

Exploring the Vocabulary Knowledge of EFL Teachers in Saudi Public Schools

Faisal Al-Homoud¹

¹ Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Faisal Al-Homoud, Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: f.alhomoud@mu.edu.sa

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Abstract

The present study investigated the nature of the vocabulary levels of male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools and identified the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge between male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools. The study adopted a quantitative approach and collected the data through an online version of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge tests. The findings revealed that male and female EFL teachers had low levels of vocabulary knowledge. Further, the findings revealed that EFL teachers at Saudi schools typically possess higher receptive vocabulary levels than productive vocabulary. The findings also indicate that gender substantially influences the vocabulary knowledge of EFL teachers. Finally, the study provides several implications and recommendations for further studies.

Keywords: Saudi EFL teachers, Vocabulary Knowledge, receptive and productive vocabulary levels

1. Introduction

The main factor influencing understanding, fluency, and achievement is vocabulary (Bromley, 2007). It seems that vocabulary is an essential part of knowledge for language production (Schmitt, Dunn, O'Sullivan, Anthony, and Kermmel, 2021). One aspect of the new academic research is vocabulary, which has created principled and systematic methods for characterizing and measuring vocabulary knowledge (Milton, 2013). Further, Elyas and Alfaki (2014) reported that English language teaching revolves around vocabulary since pupils cannot comprehend or communicate their thoughts without it. Wilkins (1972:111) supported that by stating, "While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed."

Learning new words is crucial for improving one's communication skills, and the lack of vocabulary makes it difficult for learners to explain themselves clearly, preventing them from getting over their actual message (Altalhab, 2019; Barani, Mazandarani, & Rezaie, 2010). In addition, thousands of words must be known to learn a foreign or second language to intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. Therefore, teachers and students are interested in learning how instructional programs could encourage learning a large number of vocabulary (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001).

According to Nation (1990), vocabulary knowledge is understanding words used in speech and writing, including their meaning, syntax, frequency of use, collocation, suitability, concept, and reference to other words. Schmitt (2014) concluded that lexical organization and proficiency in receptive and productive abilities and fluency constitute vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is a criterion of competence in writing, reading, listening, and speaking. (Altalhab, 2019; Barani et al.; Bromley, 2007; Milton, 2013).

Dakhi and Fitria (2019) reported uncertainty regarding vocabulary value, its types, selection criteria, size, depth, and teaching techniques were observed. However, teachers also know that struggling middle school students' inadequate vocabulary and general knowledge is one of their issues (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002). An extensive vocabulary seems to aid foreign and second-language instructors in teaching English. In addition, teachers with an extensive vocabulary may be able to adopt a new vocabulary teaching style (Bromley, 2007). Nonetheless, Al-deaif (2020) states that there is a considerable gap in the studies of EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge, as all other studies have been conducted on students. Hence, motivated by the value of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge for teachers and the gap in previous research, the current study aims to explore the vocabulary levels of male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools in addition to identifying the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge between male and female EFL teachers in Saudi public schools.

2. Literature Review

Nation (2001) combined form (pronunciation, spelling, and the words), meaning (structure or meaning of words, concepts, and preferences, a combination of words), and use (syntax, collocation, constraints in use) to determine the formation of vocabulary knowledge in a broader perspective. Learning new vocabulary is crucial for improving one's communication skills, and communication is difficult without vocabulary. In addition, a lack of vocabulary makes it difficult for learners to explain themselves clearly, preventing them

from getting over their actual message (Altalhab, 2019; Barani et al., 2010). Furthermore, Pearson, Hiebert, and Kamil (2007) reported that one must first explore how vocabulary knowledge and growth are measured to understand better how vocabulary is taught and relates to comprehension.

The investigation of teacher cognition has expanded quickly to understand better the classroom environment and the teacher's role (Bergström, Norberg & Nordlund, 2021). However, few studies (see Bergström et al., 2021; Gao & Ma, 2011; Gerami & Noordin, 2013) have examined how non-native language teachers conceptualize vocabulary, and the research focuses mainly on assumptions about vocabulary teaching and learning (e.g., Gao & Ma, 2011; Gerami & Noordin, 2013). Borg (2003:81) defines teacher cognition as examining "what teachers know, believe, and think."

There have been many empirical studies (e.g., Altalhab, 2019; Schmitt, 2010; Zhan-Xiang, 2004) on the value of vocabulary. Schmitt (2010) believes learning vocabulary is a gradual process, while Zhan-Xiang (2004) compares it to building a towering structure brick by brick. Learning a new language is only possible by comprehending the vocabulary (Altalhab, 2019). This suggests that vocabulary learning is a continuous process, even for those at a higher level.

2.1 Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

Most well-known researchers (e.g., Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2014) stated that vocabulary knowledge is divided into productive and receptive according to how it is used in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Different classifications (e.g., Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Nation, 1984) have been made for learners' lexical competence. According to Nation (1984), vocabulary is divided into two types: receptive or recognition vocabulary (understood in reading and listening) and productive vocabulary (used in writing or speech). Furthermore, Laufer and Paribakht (1998) classified learners' productive vocabulary as active and their recognition vocabulary as passive.

Receptive vocabulary knowledge mainly comes before the more complex productive vocabulary knowledge (González-Fernández & Schmitt, 2020; Laufer, 1998; Lee, 2003; Meara, 1996; Nation, 1990; Wang & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2022). For example, Waring (1997: 99) stated that "to demonstrate receptive knowledge of a word, the subject must be able to provide a specific L1 translation of the English word [but] to demonstrate productive knowledge the subject must provide a specific L2 equivalent for the L1 word."

Learning is likely to be receptive when vocabulary is taught in the classroom. Therefore, vocabulary learning tasks have a greater probability of being receptive than productive. For example, instructors may inform learners of the meaning of a word or provide a definition, but they are less likely to require learners to use an item apart from spelling or pronouncing it (Webb, 2005).

According to Laufer, Elder, Hill, Congdon (2004), and Webb (2008; 2009), productive vocabulary knowledge is the ability to recall the word's structure and meaning or to transmit it as in the learners' original language. Maskor and Baharudin (2016) defined productive vocabulary knowledge as the words the learners can pronounce and understand, which the learners can use in speech and writing. Further, Webb (2005) stated that productive vocabulary could be seen as an active process in which learners can describe their thoughts and feelings in a way that is understood by others.

A depth of word knowledge provides a rich representation of words, leading to the precise comprehension necessary for recognizing vocabulary toward becoming active or productive (Lee, 2003). The productive vocabulary refers to the words utilized to construct the messages. Speaking and writing are two fundamental abilities that naturally use productive vocabulary (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019). Researchers (see Milton, 2009; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020) stated that vocabulary is a critical component of language proficiency, and vocabulary development is crucial in language learning.

To my knowledge, no published paper has touched on the receptive and productive sides of EFL public school teachers in Saudi Arabia. Despite their paucity, all the studies, except Al-deaij (2020), have carried out their vocabulary investigations on public school pupils, not teachers (e.g., Al-Hazemi, 1993; Al-Bogami, 1995; Alsaif, 2011). Al-deaij (2020), nonetheless, is the only study that tackled EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge in the Saudi context. Al-deaij used a receptive vocabulary test and did not include any productive tests. Furthermore, since they are required to deliver language to their students, teachers are expected to possess adequate level of English proficiency. Therefore, the productive VLT was used in the current study.

Moreover, the gender differences in EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge have not been explored enough. Thus, the research gaps the current endeavor is trying to fill are twofold: EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge in Saudi Arabia and, in particular, their productive facet, and gender differences in the teachers' knowledge of both receptive and productive facets.

The only research I have been able to find to discuss EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge in Saudi Arabia is Al-deaij's (2020) master dissertation. Al-deaij carried out her research on 196 male and female Saudi public school EFL teachers. She used the five bands of Webb et al.'s vocabulary levels test (i.e., 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, and 5000). Al-deaij found that both males and females were able to reach the mastery level suggested by Webb et al. (2017), i.e., 29 out of 30, in the first 1000-word band. She also found that the female teachers did significantly better than their male counterparts at the 1000-word level, while males were significantly better at the 4000-word level. Nonetheless, Al-deaij still needs to include productive vocabulary tests. Furthermore, both genders could not reach mastery level on the subsequent bands (i.e., the 2000-, 3000-, 4000-, and 5000-word levels). Hence, the conclusion was that EFL teachers in her study scored below the threshold (3000–6000-word families) frequently cited in relevant body of research (e.g., Nation, 2006; 2010; Van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2012) which indicated low level of receptive vocabulary knowledge.

Alshammari (2022) conducted a qualitative study in which he posed 17 questions to his EFL participants. Only four of them related directly to teachers. Alshammari included 5 significant types of stakeholders for his 17-question interviews, namely educational consultants, university professors, MA students, high school teachers, and students, in his investigation of the low proficiency of Saudi EFL learners. What is clear from Alshammari's investigation is that every stakeholder type throws the responsibility of learners' low English level at other factors, but not themselves! For example, teachers blame materials for not being suitable for learners and learners for not being motivated. Alshammari reported that his participants believe that EFL learners' English ability in Saudi Arabia is very low. Some of Alshammari's participants believe that 'English ability' is to be able to do well in international standardized tests.

Conversely, learners blame their teachers, but not themselves, for their low achievements, and so. In Alshammari's (2022) study, all stakeholders raised some crucial problems that seem to cause low English proficiency levels on the learners' side. However, no one mentioned that teachers' low English proficiency level, especially vocabulary, was a main factor.

Thus, the current investigation will be exploratory to answer the following research questions that could fill some gaps in the Saudi context of EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge:

RQ1. What are the *receptive* and *productive* vocabulary levels of male and female EFL teachers in Saudi public schools?

RQ2. Are there any significant differences in receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge between male and female EFL teachers in Saudi public schools?

3. Method

Participants

The participants of the current study were 265 EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. About 52% were females ($N=138$), while around 48% were males ($N=127$). Their ages ranged between 22 and 60 years old. Approximately 87.5% of the participants were of Saudi nationality, 6.3% were Egyptians, and about 6% were of different Arabian nationalities (e.g., Jordanian, Sudanese, Yemeni, Syrian, Palestinian, and Tunisian). All the participants were teaching English subjects in the 13 different provinces of Saudi Arabia while conducting the study.

Moreover, all the participants were native speakers of Arabic. The participating EFL teachers were teaching at either high schools (40%), intermediate schools (34.9%), or primary schools (25.1%). Pupils enroll in primary schools when they are 6-12 years old, in intermediate schools when they are 13-15 years old, and in high schools when they are 16-18 years old. More than 81% of the participants teach at public schools (government-funded). Teachers in private schools work for either Arabic schools (14.5%, where the medium of instruction is Arabic, and English is taught as one school subject only) or for international schools (4.3%, where English is the medium of instruction except for Arabic and Islamic subjects which are taught through Arabic). English is still considered a school subject in these schools. English as a school subject is taught in Saudi schools from the primary school level. Teachers at primary schools teach 45-minute classes twice a week, at intermediate schools 4 times a week, and 5 times per week at high schools. Teachers around the 13 provinces in Saudi Arabia teach the 'We Can' series at primary schools, 'Super Goal' at intermediate schools, and 'Mega Goal' at high schools.

Instruments

The Receptive Vocabulary Level Test

The current investigation employed three types of instruments. First, the updated Vocabulary Levels Test (Webb, Sasao, and Balance, 2017) was administered in order to gauge the participants' *receptive* knowledge of vocabulary. The first three bands (i.e., the 1000, the 2000, and the 3000-word levels) were used. Webb et al. state that the test can be carried out as a whole, or certain parts that suit specific participants can be selected, e.g., beginners can be given the 1000-word level only. The rationale behind using this receptive VLT was that no previous study in the Saudi context has related reading anxiety to vocabulary knowledge, hence, this tool is used to explore this relationship.

The Productive Vocabulary Levels Test

In order to gauge the teachers' productive knowledge of vocabulary, Laufer & Nation's (1999) Vocabulary Levels Test (Version A) was used. The first two bands (i.e., the 2000 and the 3000-word level) were used for the current study for the same reasons. Each band has 18 items.

Scoring and Interpreting the Tests

The VLT

This test uses a matching format. Each level has 10 clusters of six words and three definitions. Each correct answer is given one mark, and the maximum score for each level is 30. Webb et al. (2011) state that the scores of individual levels are more critical when reporting than the overall scores of all levels together since the value of higher-frequency words is more significant than lower-frequency words. Furthermore, Webb et al. propose a mastery level of the first three levels to be 29/30 when interpreting the results.

The VST

We used Laufer and Nation's (1999) productive test version for the current investigation. The test gauges productive vocabulary knowledge in EFL/ESL contexts. It comprises five bands, i.e., 2000, 3000, 5000, University Word List, and 10000-word levels. Only the first two bands were used in this study, i.e., the 2000 and the 3000-word levels. Each level has 18 items, and each item has a sentence

where the first letters of the target word are only given to limit test-takers from providing another word that may fit the context semantically. However, the first letters are only sometimes half of the word. There are certain target words where the missing letters are fewer or more than the given letters. Scoring the test follows the correct/incorrect scheme. Minor misspellings, as well as grammatical mistakes, were ignored. The final scores were given to two raters to ensure some marking reliability, and the inner-rater score was around 87%. Test-takers need to score 15 or 16 out of 18 (i.e., 85% or 90%) at the 2000-word level to show satisfactory mastery.

4. Results

The results in this section will be presented under two main themes. The first theme explored the vocabulary levels of male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools in general. The second theme encompassed whether there were significant differences in receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge between male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools.

4.1 The Vocabulary Levels of EFL Teachers in Saudi Public Schools

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the participants' vocabulary levels.

An analysis was administered to all teachers (N= 265) in the treatment who participated in this study to find EFL teachers' receptive and productive vocabulary levels in Saudi schools. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for EFL teachers' receptive and productive vocabulary levels.

According to the means and the standard deviations in Table 1 and based on Webb et al.'s recommendation that a learner should score 29/30 on a level to master that level, the EFL teachers of the current investigation have not mastered any of the three *receptive* vocabulary level bands. Table 1 also indicates that the *productive* aspect of the teachers' vocabulary knowledge is far weaker than their receptive knowledge. Laufer and Nation (1999) believe that learners are to score no less than 15/18 to master a level.

Table 1. Overall Means and Standard Deviations of EFL Teachers' (both males and females) receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge

Domains	Test Band	Mean	SD.
Receptive vocabulary level	1000*	28.76	3.61
	2000*	26.94	4.68
	3000*	22.2	6.32
Productive vocabulary level	2000**	11.17	4.18
	3000**	7.27	4.06

* Max score = 30

** Max score = 18

4.2 Gender Differences on Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge among EFL Teachers in Saudi Schools

To answer the second research question that relates to the difference between male and female teachers' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, a descriptive analysis was run. Table 2 shows EFL teachers' overall means and standard deviations in receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge based on gender. From Table 2, we can see that in the 1000-word band, female EFL teachers (N=138) performed better $M = 29.25$ ($SD = 1.21$) than male teachers (N=127) $M = 28.22$ ($SD = 5.02$). Similarly, female teachers scored higher in the 2000-word band of the receptive vocabulary test $M = 27.19$ ($SD = 3.75$) than male teachers $M = 26.66$ ($SD = 5.55$). On the 3000-word band, however, male teachers scored higher $M = 22.68$ ($SD = 6.74$) than female teachers $M = 21.76$ ($SD = 5.92$). On the productive vocabulary test, however, male teachers scored higher on the 2000-word band $M = 11.37$ ($SD = 4.40$) and on the 3000-word band $M = 7.48$ ($SD = 4.24$) than their female counterparts $M = 10.86$ ($SD = 4.06$) and $M = 7.07$ ($SD = 3.90$), respectively. To see whether these differences are statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was run, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Male and Female EFL teacher's receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

Test type	Test band	Gender	n	Mean	SD
Receptive	1000*	Males	127	28.22	5.02
		Females	138	29.25	1.21
	2000*	Males	127	26.66	5.55
		Females	138	27.19	3.75
	3000*	Males	127	22.68	6.74
		females	138	21.76	5.92
Productive	2000**	Males	127	11.37	4.40
		Females	138	10.86	4.06
	3000**	Males	127	7.48	4.24
		Females	138	7.07	3.90

* Max score = 30, ** Max score = 18

Table 3 shows that female EFL teachers (N=138) performed significantly better than male teachers in the 1000-word band (p = .02). However, no significant differences are noted in the other bands of both receptive and productive tests.

Table 3. Independent samples t-test for male and female EFL teachers' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge

Test type	Test band	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
									Lower	upper
receptive	1000*	17.06	.000	-2.35	263	.02	-1.033	.44	-1.90	-.16
	2000	4.18	.04	-.92	263	.36	-.53	.58	-1.66	.61
	3000	.62	.43	1.18	263	.24	.92	.78	-.61	2.44
productive	2000	.82	.37	.97	256	.33	.51	.52	-.52	1.53
	3000	.72	.40	.81	256	.42	.41	.50	-.58	1.40

* Independent samples t-test, p > .05.

5. Discussion

The current study addresses the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of EFL teachers, which is part of a more hot-debated issue that tackles the EFL teachers' general competence in Saudi Arabia, which is a crucial criterion for teaching writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills and grammar to pupils (Altalhab, 2019; Barani et al.; Bromley, 2007; Milton, 2013). The only study that dealt with EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge in the Saudi context is Al-deaij (2020). It only focused on the receptive side of vocabulary knowledge of 196 EFL teachers. Her participants were both males and females. Al-deaij used 5 bands from Webb et al.'s (2017) vocabulary levels test (i.e., 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, and 5000-word bands). Al-deaij found that male and female teachers possess low receptive vocabulary levels except in the first 1000-word level. The results of the first research question of the current study go in hand with Al-deaij's where both male and female EFL teachers reached mastery level at the 1000-word level. Male teachers in our study, however, still need to reach that level. In addition, our results support Al-deaij's in that both male and female teachers did not reach mastery levels in the 2000 and 3000-word levels of the receptive VLT.

For productive vocabulary knowledge, however, our study is the first to explore this area, and the results showed that both male and female EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia need more productive vocabulary knowledge. If we consider the participating teachers in this study as EFL learners, they seem unable to interact and communicate efficiently in everyday conversations and tasks. Nation (2006:59) believes that "8,000 to 9,000 word-family vocabulary is needed for comprehension of written text and a vocabulary of 6,000 to 7,000 for spoken text". Although this may seem daunting, at best, our participating EFL teachers could not even reach what van Zeeland Schmitt (2012) suggests. Van Zeeland & Schmitt (2012) recommend learners to know around 2000-3000 word families to reach a 95% text coverage. This is why some relevant studies (e.g., Abu-ghararh, 2014 and Alharbi, 2019) have reported teachers' heavy use of L1 in English classes.

Furthermore, the results of our study support what previous research has found regarding the low proficiency of English of EFL teachers in general. For example, Butler (2012) reported that EFL teachers in her study view their (receptive and productive) English proficiency level as far below the level needed to teach English at elementary schools. Our results also support what other studies have found or reported that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia lack essential aspects of English language proficiency (Al-Hazmi, 2003; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Al-Thumali, 2011). Likewise, Althobaiti (2017) reported that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia scored 200 points below the average score on TOEFL compared to other EFL teachers across the world, according to a study carried out by the Saudi Ministry of Education.

It is not strange, then, that secondary school pupils graduate with very low and limited English language proficiency. Many researchers in the Saudi context state that such pupils cannot differentiate between different phonics of English, let alone conduct a basic conversation in English (e.g., Al-Johani, 2009; Alqahtani, 2019; Alrabai, 2014; Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Alrabai (2014) also states that EFL students' English proficiency in Saudi schools is far below expectations. Suppose teachers do not have adequate language proficiency, in that case, it is highly expected that their pupils would benefit less; as the amount of exposure to English from those teachers will also be limited. This is why it has been reported that L1 (i.e., Arabic) is frequently used in the English classroom every day. For instance, Abu-ghararh (2014) mentioned that 80% of her participating pupils reported that their teachers hardly use English in the classroom. In his review and analysis of seven studies on Saudi teachers' beliefs about using L1/L2 in the classroom, Alharbi (2019) found that teachers in those studies tend to use L1 in the classroom due to several reasons, e.g., they do not have positive attitudes towards using L2, they avoid using L2 due to the low English proficiency level of students, L1 is much easier in delivering grammar rules, no enough time if L2 is used, and so on. Suppose the results of the current study are an authentic mirror of EFL teachers' English proficiency level; a serious issue should be added to those reasons, i.e, teachers may be unable to communicate in the L2 due to their limited vocabulary repertoire.

Thus, such results should be warning bells for the Saudi Ministry of Education, educators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. If teachers possess inadequate competence in English, how would they be able to comprehend the content of the textbooks and deliver this content in English to their pupils? Additionally, these low levels of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge might also be the reason why so many EFL teachers tend to overuse the L1 (i.e., Arabic) when teaching English classes. Hence, pupils' exposure to the target language (i.e., English) needs to be expanded.

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

Finally, this study examined Saudi male and female EFL teachers' vocabulary levels and identified the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge between male and female EFL teachers in Saudi schools. Both male and female EFL teachers of the current investigation could not show mastery over any band of the receptive and productive vocabulary levels test, except females on the 1000-word level of the receptive test. These findings support Al-deaij's (2020) study, which is the only study that has gauged EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge in Saudi Arabia and found that teachers' receptive vocabulary levels are below the 2000 and 3000-word levels. Furthermore, our study has touched on the productive aspect of vocabulary knowledge, which has yet to be explored in the Saudi context. The participants' low levels of productive vocabulary knowledge should be taken seriously into consideration, and the Ministry of Education, as well as English programs at Saudi universities, should revisit their programs and syllabi in order to accommodate for such loss. Teachers' awareness about their current language performance, including different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, should be targeted and raised as well.

It is also important to emphasize the value of giving EFL teachers the opportunities to improve their receptive and productive vocabulary abilities. Teachers' teaching load should be revisited in order to help teachers find time to improve their English language skills as well as enroll in teachers' training and professional development programs. In-service teacher training and development is a must for teachers to be capable of delivering quality teaching to pupils.

Given the nature of this study, several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, this study is limited to a small number of EFL teachers (i.e., 265 participants), which may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, this study used only a quantitative approach based on vocabulary-level tests. Further investigations may utilize a qualitative or mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the vocabulary knowledge of EFL teachers. For instance, future research may try to conduct interviews with EFL teachers comprehensively in English to determine whether the teachers can continue such interviews in the L2 or not. Third, it might be interesting to investigate the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of fresh university graduates and compare their scores to ours. It seems that teachers lose a great deal of their English competence, and vocabulary in particular, due to the passage of time and not being exposed to adequate input and/or training after graduating from their BA programs.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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