally is more readily available for use in conversations, enabling them to communicate more effectively and fluently. As one participant put it, "*The words I pick up from talking to people or watching TV are the ones I can actually use when I speak. They just come to me naturally."* This theme underscores the dynamic relationship between vocabulary knowledge and communication ability. Incidental learning, by occurring in contexts that mimic real communication, helps learners acquire vocabulary that is not only understood but also functional and ready for use in conversations. This is consistent with the notion of communicative competence, which refers to the ability to use language appropriately in various contexts (Hymes, 1972). Moreover, incidental learning enhances the ability to retrieve and use vocabulary in spontaneous communication, reducing the cognitive load associated with searching for the right words. This was highlighted by several participants who mentioned that words learned incidentally often come to mind more quickly and naturally during conversations. This aligns with the automaticity theory in language learning, which suggests that repeated exposure to language in

meaningful contexts helps learners develop automatic retrieval of linguistic forms (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). The findings from this theme suggest that language educators should focus on creating learning environments that simulate real communication and encourage the use of incidental learning strategies. By doing so, they can help learners develop not only a broad vocabulary but also the ability to use it effectively in communication.

Theme 2: The Influence of Vocabulary Knowledge on the Quality of Communication

A significant theme that emerged from the analysis was the influence of vocabulary knowledge on the quality of communication. Participants consistently noted that having a broader vocabulary, acquired through incidental learning, allows for more precise and effective communication. One respondent shared, "*When I have the right words, I can express myself more clearly and people understand me better.*" This theme highlights the role of vocabulary depth and breadth in communication. A rich vocabulary allows speakers to articulate their thoughts more accurately and convey nuanced meanings, which enhances the clarity and effectiveness of communication. This is particularly important in second language acquisition, where learners often struggle with limited vocabulary, leading to oversimplified or ambiguous expressions. The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and communication quality is well-documented in the literature. Nation (2001) posits that vocabulary knowledge is a key component of communicative competence, enabling learners to participate more fully in conversations and express a wider range of ideas and emotions. The findings from this theme underscore the importance of fostering extensive vocabulary knowledge in language learners to improve their overall communication skills. The implications for language teaching are clear: educators should prioritize vocabulary development as a critical component of language instruction, ensuring that learners have the linguistic resources needed to communicate effectively. This can be achieved through activities that promote incidental learning, such as extensive reading, multimedia exposure, and interactive communication tasks.

Theme 3: Better Perception of the Communication Context in Incidental Learning

Participants frequently emphasized that incidental vocabulary learning enhances their perception and understanding of communication contexts. By learning words in context, learners develop a better sense of when and how to use specific vocabulary, leading to more contextually appropriate communication. One participant noted, "*When I learn words from real conversations or media, I get a feel for when to use them. It's like I understand the situation better.*" This theme is closely related to the concept of pragmatic competence, which refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different social and communicative contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Pragmatic competence involves understanding not just the literal meaning of words, but also their connotations, cultural implications, and appropriate usage in different situations. Incidental learning, by exposing learners to vocabulary

in rich, contextualized environments, helps develop this competence. Learners are not only acquiring words but also gaining insights into how these words function in different communication scenarios. This was reflected in the participants' comments, many of whom highlighted the value of learning vocabulary through natural communication settings. The findings from this theme suggest that language educators should prioritize teaching strategies that promote contextualized learning, such as through role-plays, simulations, and exposure to authentic language materials. By doing so, they can help learners develop a deeper understanding of how to use language effectively in various contexts.

Theme 4: Impact of Incidental Learning on Accurate Use of Words in Interaction

The accuracy of word usage emerged as a significant theme in the analysis, with participants noting that vocabulary learned incidentally tends to be used more accurately in interactions. This was attributed to the contextual learning that accompanies incidental vocabulary acquisition, where learners are exposed to words in specific situations, helping them understand the appropriate usage. As one participant explained, "*When I learn words in a real conversation, I know how to use them correctly because I've seen how they fit into the sentence and the situation.*"

This theme underscores the importance of context in vocabulary acquisition. Contextual learning allows learners to associate words with specific situations, grammatical structures, and collocations, leading to more accurate usage. This is supported by research in second language acquisition, which suggests that context-rich environments facilitate the acquisition of both the form and function of vocabulary (Ellis, 1994). The accurate use of vocabulary is critical for effective communication, as it reduces misunderstandings and enhances the clarity of expression. Participants frequently mentioned that they felt more confident using vocabulary they had learned incidentally because they understood the nuances and connotations of the words. This confidence in using vocabulary accurately is a key component of communicative competence, enabling learners to participate more fully in conversations and express themselves more effectively. The findings from this theme highlight the value of incidental learning in developing accurate and contextually appropriate vocabulary usage. Language educators should emphasize learning activities that expose learners to vocabulary in meaningful contexts, such as through authentic materials and interactive communication tasks. By doing so, they can help learners acquire vocabulary that is not only understood but also used accurately and appropriately in real communication.

Theme 5: Reciprocal Relationship Between Unconscious Vocabulary Learning and Communication

The analysis also revealed a reciprocal relationship between unconscious vocabulary learning and communication. Participants noted that communication settings often facilitate the unconscious

acquisition of vocabulary, which in turn enhances their ability to communicate more effectively. One participant observed, "*When I talk to people, I pick up new words without realizing it. Then, the next time I need to use them, they just come to me naturally*." This theme highlights the dynamic interaction between vocabulary acquisition and communication. Unconscious learning, which often occurs during communication, allows learners to absorb new vocabulary without conscious effort, making it available for use in subsequent interactions. This process is supported by the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which posits that exposure to comprehensible input—language that is slightly above the learner's current proficiency level—facilitates language acquisition.

The reciprocal nature of this relationship suggests that communication not only provides opportunities for vocabulary acquisition but also benefits from the vocabulary learned in these settings. As learners engage in conversations and other communicative activities, they unconsciously acquire new vocabulary, which enhances their communicative competence and ability to participate in future interactions. The findings from this theme suggest that language educators should create learning environments that encourage active communication and exposure to authentic language use. By fostering opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful conversations, educators can facilitate unconscious vocabulary acquisition and enhance learners' overall communication skills.

3. Discussion

The findings from this thematic analysis provide valuable insights into the impact of incidental vocabulary learning on language acquisition, as well as the challenges associated with intentional vocabulary learning. The themes identified in the study highlight the effectiveness of incidental learning in enhancing vocabulary knowledge, retention, and communication ability, while also shedding light on the limitations of traditional intentional learning methods.

Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Knowledge

The analysis revealed that incidental vocabulary learning is highly effective in enhancing vocabulary knowledge, with learners benefiting from the contextualized and meaningful exposure to new words. The themes of unconscious learning, retention, and real-life application all point to the strengths of incidental learning in fostering a deep and durable understanding of vocabulary. These findings are consistent with existing literature on incidental learning, which emphasizes the importance of context, repetition, and meaningful use in vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). The insights from this study suggest that language educators should prioritize incidental learning strategies in their teaching, providing learners with ample opportunities to engage with new vocabulary in authentic and meaningful contexts. This could involve incorporating extensive reading, multimedia resources, and

120

interactive communication activities that expose learners to vocabulary in varied and rich environments.

Enhancing Communication Ability Through Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The study also highlighted the positive impact of incidental vocabulary learning on learners' communication abilities. Participants reported that vocabulary acquired incidentally is more readily available for use in conversations and enhances their ability to communicate effectively and fluently. The themes of context, accuracy, and reciprocal learning underscore the dynamic relationship between vocabulary acquisition and communication, with incidental learning providing the foundation for more natural and effective language use. These findings have important implications for language teaching, suggesting that educators should focus on creating learning environments that simulate real communication and encourage the use of incidental learning strategies. By fostering opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful conversations and other communicative activities, educators can promote the acquisition of vocabulary that is not only understood but also functional and ready for use in real communication.

Challenges in Intentional Vocabulary Learning

The analysis also identified several challenges associated with intentional vocabulary learning, including difficulties in retention, lack of motivation, and the limited application of learned vocabulary. These challenges reflect the cognitive and motivational limitations of traditional vocabulary learning methods, which often rely on rote memorization and decontextualized study. The findings suggest that language educators should seek to address these challenges by adopting more engaging and context-rich vocabulary learning strategies. This could involve integrating vocabulary learning into thematic units, using multimedia resources, and designing activities that encourage the practical application of vocabulary in real-life situations. By doing so, educators can help learners overcome the limitations of intentional learning and develop a more robust and functional vocabulary base.

Implications for Language Teaching and Learning

The findings from this study have important implications for language teaching and learning, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that combines the strengths of both incidental and intentional vocabulary learning. While incidental learning offers significant benefits in terms of retention, understanding, and communication ability, intentional learning can still play a valuable role in providing explicit instruction and focused practice on specific vocabulary items. To maximize the effectiveness of vocabulary learning, educators should consider adopting a hybrid approach that

integrates incidental learning opportunities with intentional learning strategies. This could involve using intentional learning to introduce and practice new vocabulary, followed by opportunities for incidental learning through extensive reading, listening, and interactive communication activities. By combining these approaches, educators can help learners build a deep, durable, and functional vocabulary that supports their overall language proficiency.

4. Conclusion

This thematic analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the impact of incidental vocabulary learning on language acquisition, drawing on the experiences and perceptions of learners. The findings highlight the effectiveness of incidental learning in enhancing vocabulary knowledge, retention, and communication ability, while also revealing the challenges associated with traditional intentional vocabulary learning methods. The themes identified in the study underscore the importance of context, repetition, and meaningful use in vocabulary acquisition, suggesting that language educators should prioritize incidental learning strategies in their teaching. By creating learning environments that simulate real communication and encourage the use of vocabulary in authentic contexts, educators can help learners develop a robust and functional vocabulary that supports their overall language proficiency. At the same time, the study also highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates both incidental and intentional learning strategies. By combining the strengths of these approaches, educators can provide learners with the explicit instruction and focused practice they need, while also fostering the deep, durable learning that comes from meaningful, context-rich language use. Overall, this analysis contributes to the growing body of research on vocabulary acquisition, offering valuable insights for language educators, researchers, and learners. As the field continues to evolve, it is essential to continue exploring the interplay between different learning strategies and their impact on language acquisition, ensuring that learners are equipped with the tools and resources they need to succeed in their language learning journey.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

While this thematic analysis has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning, there are several areas where future research could further expand our understanding. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that track learners' vocabulary retention and application over time. By examining how vocabulary learned incidentally versus intentionally is retained and used in real-life communication months or even years after the initial learning, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effectiveness of different learning strategies. Further research could also explore the impact of different learning environments on vocabulary acquisition. For example, how do traditional classroom settings compare with immersive language environments in terms of facilitating incidental vocabulary learning?

Additionally, studies could investigate how online and digital learning platforms influence vocabulary learning, particularly in terms of providing contextualized, incidental learning opportunities. There is also potential for future studies to employ mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data to explore the nuanced effects of vocabulary learning strategies. For example, researchers could use quantitative measures to assess vocabulary retention and usage, while also conducting in-depth interviews or case studies to explore learners' experiences and perceptions in more detail. Given the increasing use of technology in education, future research could also explore how multimedia resources, language learning apps, and other digital tools can be used to enhance both incidental and intentional vocabulary learning. Studies could investigate which types of technology are most effective in promoting vocabulary retention, context-rich learning, and learner engagement. Finally, future research could involve cross-linguistic comparisons, examining how vocabulary learning strategies and their effectiveness might differ across languages with different structures, such as tonal versus non-tonal languages, or languages with extensive inflectional morphology versus those with more analytic structures.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the significant role that incidental vocabulary learning plays in language acquisition, emphasizing its effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary retention, application, and overall communication ability. There were some challenges associated with intentional vocabulary learning, including issues of retention, motivation, and practical application, further which underscore the need for a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction. By integrating the strengths of both incidental and intentional learning strategies, language educators can create more effective and engaging learning experiences that support learners in developing a robust, functional vocabulary. As the field of language acquisition continues to evolve, it is essential to remain open to new research and methodologies that can further enhance our understanding of how vocabulary is best learned and applied. Through continued exploration and innovation, educators and researchers can work together to refine vocabulary teaching practices, ultimately supporting learners in achieving their language learning goals and improving their communicative competence in meaningful, lasting ways.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

Declaration

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

Ethical Consideration

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

References

Aliakbari, M. (2004). Textbooks should present a certain way of looking at the world. *Educational Research*.

Ausubel, D. P. (1963). The psychology of meaningful verbal learning. *New York: Grune & Stratton.*

Barjesteh, H., Vaseghi, R., & Neissi, S. (2012). The challenges of EFL learners' communicative competence. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*.

Bogaards, P., & Laufer, B. (2004). Vocabulary in a second language: Selection, *acquisition, and testing*. *John Benjamins Publishing.*

Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher, 18*(1), 32-42.

Carter, R. (2004). Vocabulary: Applied linguistic perspectives. Routledge.

Celce-Murcia, M. (2001). Teaching English as a second or foreign language. *Heinle & Heinle.*

Cepeda, N. J., Pashler, H., Vul, E., Wixted, J. T., & Rohrer, D. (2006). Distributed practice in verbal recall tasks: A review and quantitative synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin,* 132(3), 354-380.

Chen, L., & Wang, X. (2022). The impact of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications on vocabulary acquisition. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society,* 25(3), 119-131.

Cook, V. (2009). Fundamental concepts of language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal, 93*(1), 132-149.

Ebbinghaus, H. (1885). Memory: A contribution to experimental psychology (H. A. Ruger & C. E. Bussenius, Trans.). *Teachers College, Columbia University. (Original work published 1885).*

Ellis, N. C. (1994). Implicit and explicit learning of languages. *Academic Press.*

Ellis, N. C. (2002). Frequency effects in language processing: A review with implications for theories of implicit and explicit language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 24*(2), 143-188.

Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2008). Second language acquisition: An introductory course. Routledge.

Ghorbani, M. R. (2009). Iranian high school textbooks and their adequacy for communicative needs. *Asian EFL Journal*.

Gholami, J., et al. (2012). The role of social context in language learning in Iranian EFL textbooks. *Journal of Language and Literature, 20*(2), 85-93.

Hong, H. (2010). Vocabulary acquisition in second language acquisition. *Language Learning Journal, 38*(3), 303-319.

Huang, H., & Yang, L. (2023). Dual coding theory in interactive learning environments. *Educational Psychology Review*.

Hunt, A., & Beglar, D. (2005). A framework for developing EFL reading vocabulary. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 17*(1), 23-59.

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. *Penguin Education*.

Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2002). Pragmatic development in a second language. *Language Learning Monograph Series*.

Keshavarz, M. H., & Astaneh, H. (2004). Vocabulary learning strategies of Iranian EFL learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 14*(3), 309-324.

Khajavi, Y., & Abbasi, M. (2011). Content analysis of Iranian high school English textbooks. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 2*(4), 844-849.

Krashen, S. D. (1985). The input hypothesis: Issues and implications. *Longman.*

Laufer, B. (2009). Second language vocabulary acquisition: From theory to practice. *Cambridge University Press.*

Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics, 22*(1), 1-26.

Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2006). How languages are learned. *Oxford University Press.*

Liu, J., Liu, L., & Wang, Y. (2021). Digital flashcards versus traditional methods in vocabulary retention. *Language Learning & Technology*, 25(2), 120-141.

Maghsudi, M. (2007). Incidental vocabulary learning and retention among Iranian EFL learners. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly,* 9(1), 120-140.

Mayer, R. E. (2005). The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning. Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). Learning vocabulary in another language. Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I. S. P. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(1), 59-82.

Nagy, W. E., & Herman, P. A. (1985). Incidental vs. intentional learning. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 20(2), 233-253.

Park, J., & Kim, S. (2020). Rote learning versus meaning-focused activities in vocabulary acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly,* 54(3), 678-703.

Paivio, A. (1986). Mental representations: A dual coding approach. Oxford University Press.

125

Rahimi, M., & Sahragard, R. (2008). Incidental vocabulary learning in Iranian EFL context. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 11*(1), 145-165.

Reber, A. S. (1993). Implicit learning and tacit knowledge: *An essay on the cognitive unconscious*. Oxford University Press.

Rott, S. (1999). The effect of exposure frequency on intermediate language learners' incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention through reading. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 21*(4), 589-619.

Schmitt, N. (2000). Vocabulary in language teaching. Cambridge University Press.

Schneider, W., & Shiffrin, R. M. (1977). Controlled and automatic human information processing: I. Detection, search, and attention. *Psychological Review, 84*(1), 1-66.

Smith, J., Adams, T., & Jones, L. (2023). The role of spaced repetition in vocabulary retention. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 14*(2), 250-265.

Stahl, S. A. (2005). Four problems with teaching word meanings (and what to do to make vocabulary an integral part of instruction). *The Reading Teacher, 58*(8), 582-593.

Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science, 12*(2), 257-285.

Tulving, E., & Thomson, D. M. (1973). Encoding specificity and retrieval processes in episodic memory. *Psychological Review, 80*(5), 352-373.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. *Harvard University Press.*

Waring, R., & Takaki, M. (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader? *Reading in a Foreign Language, 15*(2), 130-163.

Whitehead, A. N. (1929). The aims of education and other essays. Macmillan.

Zarrinabadi, N., & Abdi, R. (2011). The communicative needs of Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language and Translation, 2*(2), 1-18.

Zhao, Q., Chen, L., & Mei, Y. (2021). Effectiveness of multimedia in vocabulary acquisition. *Educational Technology & Society, 24*(4), 98-109.