

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF VOCABULARY JOURNALS IN EFL LEARNING: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to second and foreign language acquisition. However, developing both vocabulary breadth and depth remains a challenge in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This study examines how vocabulary is conceptualized and taught, explores the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of vocabulary journals, and evaluates their impact on learners' vocabulary acquisition and language development. Using a systematic literature review guided by PRISMA principles, this study synthesizes findings from selected empirical and theoretical studies. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, theoretical alignments, and pedagogical implications. The findings indicate that vocabulary is a multidimensional construct involving both breadth and depth of knowledge. Vocabulary journals are grounded in key theoretical frameworks, including cognitive processing theories, the involvement load hypothesis, the noticing hypothesis, dual coding theory, and self-regulated learning. The results show that vocabulary journals enhance vocabulary acquisition by promoting deeper cognitive engagement, repeated exposure, and learner autonomy. They also contribute to the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. However, variations in journal design and implementation lead to inconsistencies in outcomes, which can affect the overall effectiveness of vocabulary journals in enhancing language skills. This study emphasizes the necessity of effective design and integration of vocabulary journals and calls for further research on their long-term impact.

Keywords: EFL Learning, Learner Autonomy, Systematic Review, Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Journals

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second and foreign language proficiency. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, vocabulary serves as the foundation for developing the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing because learners must possess sufficient lexical knowledge to comprehend and produce meaningful language. However, vocabulary acquisition remains one of the most challenging aspects of language learning. Studies consistently show that limited vocabulary knowledge significantly constrains learners' ability to understand texts and communicate effectively in English (Harselina et al., 2024; Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023).

One of the main challenges in vocabulary learning lies in the complex nature of vocabulary knowledge itself. Vocabulary acquisition involves more than memorizing word meanings; it requires understanding multiple aspects of lexical items, including pronunciation, spelling, grammatical behaviors, collocations, and contextual usage. Scholars have emphasized that vocabulary knowledge includes both *breadth* (the number of words known) and *depth* (the quality of knowledge about those words), both of which are essential for effective language use (Schmitt, 2014; Nation, 2013). In addition, words often carry multiple meanings and subtle semantic variations depending on the context in which they are used, making it difficult for learners to interpret and apply them appropriately (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020). As a result, learners must engage in repeated encounters with vocabulary in meaningful contexts to develop deeper lexical knowledge (Webb & Nation, 2017).

Another challenge faced by EFL learners relates to the irregular relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English. Unlike languages with more consistent phonological systems, English contains numerous inconsistencies between written forms and spoken sounds. Such discrepancies often cause confusion for learners, particularly those whose first languages follow more predictable spelling patterns. Previous studies have indicated that difficulties related to pronunciation and spelling can hinder learners' ability to recognize and produce vocabulary accurately (Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023; Nugraha et al., 2022). These challenges may also affect learners' listening comprehension and overall vocabulary development because inaccurate pronunciation can interfere with the recognition of spoken words (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021).

In addition to linguistic complexity, the vast size of the English lexicon poses another major challenge for language learners. Developing a large vocabulary requires sustained effort and continuous exposure to language input. According to Thornbury (2002), learners need approximately 1,000–2,000 high-frequency words to participate in basic communication and understand everyday texts. More advanced communication may require around 8,000 words, while comprehension of academic texts at the university level may require knowledge of 10,000–20,000 word-families. This substantial lexical demand highlights why vocabulary learning is often considered a long-term and challenging process in EFL contexts. Recent research also confirms that vocabulary size strongly predicts reading comprehension and overall language proficiency among EFL learners (Hidayad et al., 2024; Anam, 2017).

Vocabulary acquisition is influenced by a range of factors related to learners, learning environments, and instructional practices. Learner characteristics such as motivation, memory capacity, prior knowledge, and exposure to the target language play important roles in determining vocabulary development (Andari, 2023). Simultaneously, the instructional strategies employed by educators profoundly influence learners' interaction with new vocabulary. Effective vocabulary instruction encourages learners to process lexical items deeply, connect new words with prior knowledge, and use vocabulary in meaningful contexts (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). Teachers therefore play a critical role in designing learning activities that facilitate vocabulary acquisition and promote active learner engagement (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

One instructional strategy that has gained attention in vocabulary learning is the use of *vocabulary journals*. Vocabulary journals are learning tools that encourage students to systematically record and reflect on newly encountered words by including

information such as definitions, example sentences, synonyms, collocations, and personal notes. This process allows learners to actively process vocabulary rather than passively memorize word lists. Research indicates that strategies incorporating reflection and learner autonomy can markedly improve vocabulary retention and engagement (Ruswandi et al., 2024). Vocabulary journals also encourage learners to interact more frequently with new lexical items, which may support deeper vocabulary learning and long-term retention.

A growing body of research has investigated the use of vocabulary journals in EFL classrooms. Previous studies have reported that vocabulary journals can improve vocabulary mastery, promote learner engagement, and encourage independent vocabulary learning (Purwati, 2022; Nikijuluw, 2020; Ting & Li, 2019; Erniwati et al., 2019; Turnuk, 2018; Nurdini & Marlina, 2017). More recent research also indicates that reflective vocabulary-learning strategies, including vocabulary journals, can facilitate vocabulary acquisition by encouraging learners to actively analyze and contextualize new lexical items (Salfarani et al., 2024). These findings suggest that vocabulary journals may function not only as a learning record but also as a cognitive strategy that supports deeper vocabulary processing.

Despite these promising findings, several limitations remain in existing literature. First, many studies focus primarily on classroom implementation or learning outcomes without thoroughly examining the theoretical foundations underlying the use of vocabulary journals. Consequently, the conceptual connections between vocabulary journals and established theories of vocabulary acquisition, such as the depth of the vocabulary knowledge framework (Schmitt, 2014; Nation, 2013) and the involvement load hypothesis (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001), remain insufficiently explored. Second, empirical studies on vocabulary journals are relatively limited and often conducted in specific educational contexts, making it difficult to generalize their findings across broader EFL settings. Furthermore, many studies emphasize vocabulary retention as the main outcome while paying less attention to the potential influence of vocabulary journals on other language skills, such as reading comprehension and writing development.

These limitations emphasize the necessity of a more comprehensive examination of vocabulary journals from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. A systematic synthesis of existing research can clarify how vocabulary journals align with established frameworks of vocabulary learning and how they contribute to vocabulary development in EFL contexts. Such an analysis can also provide helpful insights to educators seeking effective strategies to support vocabulary learning and promote learner autonomy. Therefore, this paper aims to review and synthesize existing literature on vocabulary conceptualization and vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts, with particular attention to the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of vocabulary journals and their reported impacts on learners' vocabulary acquisition and language skills.

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How is vocabulary conceptualized and taught in EFL contexts according to existing literature?
2. What theoretical and pedagogical foundations underpin the use of vocabulary journals in EFL learning?

3. What impacts do vocabulary journals have on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition and language skills?

METHOD

This study employed a *systematic literature review (SLR)* to synthesize theoretical perspectives, pedagogical practices, and empirical evidence regarding the use of vocabulary journals in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. A systematic review approach was chosen because it allows researchers to collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing research in a transparent and replicable manner. The review followed the reporting standards of the *PRISMA 2020 Statement* to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and reproducibility. The procedures included a structured search strategy, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, systematic study selection, data extraction, and thematic analysis.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases to identify relevant studies addressing the research questions. The databases included *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *ERIC*, and *Google Scholar*, which were selected because they provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in education, applied linguistics, and language learning research.

To ensure a systematic search, combinations of keywords and Boolean operators were used. The search strings were developed based on the main constructs of the study: vocabulary learning, vocabulary journals, and EFL contexts. The primary search string used in the databases was ("vocabulary journal" OR "vocabulary notebook" OR "vocabulary log" OR "lexical journal" OR "word journal") AND ("EFL" OR "ESL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "second language learning") AND ("vocabulary learning" OR "vocabulary acquisition" OR "lexical development").

Additional manual searches were conducted by examining the reference lists of relevant articles to identify studies that might not have been retrieved during the database search. The search was limited to *peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2014 and 2024* to ensure the inclusion of recent and methodologically rigorous research.

The selection of studies was guided by predefined criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the included literature. These criteria ensured that only studies directly relevant to the research questions were included in the review.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for study selection

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses, dissertations, book chapters, conference proceedings
Time frame	2014–2024	Published before 2014
Research focus	Vocabulary journals or related vocabulary-recording strategies in EFL contexts	Studies unrelated to vocabulary journals or not involving EFL learners

Methodology	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) or theoretical studies	Opinion papers without scholarly evidence
Outcomes	Vocabulary acquisition and/or language skills	Studies without explicit learning outcomes
Language	English	Non-English publications

The process of choosing studies followed the four steps laid out in the PRISMA 2020 Statement: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, 72 records were found by searching databases. These included 14 records from Scopus, 6 from Web of Science, 18 from ERIC, and 34 from Google Scholar. In addition to these records, six further records were identified through other sources, resulting in a total of 78 records.

During the screening stage, duplicate records were removed, leaving 72 unique studies for further examination. The titles and abstracts of these studies were then screened to assess their relevance. As a result of this process, 33 records were excluded because they were unrelated to vocabulary journals, did not focus on EFL context, or were not research articles.

In the eligibility stage, 39 full-text articles were assessed in detail. A small number of studies (ranging from zero to five, depending on the final screening decisions) were excluded at this stage for several reasons, including not directly addressing the research questions, lacking empirical evidence, or failing to meet the established publication criteria.

Ultimately, 39 studies were included in the systematic review. These studies were further categorized based on their primary focus. Specifically, 20 studies addressed the conceptualization of vocabulary learning, 10 studies examined the theoretical foundations of vocabulary journals, and 9 studies focused on the empirical effectiveness of vocabulary journals.

To support a systematic and consistent analysis, a structured data extraction form was developed and applied to all included studies. The extracted data were carefully aligned with the research questions. First, general study characteristics were recorded, including the authors, year of publication, country, participants, and research design. Second, information related to vocabulary conceptualization and instruction (RQ1) was collected, such as definitions of vocabulary knowledge, as well as discussions of vocabulary breadth and depth and the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary. Third, data concerning vocabulary journal characteristics (RQ2) were extracted, including their theoretical foundations, instructional procedures, formats, and their connections to learner autonomy or self-regulated learning. Fourth, the analysis captured language skill outcomes (RQ3), particularly vocabulary acquisition and its impact on reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Finally, key findings from each study were documented, focusing on major empirical results and their pedagogical implications.

The extracted data were analyzed using *thematic analysis* following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen because it allows systematic identification and interpretation of recurring patterns across studies. The thematic analysis involved six stages. First, *familiarization with the data*. All selected

studies were read several times to gain an overall understanding of the content and key findings. Second, *generating initial codes*. Relevant segments of information related to vocabulary conceptualization, vocabulary journal practices, and learning outcomes were coded. Codes included categories such as vocabulary breadth, learner autonomy, reflective learning, and vocabulary retention. Third, *searching for themes*. Codes were then grouped into broader themes corresponding to the three research questions. Next, *reviewing themes*. The themes were reviewed to ensure that they accurately represented patterns across the studies and were supported by sufficient evidence. In addition, *defining and naming themes*. Each theme was clearly defined and linked to the theoretical frameworks of vocabulary learning and instructional strategies. Last, *producing the report*. The themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative explaining how vocabulary journals contribute to vocabulary acquisition and language learning in EFL contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents and interprets the findings of the systematic literature review by synthesizing evidence from the selected studies and situating the results within broader theoretical and empirical discussions in vocabulary acquisition research. Rather than merely summarizing individual studies, the analysis identifies patterns, points of convergence and divergence across studies, and their implications for vocabulary learning theory and EFL pedagogy. The findings are organized according to the three research questions.

RQ1: How is vocabulary conceptualized and taught in EFL contexts according to existing literature?

Conceptualizing Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary is widely recognized as a central component of second and foreign language development. Across the reviewed studies, vocabulary is conceptualized not simply as a list of lexical items but as a multidimensional construct involving both breadth and depth of knowledge (Dujardin et al., 2022; Schmitt, 2014). Vocabulary breadth refers to the number of words a learner knows, while vocabulary depth concerns the quality of knowledge associated with those words, including semantic, syntactic, and morphological dimensions (Dagnaw, 2023; Nation, 2022; Zano, 2022).

Recent research continues to affirm this distinction, emphasizing that vocabulary breadth reflects the size of learners' lexical repertoire, while vocabulary depth encompasses a multidimensional understanding of word knowledge, such as meaning relationships, grammatical usage, and word formation (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Sun et al., 2023; Tong & Tong, 2022). Furthermore, vocabulary depth is not limited to form-meaning connections but extends to more complex aspects of language use, including collocational and contextual knowledge, which are essential for effective comprehension and production (Ebadi, 2025; Abbasi et al., 2024).

A consistent pattern across the literature is the recognition that both dimensions are essential for language proficiency, yet studies differ in the emphasis they place on each component. Early vocabulary studies often focused on vocabulary size as the main sign of

lexical competence. For instance, Nation (2022) argues that vocabulary size is a strong predictor of language proficiency because a larger lexicon enables learners to comprehend and produce language more effectively. Similarly, Astan & Tamah (2015) highlight that learners with larger vocabularies are better able to engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks.

However, more recent research increasingly emphasizes depth of vocabulary knowledge, suggesting that learners with similar vocabulary breadth can demonstrate markedly different levels of performance depending on the depth of their lexical knowledge. Depth involves knowledge of word associations, collocations, grammatical behavior, and pragmatic usage reflecting the multidimensional nature of lexical knowledge that extends beyond simple form–meaning relationships (Heidari, 2024; Sun & Nam, 2023).

Studies such as Crespo et al. (2025) Wang (2023) and Dujardin et al. (2022) further demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge includes syntagmatic relationships (how words combine with others in context) and paradigmatic relationships (hierarchical semantic relations such as synonyms and hyponyms). These relationships reflect the organization of lexical knowledge and play an important part in comprehending how words are both used and semantically connected within a language, as they link words through contextual co-occurrence patterns and hierarchical semantic relations within the mental lexicon (Wang, 2023; Hamada, 2011; Shimamoto, 2005).

Overall, these perspectives suggest a growing consensus that effective vocabulary instruction must address both breadth and depth simultaneously, as research indicates that the combined development of these dimensions leads to stronger language outcomes than focusing on either aspect alone (Ebadi, 2025; Zeng et al., 2025; Dagnaw, 2023). This shift reflects a broader theoretical movement in vocabulary studies toward viewing lexical knowledge as a dynamic and interconnected network rather than isolated lexical units, where words are linked through multiple semantic, syntactic, and associative relationships that evolve (Li & Chen, 2025; Tu, 2024; Feng & Liu, 2023; Chen, 2023).

Another recurring finding in the literature concerns the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Receptive vocabulary refers to words that learners recognize and understand during listening or reading, whereas productive vocabulary refers to words they can actively use in speaking or writing (Sonbul et al., 2020; Kim, 2020; Benjamin & Crow, 2017). The studies examined (Malmström et al., 2025; Yilmaz & Kavanoz, 2025; Pan, 2023) consistently demonstrate that receptive vocabulary develops earlier and more swiftly than productive vocabulary, as learners typically gain the capacity to recognize and comprehend words prior to their ability to utilize them actively in speaking or writing. This discrepancy emphasizes the necessity of instructional approaches that move learners beyond passive recognition toward active language use.

Approaches for Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

The literature reveals three dominant instructional approaches to vocabulary learning in EFL contexts: *incidental learning*, *explicit instruction*, and *independent strategy development*. Rather than operating as mutually exclusive approaches, the findings suggest that these methods are most effective when used in complementary ways.

Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Incidental vocabulary learning refers to the acquisition of lexical knowledge as a by-product of meaning-focused activities such as reading or listening (Teng, 2023; Webb, 2020). It is strongly associated with extensive exposure to language input, as learners acquire new words through repeated encounters in meaningful contexts. Research such as (Nie et al., 2022; Peters & Webb, 2018; Bisson et al., 2014) consistently shows that frequency of exposure and contextualized input are key factors facilitating vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Recent research demonstrates that vocabulary acquisition is a gradual, cumulative process in which repeated exposure plays a central role. Studies of (Reynolds (2025), Nation (2024), Lo (2024), Pérez-Serrano et al. (2022) and Tapia et al. (2022) show that multiple encounters with lexical items, often across different contexts and input modalities, are necessary for learners to consolidate form–meaning connections and integrate new words into their mental lexicon. This finding aligns with theories of input-based learning, including the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), Usage-Based Theory (Ellis & Wulff, 2020), the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), and Connectionism/Associative Learning (Ellis, 1998), and supports the argument that rich linguistic input is necessary for vocabulary development.

Nonetheless, the studies indicate a significant limitation: incidental learning alone may be inadequate for vocabulary development, especially in EFL contexts where learners have restricted exposure to English beyond the classroom. While incidental learning contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, it is typically a gradual and incremental process that often results in partial word knowledge. Empirical studies by Reynolds (2025), Shahiwala et al. (2024), and Godfroid et al. (2013) indicate that incidental learning frequently leads to gains in form and meaning recognition rather than full lexical mastery. Deeper aspects of vocabulary knowledge, such as collocational use and semantic nuances, require more focused attention and repeated processing. Consequently, although incidental learning is effective for expanding vocabulary breadth, it may be insufficient for developing deeper, more comprehensive lexical knowledge without additional intentional learning support.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Explicit vocabulary instruction involves direct teaching of word meanings, pronunciation, and usage (Martin-Sanchez, 2019). In contrast to incidental learning, it is deliberate and systematically structured, involving the intentional presentation, explanation, and practice of target words. Research indicates that such instruction facilitates the development of more detailed lexical knowledge, including form–meaning connections, usage, and contextual application, thereby supporting deeper and more comprehensive vocabulary learning (Zeng et al., 2025; Torres & Mera, 2025; Luu, 2025).

The explicit instruction has been shown to significantly enhance reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Empirical studies indicate that learners who receive explicit vocabulary instruction demonstrate greater improvements in reading comprehension than those relying on implicit approaches (Herrera, 2022; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021). Explicit teaching also includes intentionally showing,

explaining, and practicing target words in context, which helps students learn new words more quickly and use them correctly in school (Masrul & Wicaksono, 2023).

Another important pattern is the motivational impact of explicit vocabulary teaching. Studies such as Alzahrani and Alhomyani (2023) and Amirzai (2021) show that learners who understand word meanings are more likely to participate actively in language tasks. Similarly, Aswadi (2024) reports that explicit vocabulary instruction can increase learners' engagement and confidence in using English. Despite its benefits, explicit instruction alone cannot account for the large number of words learners need to acquire. This limitation highlights the importance of combining explicit instruction with other vocabulary learning approaches.

Independent Vocabulary Strategy Development

A third major approach identified in the literature involves training learners to develop independent vocabulary learning strategies. This approach reflects a shift toward learner autonomy and self-regulated learning in language education.

Research consistently emphasizes that successful vocabulary learners actively employ strategies such as contextual inference, dictionary use, morphological analysis, and semantic mapping (Efklides & Schwartz, 2024; Brown & Lee, 2020). These strategies help students keep learning new words even when they aren't in class.

A particularly influential framework in this area is the vocabulary learning strategy taxonomy proposed by Schmitt (1997). He categorizes strategies into *discovery strategies* (used to determine the meaning of new words) and *consolidation strategies* (used to retain and reinforce vocabulary knowledge). Discovery strategies include determination and social strategies, while consolidation strategies include memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies.

Across the reviewed studies (Aghdam et al., 2025; Gordon & Lowry, 2024; Salsabila & Santoso, 2024; Strong, 2023), the consolidation strategies appear particularly important for long-term vocabulary retention. This finding is relevant to the present study because vocabulary journals primarily function as a consolidation strategy, enabling learners to revisit and reinforce newly learned words.

RQ2: What theoretical and pedagogical foundations underpin the use of vocabulary journals in EFL learning?

Literature consistently positions vocabulary journals as a pedagogical tool that supports active engagement with lexical items and facilitates deeper processing of vocabulary knowledge. Rather than functioning as a replacement for vocabulary instruction, vocabulary journals operate as a complementary strategy that reinforces both explicit and incidental learning processes (Turnuk, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, vocabulary journals align closely with vocabulary learning strategy frameworks, particularly Schmitt's consolidation strategies (1997). By encouraging learners to record definitions, examples, and contextual information, vocabulary journals promote memory-based learning processes that strengthen long-term retention.

Vocabulary journals promote multiple encounters with lexical items, which is widely recognized as a crucial condition for vocabulary acquisition. Learners repeatedly revisit words, expand their understanding of them, and connect them to new contexts

(Nikijuluw, 2020; Larson et al., 2013). This process reflects principles of distributed practice and elaborative rehearsal, both of which are known to support durable learning.

Another important theoretical foundation underlying vocabulary journals is *the Dual Coding Theory* of Paivio (2014), which suggests that combining verbal and visual representations enhances memory. Studies such as Erniwati et al. (2019) and Ting and Li (2019) show that incorporating drawings or visual symbols into vocabulary journals strengthens learners' ability to recall word meanings. This finding is consistent with the *cognitive theory of multimedia learning* proposed by Mayer (2024), which emphasizes the benefits of integrating visual and verbal information.

The literature also reveals considerable variation in journal design and implementation, indicating that vocabulary journals are highly adaptable instructional tools. Formats such as the *triple-entry journal* (Nashruddin et al., 2022) and multi-column vocabulary logs (Turnuk, 2018) allow teachers to tailor the activity according to learners' proficiency levels and learning objectives.

Despite these variations, the pattern across studies is consistent: vocabulary journals encourage deeper cognitive engagement with lexical items. Instead of memorizing isolated definitions, learners analyze word meanings, create sentences, and connect words to personal experiences. These processes correspond to the *Involvement Load Hypothesis* proposed by Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), which suggests that vocabulary learning is enhanced when tasks require greater cognitive involvement.

Another significant finding concerns the role of vocabulary journals in promoting learner autonomy. Studies by Chao (2016), Haddad (2016) and Hanifia (2013) show that vocabulary journals encourage students to take responsibility for their own vocabulary development. By documenting and reflecting on their learning, students become more aware of their vocabulary gaps and more motivated to expand their lexical knowledge. This emphasis on learner autonomy aligns with broader theories of *self-regulated learning* (Zimmerman, 1990), which emphasize learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes.

RQ3: What impacts do vocabulary journals have on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition and language skills?

The reviewed studies consistently report positive effects of vocabulary journals on vocabulary acquisition, particularly in terms of vocabulary retention and learner engagement. By providing a structured space for documenting and revisiting words, vocabulary journals encourage repeated interaction with lexical items, which strengthens memory and recall (Ting & Li, 2019; Collins, 2017). A key pattern across the studies is that vocabulary journals support both vocabulary breadth and depth. Recording definitions expands vocabulary size, while activities such as sentence construction and visual representation deepen lexical knowledge (Erniwati et al., 2024).

Another important finding concerns the impact of vocabulary journals on reading comprehension. Numerous studies, such as Bombo et al. (2022) and Al-Khasawneh (2019), highlight the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability. Learners with larger vocabulary can recognize more words during reading, leading to improved comprehension. Vocabulary journals help with this by giving students a place to write down new words they come across while reading (O'Callaghan

& Antonacci, 2012). As a result, journals function as both a vocabulary learning strategy and a reading support tool.

Beyond reading, vocabulary journals also influence other language skills. In writing, for example, the practice of composing sentences with newly learned words helps learners integrate vocabulary into meaningful contexts. This process reflects what researchers describe as the sentence superiority effect, where words embedded in meaningful sentences are remembered more effectively than isolated lexical items (Roverud et al., 2020).

Similarly, vocabulary journals contribute to the development of speaking proficiency by expanding learners' lexical repertoire and increasing their confidence in expressing ideas (Widjaja & Apriliyanti, 2022; Viera, 2017). With a broader vocabulary base, learners can communicate more precisely and fluently.

Listening comprehension is another area influenced by vocabulary journaling. Studies suggest that documenting new words encountered during listening tasks enhances learners' attention to spoken language and supports the development of listening strategies (Gonzalez-Torres & Solano, 2024).

In other words, the evidence suggests that vocabulary journals function as a multifaceted learning tool that supports vocabulary acquisition while simultaneously contributing to broader language development.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how vocabulary is conceptualized in EFL contexts, the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of vocabulary journals, and their impact on learners' vocabulary acquisition and language development. By synthesizing findings across studies, this review moves beyond isolated results to provide an integrated understanding of vocabulary journaling as a pedagogical practice.

A central finding of this review is that vocabulary knowledge is consistently conceptualized as multidimensional, encompassing both breadth and depth. This corresponds with the framework put forth by Nation (2013) and further developed by Schmitt (2014), who contend that comprehension of a word encompasses significantly more than mere recognition of its meaning. Recent research continues to support this multidimensional perspective, emphasizing that vocabulary knowledge includes both the quantity of known words and the quality of lexical understanding (Sun et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2023). The reviewed studies extend this perspective by demonstrating that instructional practices, particularly vocabulary journaling, can operationalize this multidimensionality in classroom settings. Specifically, vocabulary journals provide a structured means for learners to engage with lexical items at multiple levels, including meaning, form, usage, and association (Teng et al., 2024).

The findings also show that there is a conflict in the literature between methods that focus on vocabulary size and those that focus on depth of knowledge. Numerous studies emphasize the significance of broadening vocabulary for comprehension, while others stress the imperative of deeper lexical processing for proficient language use (Webb, 2020; Schmitt, 2014). Vocabulary journals seem to close this gap by helping both sides at the same time. However, the extent to which they do so depends heavily on task design. Journals that focus primarily on listing definitions may contribute mainly to breadth, whereas those incorporating contextualization, sentence construction, and visual

representation are more likely to enhance depth (Reynolds, 2025; Teng et al., 2024). This variation suggests that the effectiveness of vocabulary journals is not inherent in the tool itself but in how it is pedagogically implemented.

Another key insight concerns the role of cognitive engagement in vocabulary learning. The findings strongly support the *Involvement Load Hypothesis* proposed by Jan H. Hulstijn and Batia Laufer (2001), which posits that vocabulary retention is a function of the cognitive effort invested in processing lexical items (Keating, 2008; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Vocabulary journals, when properly designed, require learners to engage in meaning-focused processing, including searching for definitions, evaluating word usage, and integrating new vocabulary into meaningful contexts. This helps explain why journaling is consistently associated with improved retention and recall across studies (Zeng et al., 2025; Teng et al., 2024).

Closely related to this topic is the importance of noticing and repeated exposure, as emphasized in the *Noticing Hypothesis* by Richard Schmidt (1990). The reviewed studies indicate that vocabulary journals facilitate noticing by directing learners' attention to unfamiliar words encountered in input (Godfroid et al., 2013). More importantly, journals create opportunities for recycling vocabulary over time, which is essential for long-term acquisition (Gordon & Lowry, 2024; Webb & Nation, 2017). However, the findings also suggest that not all implementations of vocabulary journals include systematic review processes. This inconsistency may partly explain variations in reported outcomes and calls for more structured integration of recycling activities.

The analysis also points to the significance of multimodal learning in vocabulary acquisition. The incorporation of visual elements in vocabulary journals reflects principles derived from *dual coding theory*, associated with Allan Paivio in the late 1960s. Research incorporating visual representations consistently indicates superior retention outcomes, implying that the integration of verbal and visual processing augments memory (Teng et al., 2024; Mayer, 2021). Nevertheless, not all studies adopt this approach, indicating a gap between theoretical recommendations and classroom practice, particularly in how educators implement visual elements in vocabulary journals despite their proven benefits.

In addition to cognitive factors, the findings highlight the role of vocabulary journals in fostering learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. Drawing on the work of Barry Zimmerman, the reviewed studies suggest that journaling encourages learners to take an active role in their vocabulary development. By documenting, revisiting, and expanding their lexical knowledge, learners engage in self-monitoring and reflective practices (Teng et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 2002). However, the degree to which journals promote self-regulation appears to vary. In some cases, journals are highly structured and teacher-directed, potentially limiting opportunities for autonomous learning, which can hinder the development of self-regulation skills in learners. This points to a need for more balanced approaches that combine guidance with learner independence.

Despite the overall positive findings, several inconsistencies and limitations emerge from the literature. One significant problem is the inconsistency in research design, which encompasses variations in intervention duration, participant characteristics, and assessment methodologies. These variations make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of vocabulary journals. Additionally, many studies

rely on short-term interventions, leaving the long-term impact of journaling largely unexplored (Reynolds, 2025).

Another limitation concerns the lack of focus on deep vocabulary knowledge in empirical measurement. While many studies claim improvements in vocabulary learning, relatively few employ instruments that capture nuanced aspects of lexical knowledge, such as collocational competence or pragmatic usage (Webb, 2020; Schmitt, 2014). This suggests that the reported benefits of vocabulary journals may not fully reflect their potential impact on deeper lexical development.

Overall, this review contributes to the literature by demonstrating that vocabulary journals function as a convergence point of multiple theoretical principles, including cognitive processing, noticing, repetition, and self-regulated learning. However, their effectiveness is contingent upon thoughtful pedagogical design and systematic integration into instruction, which includes aligning journal activities with specific learning objectives and providing ongoing feedback to learners.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that vocabulary journals are a theoretically grounded and pedagogically effective tool in EFL contexts. By bridging incidental and explicit learning, they support both vocabulary breadth and depth while fostering learner autonomy.

However, their effectiveness depends on implementation. Journals that require more thought, systematic recycling, and using more than one mode of representation produce better results than journals that only require simple word recording.

Ultimately, vocabulary journals should not be viewed as an isolated activity but as part of an integrated instructional framework that combines exposure, instruction, and strategy use. When implemented effectively, they contribute not only to vocabulary acquisition but also to the development of proficient, independent language learners.

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