

## The Impact of Focused vs. Unfocused Tasks on EFL Learners' Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Development

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study investigated the effects of post-listening vocabulary-focused and vocabulary-unfocused tasks on the receptive and productive vocabulary development of Iranian EFL learners.

**Methods:** A total of 90 Iranian EFL students from two language institutes in Iranshahr participated in the study. After taking a general English proficiency test to ensure group homogeneity, participants were randomly assigned to either a vocabulary-focused post-listening group or a vocabulary-unfocused post-listening group. Receptive and productive vocabulary tests were administered as pretests and posttests. The focused group completed post-listening activities that explicitly highlighted and practiced target vocabulary from the listening texts, whereas the unfocused group engaged in general post-listening tasks such as brainstorming and fill-in-the-blank activities without explicit vocabulary emphasis.

**Results:** Both groups showed improvement in receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge; however, the vocabulary-focused post-listening group demonstrated significantly greater gains than the vocabulary-unfocused group.

**Conclusions:** Explicit vocabulary-focused post-listening tasks are more effective than unfocused post-listening activities in promoting both receptive and productive vocabulary development among Iranian EFL learners. Integrating targeted vocabulary practice into post-listening instruction can enhance vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts.

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## Introduction

The challenges associated with vocabulary acquisition extend beyond mere memorization; they encompass a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between linguistic elements and contextual usage. As posited by scholars in the field, including Nation (2006) and Richards (1976), achieving fluency necessitates not only the accumulation of lexical knowledge but also the ability to navigate the nuances of meaning, usage, and association embedded within each word. Furthermore, the evolving landscape of language acquisition research continues to shed light on the dynamic nature of vocabulary acquisition. Emerging studies, such as those by Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), provide invaluable insights into the cognitive processes underlying lexical acquisition, further enriching our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

In essence, while the journey towards vocabulary mastery may be fraught with challenges, it is also imbued with endless opportunities for growth and discovery. By embracing the multidimensional nature of lexical learning and remaining receptive to new insights and methodologies, language learners can navigate the linguistic landscape with confidence and proficiency.

In light of the imperative requirement for learners to possess a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of lexical items, it is only natural to perceive the process of vocabulary acquisition as an intricate continuum, as highlighted by Meara and Miralpeix (2021). This continuum typically initiates with the acquisition of receptive knowledge before progressing towards productive mastery, a concept elucidated by Schmitt (2010). Receptive vocabulary entails the recognition and recall of meanings, whereas productive vocabulary entails an additional layer of complexity, involving the recognition and recall of linguistic forms.

As such, it is not uncommon for vocabulary knowledge to remain partial throughout the process of foreign language acquisition, as elucidated by Meara and Miralpeix (2021), Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), and Webb (2009). Language learners may exhibit proficiency in comprehending words when encountered in oral or written contexts, yet struggle with their oral and written production. This dichotomy underscores the dynamic nature of vocabulary acquisition, wherein mastery of receptive skills may precede the development of productive competencies. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that receptive knowledge tends to outweigh productive knowledge, a phenomenon substantiated by studies such as those by Webb (2009), Waring (1997), and Griffin

(1992). The relative ease and expediency associated with acquiring receptive skills contribute to this asymmetry, as noted by Waring (1997) and Griffin (1992). This observation underscores the nuanced interplay between receptive and productive competencies within the realm of second or foreign language (L2) learning.

Indeed, the existence of a learning continuum has been corroborated by numerous studies conducted in the field, including those by Ellis and Beaton (1993), Laufer (2005), and Shintani (2011). These studies have consistently reported higher levels of proficiency in receptive vocabulary tests compared to productive assessments, indicative of learners' partial grasp of lexical items during the nascent stages of L2 acquisition. This body of research underscores the developmental trajectory of vocabulary acquisition, wherein learner traverse from receptive understanding to productive application, with varying degrees of proficiency observed along the continuum.

The expansiveness of vocabulary comprehension is of such magnitude that achieving a definitive and comprehensive understanding of a word can pose considerable challenges. As articulated by Read (2000), delving into the intricacies of vocabulary knowledge necessitates addressing several key facets. These include inquiries into the fundamental nature of a word, whether vocabulary encompasses solely individual lexical units or extends to encompass larger linguistic constructs, the essence of comprehending a word or an item, and the methodologies employed in assessing vocabulary proficiency.

In a broader context, Cameron (2001) contended that gaining insight into a word entails an exploration of its multifaceted dimensions. This encompasses an understanding of its phonological attributes, encompassing considerations of its auditory qualities and orthographic representation, as well as an examination of the morphological intricacies, encompassing analyses of the grammatical modifications it can undergo. Furthermore, it entails an exploration of its semantic dimensions, encompassing an elucidation of its conceptual significance and its interconnectedness with other linguistic entities and conceptual frameworks. Finally, it involves an investigation into its pragmatic utilization, encompassing an examination of its contextual occurrences and collocational patterns within discourse.

By scrutinizing these various dimensions, language scholars and educators gain a more nuanced comprehension of vocabulary knowledge, enabling them to devise more effective pedagogical

strategies and assessment methodologies. This holistic approach to understanding vocabulary underscores its dynamic and multifaceted nature, affirming its centrality in language acquisition and proficiency. In a similar vein, Hatch and Brown (1995) delineated a series of five pivotal stages integral to the process of vocabulary acquisition, drawing upon empirical research on learner strategies. These stages encompass the necessity of accessing ample resources to encounter novel lexical items, forming a vivid mental representation of the new linguistic forms, grasping their semantic connotations, establishing mnemonic connections between form and meaning, and ultimately integrating these words into communicative contexts.

Moreover, Read (2000) posited that the quantity of words apprehended and comprehended far exceeds the tally of words actually employed in verbal or written discourse. Consequently, he underscores the delineation between receptive and productive vocabulary, delineating the distinction between words recognized and those effectively utilized in communicative settings. This dichotomy accentuates the nuanced interplay between passive recognition and active application of lexical knowledge. Harmer (1991) also distinguished between receptive and productive vocabulary, characterizing the former as encompassing words that learners can identify upon encountering them, albeit without the ability to spontaneously produce them. This differentiation assumes significance, as it aligns with the conceptual framework of vocabulary knowledge adopted in this study, which emphasizes receptive familiarity with lexical items.

By elucidating these nuanced distinctions and stages in the vocabulary learning process, scholars and educators gain deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of lexical acquisition, thereby informing more effective instructional practices tailored to learners' diverse needs and competencies. Accordingly, this study was interested in examining the impacts of two types of (post-listening) tasks, i.e., focused vs. unfocused tasks on receptive and productive vocabulary development of EFL learners. Based on this purpose, the following research questions were posed: RQ1. Do vocabulary-focused activities have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' receptive vocabulary development ?

RQ2. Do vocabulary-focused activities have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' productive vocabulary development ?

RQ3. Do vocabulary-unfocused activities have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' receptive vocabulary development?

RQ4. Do vocabulary-unfocused activities have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' productive vocabulary development?

RQ5. Is there a difference between the effectiveness of vocabulary-focused and unfocused tasks on receptive and productive vocabulary development?

## Literature Review

### *Receptive vs. Productive Vocabulary*

The acquisition of vocabulary in a second or foreign language is widely recognized as a multifaceted process that extends beyond simple memorization. Scholars such as Nation (2013) and Richards (1976) have posited that achieving fluency necessitates not only the accumulation of lexical knowledge but also the ability to navigate the nuances of meaning, usage, and association embedded within each word. This intricate interplay between linguistic elements and contextual usage is further illuminated by emerging studies, including those by Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), which provide invaluable insights into the cognitive processes underlying lexical acquisition. Consequently, embracing the multidimensional nature of lexical learning is essential for language learners to navigate the linguistic landscape with confidence and proficiency.

A central tenet in the literature is the conceptual distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. According to Schmitt (2010), vocabulary acquisition typically initiates with the acquisition of receptive knowledge before progressing towards productive mastery, forming an intricate continuum. Receptive vocabulary entails the recognition and recall of meanings when words are encountered in oral or written contexts, whereas productive vocabulary entails an additional layer of complexity, involving the recognition and recall of linguistic forms for active use. Harmer (1991) distinguished between these two types by characterizing receptive vocabulary as encompassing words that learners can identify upon encountering them, albeit without the ability to spontaneously produce them. Similarly, Read (2000) underscored this delineation by noting that the quantity of words apprehended and comprehended far exceeds the tally of words actually employed in verbal or written discourse, emphasizing the distinction between passive recognition and active application of lexical knowledge.

The literature further indicates that receptive knowledge tends to outweigh productive knowledge, a phenomenon substantiated by empirical studies such as those by Webb (2009), Waring (1997), and Griffin (1992). The relative ease and expediency associated with acquiring receptive skills

contribute to this asymmetry, and it is not uncommon for vocabulary knowledge to remain partial throughout the process of foreign language acquisition. As elucidated by Meara and Miralpeix (2021), language learners may exhibit proficiency in comprehending words when encountered in context yet struggle with their oral and written production. This dichotomy underscores the dynamic nature of vocabulary acquisition, wherein mastery of receptive skills may precede the development of productive competencies. The existence of this learning continuum has been corroborated by numerous studies, including those by Ellis and Beaton (1993), Laufer (2005), and Shintani (2011), which have consistently reported higher levels of proficiency in receptive vocabulary tests compared to productive assessments, indicative of learners' partial grasp of lexical items during the nascent stages of L2 acquisition.

To fully comprehend the nature of vocabulary knowledge, scholars have explored its various dimensions. Cameron (2001) contended that gaining insight into a word entails an exploration of its phonological attributes, morphological intricacies, semantic dimensions, and pragmatic utilization within discourse. In a similar vein, Hatch and Brown (1995) delineated five pivotal stages integral to vocabulary acquisition: accessing ample resources to encounter novel lexical items, forming a vivid mental representation of new linguistic forms, grasping their semantic connotations, establishing mnemonic connections between form and meaning, and ultimately integrating these words into communicative contexts. This holistic approach underscores the centrality of vocabulary in language acquisition and proficiency, affirming its dynamic and multifaceted nature. Accordingly, the literature calls for pedagogical strategies and assessment methodologies that address both receptive and productive competencies, recognizing the nuanced interplay between passive recognition and active use of lexical knowledge.

### **Focused vs. Unfocused Tasks**

The conceptual foundation for task-based learning (TBL) was first introduced by Prabhu (1987) as a learner-centered approach to language instruction. Within this framework, Richards and Schmidt (2010) note that the learner-centered approach places the student at the center of all stages of language learning, including planning, assessment, and the learning process itself. Emphasizing the importance of TBL, Ellis (2003) claims that it encourages students to socialize, work collaboratively in groups, and assists in solving social problems. As argued by Prabhu (1987), a language task is an activity that requires a student to achieve a result by processing and reflecting

on certain information, allowing the teacher to control and influence the learning process. Bhandari (2020) considers task-based language teaching to be one of the most widely discussed teaching approaches at present, noting that although English language teachers hold positive attitudes towards TBL as a contemporary EFL approach, they are not sufficiently aware of the methods for implementing this approach in their classrooms.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), task-based language teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (p. 223). Nunan (2004) believes that the task is an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching, and learner assessment (p. 1). Ellis (2003) maintains that tasks hold a central place in current second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy (p. 1). Willis (1996) defines tasks as activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome (p. 23). Richards and Rodgers (2001) offer several assumptions underlying TBLT, including that language is primarily a means of making meaning, that multiple models of language inform task-based learning, that lexical units are central in language use and learning, and that conversation is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition. Ellis (2003) further specifies six criterial features of tasks: a task is a work plan, involves a primary focus on meaning, involves real-world processes of language use, can involve any of the four language skills, engages cognitive processes, and has a clearly defined outcome.

A fundamental distinction in task-based pedagogy is that between focused and unfocused tasks. Ellis (2003) noted that unfocused tasks may predispose learners to choose from a range of forms but are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. In contrast, focused tasks are specifically aimed to predispose learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, such as a grammatical structure (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). Focused tasks thus have two aims: first, to focus on communicative language use, and second, to target the use of a particular, predetermined linguistic feature. Ellis (2003) claims that there are two primary ways in which a task can achieve such a focus. The first is to design the task so that it can only be performed if learners use particular linguistic features. The second way is by making language itself the content of a task, as in consciousness-raising tasks. Regarding the latter, Ellis (2003) notes that the 'taskness' of a consciousness-raising task lies not in the linguistic point that is the focus but rather in the task learners must engage in to achieve an outcome.



Regarding the design of focused tasks, Ellis (2003) identifies three principal approaches: structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and consciousness-raising tasks. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) distinguish three ways a task can incorporate a specific target language feature: task-naturalness, where the target structure may not be necessary but is naturally assumed to be used; task utility, where the target structure is useful but not essential; and task-essentialness, where learners must utilize the specific feature to complete the task because the feature becomes the essence of the task. Comprehension tasks, which Ellis (2003) suggests may be more successful in eliciting attention to a targeted feature than production-based tasks, include input enrichment—designing tasks so the targeted feature is frequent and salient in the input—and input-processing instruction, a term coined by Van Patten (1996) that aims to alter learners' processing strategies to encourage better form-meaning connections through explanation, information about processing strategies, and structured-input activities.

In unfocused tasks, learners use the language freely, and no particular grammatical form is needed to complete the task. As exemplified by a simple storytelling task where a learner narrates a story based on picture prompts, unfocused tasks are not designed with the purpose of eliciting specific grammatical features in the learners' output. Both focused and unfocused tasks provide L2 learners with opportunities to use the target language in a meaningful context, but only focused tasks are designed to elicit specific linguistic features. However, research has shown that learners do not always focus on the linguistic features targeted by the teacher or researcher, that some linguistic features are easier to elicit than others, and that using a target form while completing a communication-focused task does not guarantee that the target form will be learned. Despite these challenges, numerous studies have demonstrated that both focused and unfocused tasks trigger the use of language-related episodes (Swain, 1998), where learners focus on the language they are using without teacher intervention, thereby helping to draw learners' attention to form while completing communicative tasks.

Empirical research has provided valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of different task types. Mediha and Enisa (2014) conducted a study with ninth-grade students and found that integration of literature into lessons had a positive effect on improving learners' vocabulary knowledge, indicating the value of rich contextual input. Çetinavci (2013) investigated contextual factors in guessing word meaning and found that unknown words in a rich context were guessed



more successfully than those presented in a poor context. Lu and Huang (2009) tested vocabulary learning in listening comprehension tasks, demonstrating that tasks requiring deeper processing, such as writing a short article with target words, produced higher involvement loads and better retention. Kim (2011) carried out two experiments examining the Involvement Load Hypothesis, finding that composition groups outperformed fill-in and reading groups in both immediate and delayed posttests. Van Zeeland (2013) compared decontextual and contextual vocabulary knowledge, revealing a considerable gap between the two and emphasizing that scores on decontextualized vocabulary tests should not be used as predictors of learners' vocabulary knowledge in context. Candry et al. (2017) compared increased attention to form versus meaning conditions, demonstrating that a word-writing condition developed both form recall and meaning recall to a greater extent than a meaning-inferencing condition. Finally, Nasrollahy Shahry (2010) examined reading comprehension and sentence-writing tasks across two proficiency levels, finding an advantage for lower-proficiency learners in the writing condition over the reading group, consistent with the Involvement Load Hypothesis, though no significant differences were observed for the high-proficiency group.

## Material and Methods

### *Participants*

In the present study, 90 Iranian EFL students in two language institutes in Iranshahr, Sistan and Baluchistan, Iran were recruited. They were both male ( $n= 30$ ) and female ( $n= 60$ ) language learners and their age ranged from 15 to 19 years old ( $m= 17.2$ ). Their mother tongue is Baluchi. They came to the English class for two sessions in a week and stayed for one-hour and a half.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *English Language Proficiency test*

For the purpose of testing the participants' English language proficiency, a standardized form the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) was used. The CPE is designed for the intermediate level students according to the classifications of proficiency levels by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. The test includes different target language situations that address a wide range of skills involved. There are 28 questions in the test which are divided by four different parts covering a variety of different text types. These task types

are; multiple choice, sentence completion, and three-way matching. At the beginning of each part, the test gives time for the participants to have a look at the questions and each piece of text is played twice. The test was used as the pretest in the present study. The test was distributed among 167 students in the language institutes. They were given 50 minutes to complete the test and return them to the researcher. After completing the test, the researcher examined the papers and those students who were identified as intermediate language learners were recruited .

### ***The Vocabulary Size Test for Receptive Vocabulary***

An adapted version of Nation's vocabulary size test (VST) (2010) (downloadable from <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>) in a bilingual form was utilized to measure the receptive vocabulary size of learners. The test was originally developed to provide a reliable and comprehensive measure of a learner's vocabulary size by selecting word items at each band from the 1st to the 14th 1000 word families, which is based on the development of the fourteen 1,000 BNC word lists. In effect, each word would represent a sample of 100 words at each level, and thus learners' scores are multiplied by 100 to roughly estimate their total vocabulary size. Two versions of this test was used as the pretest and posttest in the present study. The students had 45 minutes to complete the test before starting the study and the same time to take the test again at the end of the study.

### ***The Vocabulary Levels Test for Productive Vocabulary***

The decision for the type of productive vocabulary test to be used was based on Laufer and Nation's (1999) productive vocabulary levels test, which is thus far one of the well-known tests for measuring controlled productive vocabulary size. The test assesses the learners' vocabulary size at 2000, 3000, 5000, University Word List, and 10,000 word levels by presenting 18 items at each level in the form of C-tests by providing 2-4 initial letters of the target word. The items involve the learners' ability to produce target words to express an intended meaning. This test was also used as the pretest and posttest in the present study. The students were asked to complete the test in 30 minutes.

### ***Procedure***

Before starting the study, the researcher used an English Placement test to homogenize learners regarding their levels of language proficiencies. After that, the participants took part in receptive

and productive vocabulary tests as the pretest. Then, they were randomly assigned to two groups which are described below:

### **1 .Focused Post-listening activities group**

In this group, the participants took part in different post-listening tasks. Post-listening tasks were the exercises that each student had to do after listening to a listening track. The tasks were designed by the researcher to represent the listening activities following a listening episode. In this group, those vocabularies which are used in the follow-up listening activity were highlighted and used in the focused post-listening tasks. In addition, the definitions of some important vocabularies were given at the side to the tasks. The participants were given time to listen and do the activities and provide the responses to the teacher. The tasks were focused on those activities which provided the most important words in the Nation word list.

### **2.Unfocused Post-listening activities group.**

In this group, the participants were given several tasks such as brainstorming, fill in the blanks, etc. designed by the researcher. The tasks were related to the topic of previous listening activities. However, they were not focused on special vocabularies. There were general vocabularies used to prepare students for the post-listening listening activities. The post-listening tasks were of various forms including noting down the vocabularies, writing sentences, etc. The students were asked to answer to these exercises and no special attention was paid to the

After the end of the study, the participants took the receptive and productive vocabulary tests again.

## **Results**

This section summarizes and presents the findings of the study, and the research questions are answered. First, the descriptive indices indicating the results of receptive and productive vocabulary tests of the focused and unfocused task groups are presented. Then the results of normality test are shown in a separate table. Finally, the results of inferential statistical tests run to test the null hypotheses are presented and explained.

**Table 1.** The descriptive indices of the receptive and productive vocabulary test scores

|            |          | Group     | M     | SD   | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|------------|----------|-----------|-------|------|----------|----------|
| Receptive  | Pretest  | Focused   | 23.73 | 6.61 | -.16     | -1.16    |
|            |          | Unfocused | 23.84 | 4.40 | .12      | .06      |
|            | Posttest | Focused   | 88.80 | 6.50 | .03      | -1.23    |
|            |          | Unfocused | 58.53 | 6.79 | -.01     | -1.12    |
| Productive | Pretest  | Focused   | 23.80 | 6.50 | .03      | 1.23     |
|            |          | Unfocused | 22.71 | 6.44 | -.04     | 1.21     |
|            | Posttest | Focused   | 88.76 | 6.57 | .00      | -1.96    |
|            |          | Unfocused | 58.51 | 6.71 | -.03     | -1.25    |

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values, for the receptive and productive vocabulary test scores of both the focused and unfocused task groups across the pretest and posttest phases. As displayed in the table, the mean scores of the focused and unfocused groups on the receptive vocabulary pretest were closely comparable ( $M = 23.73$  and  $M = 23.84$ , respectively). Similarly, the productive vocabulary pretest means showed negligible differences between the two groups ( $M = 23.80$  for the focused group and  $M = 22.71$  for the unfocused group). However, on the posttest, the focused group substantially outperformed the unfocused group in both receptive ( $M = 88.80$  vs.  $M = 58.53$ ) and productive vocabulary ( $M = 88.76$  vs.  $M = 58.51$ ). The skewness and kurtosis values for all measures fell within acceptable ranges, suggesting that the data approximated a normal distribution.

**Table 2.** Test of normality for the receptive and productive vocabulary test scores

| Variables  |          | Group     | Kolmogorov-Smirnov |    |      | Shapiro-Wilk |    |     |
|------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|----|------|--------------|----|-----|
|            |          |           | Statistics         | df | p    | Statistics   | df | p   |
| Receptive  | Pretest  | Focused   | .07                | 45 | .20* | .95          | 45 | .11 |
|            |          | Unfocused | .08                | 45 | .20* | .94          | 45 | .03 |
|            | Posttest | Focused   | .08                | 45 | .20* | .94          | 45 | .03 |
|            |          | Unfocused | .07                | 45 | .20* | .95          | 45 | .07 |
| Productive | Pretest  | Focused   | .08                | 45 | .20* | .94          | 45 | .03 |
|            |          | Unfocused | .08                | 45 | .20* | .95          | 45 | .06 |
|            | Posttest | Focused   | .08                | 45 | .20* | .95          | 45 | .05 |
|            |          | Unfocused | .08                | 45 | .20* | .94          | 45 | .04 |

Table 2 summarizes the results of the normality tests, specifically the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk statistics, for the receptive and productive vocabulary test scores. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics for all pretest and posttest measures across both the focused and unfocused groups ranged from .07 to .08, all with non-significant p-values ( $p = .20^*$ ), indicating that the assumption of normality was not violated. The Shapiro-Wilk test results further supported this

conclusion, as most p-values exceeded the conventional threshold of .05, with only a few minor exceptions (e.g., receptive pretest unfocused group,  $p = .03$ ). Overall, the findings from Table 4.2 justify the use of parametric statistical tests for subsequent analyses.

**Table 3.** Paired samples t-test for the receptive and productive vocabulary test scores

| Variables  | Group     | Paired samples t-test |    |     |
|------------|-----------|-----------------------|----|-----|
|            |           | t                     | df | p   |
| Receptive  | Focused   | 321.51                | 44 | .00 |
|            | Unfocused | 254.15                | 44 | .00 |
| Productive | Focused   | 436.17                | 44 | .00 |
|            | Unfocused | 317.43                | 44 | .00 |

Table 3 reports the outcomes of paired samples t-tests conducted to examine within-group differences in receptive and productive vocabulary development from pretest to posttest. For the focused task group, the results revealed a statistically significant improvement in receptive vocabulary,  $t(44) = 321.51$ ,  $p = .00$ , as well as in productive vocabulary,  $t(44) = 436.17$ ,  $p = .00$ . Similarly, the unfocused task group demonstrated significant gains in both receptive vocabulary,  $t(44) = 254.15$ ,  $p = .00$ , and productive vocabulary,  $t(44) = 317.43$ ,  $p = .00$ . These findings indicate that both instructional conditions led to significant vocabulary development over the course of the intervention.

**Table 4.** Independent samples t-test for focused and unfocused test scores

|            | Group     | N  | M     | SD   | F   | p   | t     | df  | p   |
|------------|-----------|----|-------|------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-----|
| Vocabulary | Focused   | 90 | 88.78 | 6.49 | .24 | .62 | 30.65 | 178 | .00 |
|            | Unfocused | 90 | 58.52 | 6.74 |     |     |       |     |     |

Table 4 presents the results of an independent samples t-test comparing the posttest vocabulary scores of the focused and unfocused task groups. The focused group ( $M = 88.78$ ,  $SD = 6.49$ ) and the unfocused group ( $M = 58.52$ ,  $SD = 6.74$ ) showed a statistically significant mean difference,  $t(178) = 30.65$ ,  $p = .00$ . The Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant ( $F = .24$ ,  $p = .62$ ), confirming that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. These results provide strong evidence that vocabulary-focused tasks were significantly more effective than vocabulary-unfocused tasks in promoting overall vocabulary development among the EFL learners.

## Discussion

Having analyzed the data, it was evident that the group which received vocabulary-focused tasks (either in receptive or productive mode) outperformed the group which received vocabulary-unfocused tasks. In other words, vocabulary-focused tasks are more effective in vocabulary development than vocabulary-unfocused tasks. The findings in this study are in line with those of Laufer and Shmueli's (1997) who found that explicit vocabulary instruction significantly improves vocabulary retention compared to incidental learning methods. Their research demonstrated that focused tasks like word list memorization, gap-filling exercises, and translation practices lead to better vocabulary acquisition because they require active engagement with the target words.

Moreover, the findings of this study are supported by a similar study which demonstrated that post-reading vocabulary-focused activities, such as summarizing texts using target vocabulary and sentence completion exercises, are more effective for vocabulary retention than comprehension-focused activities. The research emphasizes that these tasks help learners process and recall words more effectively (Laufer, 2003). In the same way, Nation (2007) proposed a balanced approach to vocabulary learning, emphasizing the importance of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Vocabulary-focused tasks align with language-focused learning and have been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition by providing repeated and varied exposure to new words.

In addition, studies by Macis (2018) showed that integrating vocabulary instruction into reading activities, where learners are required to use new vocabulary in context, leads to significant improvements in vocabulary knowledge. These findings suggest that tasks requiring active manipulation of vocabulary in meaningful contexts are particularly effective.

The present research study has a number of implications for language instructors and teaching practitioners. Below are some of them:

1. TEFL instructors should incorporate explicit vocabulary instruction into their lesson plans. This could include activities such as direct teaching of word meanings, use of word lists, and practice with word cards. Emphasizing vocabulary teaching explicitly can significantly improve learners' retention and recall of new words.
2. After reading activities, teachers should integrate vocabulary-focused tasks like summarizing texts using new vocabulary, sentence completion exercises, and creating context-rich sentences

with target words. These activities help reinforce vocabulary acquisition by ensuring that learners actively engage with the new words.

3. ESL instructors should design lessons that prioritize vocabulary-centric activities such as word mapping, semantic mapping, and vocabulary journals. These activities require students to engage deeply with new words, promoting better retention and understanding.

4. Frequent and focused vocabulary assessments can help track student progress and identify areas that need reinforcement. This not only ensures that students are retaining new vocabulary but also keeps them motivated to learn.

5. Encourage students to actively use new vocabulary in speaking and writing. Activities like group discussions, presentations, and writing assignments that require the use of target vocabulary can significantly enhance word retention and usage skills.

6. Embedding new vocabulary in meaningful and relevant contexts can enhance learning. This approach helps students understand how words are used in real-life situations, improving both retention and practical application.

In addition, the following suggestions are made to investigate other aspects of vocabulary teaching through listening tasks:

1. Investigations can be made in how different types of pre-listening tasks (e.g., vocabulary previews, discussion prompts, context-setting activities) influence the acquisition and retention of new vocabulary.

2. Research can be done to explore how combining auditory input with visual aids (e.g., images, videos, subtitles) affects learners' receptive and productive vocabulary growth compared to audio-only listening tasks.

3. A research study can be carried out to examine the differences in vocabulary development outcomes between synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) listening activities, focusing on both receptive and productive vocabulary.

4. A study can be conducted to assess how varying the difficulty and complexity of listening tasks impacts vocabulary learning, particularly examining whether more challenging tasks lead to greater vocabulary gains.



5. Researchers can conduct a long-term study to determine how the use of different listening strategies (e.g., note-taking, summarizing, predicting content) affects the retention of new vocabulary over time.
6. A research study can be carried out to investigate how incorporating culturally relevant and contextually rich listening materials affects learners' ability to acquire and use new vocabulary compared to culturally neutral materials.

### Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

### Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

### Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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