Enhancing Vocabulary Knowledge in Thai Primary School Students Through Activity-Based Learning Instruction

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Abstract

This study explores the effect of using activity-based learning instruction to enhance vocabulary knowledge among Thai primary school students. It also aims to assess the students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through this instructional approach. The participants were 25 sixth-grade students at Nonchantuekhuaykaewittaya School in Wangyai District, Khon Kaen. Data were collected and analyzed using three research instruments: 1) activity-based learning instruction, 2) pre- and post-vocabulary tests, and 3) questionnaires. The findings revealed that after implementing activity-based learning instruction in the vocabulary classroom, the participants' vocabulary knowledge improved significantly at the 0.05 level of statistical significance. Additionally, the participants demonstrated positive attitudes towards the instruction and agreed that activity-based learning is effective in improving vocabulary knowledge in terms of form, meaning, and use.

Keywords

Introduction

Vocabulary is known as an essential part of communication and language learning. Wilkins (1972) states that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed, and nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary." Also, Lewis (1993) refers to lexis or vocabulary as the core or heart of language. In second language acquisition, vocabulary learning is an essential skill for communicating and learning a second language (Schmitt, 2000). Nation (2001) adds that when acquiring a second language, there are a large number of words that learners need to know. With insufficient vocabulary, learners would have problems using and understanding a foreign language.

As EFL learners, Thai students at all levels are required to learn a set of English vocabulary, based on the Basic Educational Core Curriculum. There is also a national exam called the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) which allows students to check their English proficiency including vocabulary skills, compared with students around the country. Unfortunately, every year, the national average scores were quite low. It can be implied that Thai students have encountered problems when learning English and lack essential vocabulary at their level. Besides, the EF English Proficiency Index, or EF EPI (2023), reported that Thailand is now ranked 101th (very low proficiency) among the 113 listed countries, 21 of 23 in Asia, in the proficiency rankings for non-native English-speaking countries. The mentioned reports apparently show that Thai students' English language skills should be improved.

Vocabulary knowledge appears to be a major problem which Thai students have faced (Srimanee & Laohawiriyanon, 2010; Liangpanit, 2014; Aegpongpaow, 2008; Plianpran & Nakjan, 2015; Platapienthong, 2019; Mameesuk, 2021). There are some previous studies which revealed that Thai EFL students have a problem with vocabulary learning, and their vocabulary knowledge is limited (Adunyarittigun, 2002; Withiprod, 2009; Mungkonwong, 2011).

To improve Thai students' vocabulary knowledge, active learning is introduced into English classrooms. Active learning can be divided into various types (Phoothong, 2014; ESDC, 2019), such as activity-based learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and thinking-based learning. This current study focuses on activity-based learning, the teaching method that allows students to fully and actively participate in the learning process and learn through various types of activities (Bormann et al., 2021). In this current study, activity-based learning will be implemented as an instructional approach since it has been widely and effectively used in English teaching to improve all English skills for EFL learners (Suttanon, 2018; Anwer, 2019; Kuyate, 2019; Talabklang & Thienpermpool, 2019; German & Lestari, 2020)

The focus of this current study is on the use of activity-based learning instruction in order to enhance vocabulary knowledge for Thai EFL primary school students. Also, this study particularly gives attention to the students who were considered as low-proficiency learners from an extended educational opportunity school since little research has been conducted on this area. During the process of the instruction, there were additional vocabulary exercises constructed to develop students' integrated skills. The study also expects the outcomes to improve primary students' vocabulary knowledge and stimulate an activity-based learning environment in the classroom in terms of form, meaning, and use. According to the studies about activity-based learning above, the activity-based learning approach is expected to be one of the best ways that teachers can use to teach English vocabulary in the classroom and help their students improve their vocabulary skill.

Research Questions

1. What are the effects of using activity-based learning instruction to enhance vocabulary knowledge of Thai primary school students?

2. What are students' attitudes on using activity-based learning instruction to enhance vocabulary knowledge?

The Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the effects of using activity-based learning instruction to enhance vocabulary knowledge of Thai primary school students

2. To explore Thai primary school students' attitudes on using activity-based learning instruction to enhance vocabulary knowledge

Research Method

The participants of this current study were purposefully selected as an intact group. They were 25 primary six students from Nonchantuekhuaykaewittaya School, located in Wang Yai District, Khon Kaen, Thailand, under Khon Kaen Primary Educational Service Area Office 3, known as an extended educational opportunity school. The students were considered to be low-proficiency learners based on their classroom performance and achievement. They had been studying English as a foreign language for approximately six years.

The reasons for choosing these participants included: 1) their achievement needed improvement, and 2) they were required to take the ONET exam before graduating from the school.

The research instruments used were pre- and post-vocabulary tests, lesson plans with activity-based learning instruction, a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and vocabulary exercises.

The pre-and post-vocabulary knowledge tests were adopted from the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) by Wesche & Paribakht (1996). The tests were constructed as follows: 1) Three primary school English teachers chose difficult words for primary six students from the vocabulary lists provided by the Ministry of Education. 2) The participants were asked to check the list selected by the teachers. 3) The overlapping words were compared with the CEFR A1 level list, and 4) 35 words were chosen as the target words to be applied in the lesson plans, while 30 out of the 35 words were used to construct the pre- and post-vocabulary tests. The tests were then reviewed by three experts before conducting the pilot study.

The activity-based learning instruction was divided into five themes based on the Basic Education Core Curriculum, including family, food, places, climate, and health. There were 15-hour lesson plans for these five units. In each lesson, the students attended the activity-based learning classroom for two hours, with an additional hour to complete the vocabulary exercise worksheet. There were five stages of teaching within the framework: leading in, experiencing, applying, discussing and reflecting, and evaluating, summarizing based on previous related research studies. The first hour covered the stages of leading in, experiencing, and applying. Next, the students discussed together and presented their work during the second hour. The time spent on each section depended on the class or lesson plan.

This study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2023, and the course was based on Thailand's Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) in the learning area of foreign languages.

The questionnaire was constructed after the students learned the 35 target vocabulary words from the activity-based learning instruction to assess their thoughts about learning vocabulary through this approach. The participants were asked to rate their opinions on a five-point Likert scale.

An hour a week was spent on each unit of vocabulary exercises, focusing on some aspect of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning, and use. The vocabulary exercises were designed to develop the learners' command of target language vocabulary (Wallace, 1985) and to measure the students' vocabulary knowledge progress after finishing each unit. After learning, students needed to know their vocabulary learning progress to gain feedback (Nation,

2001). The types of exercises included matching words, completion, and gap filling.

Data Collection

In the second semester of 2022, the target words were selected from the Cambridge English Vocabulary List (A1). The survey word list was then offered to discover the overlapping words among the teachers and the students. Next, 35 overlapping words were selected for inclusion in the pre- and post-vocabulary tests.

In the second semester of 2023, the first session began. The participants were asked to take the pre-test by completing the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale Table with 30 vocabulary items. Then, the second session was conducted. The activity-based learning instruction was implemented in the classroom, followed by the vocabulary exercise.

In the third session, the post-test was administered to check the effect of the instruction. In the last session, the participants were asked to complete the questionnaire to provide feedback and reveal their own opinions.

Data Analysis

After collecting all data, they were analyzed for mean, standard deviation, and the t-test. The effect of using activity-based learning instruction to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge was evaluated by comparing the students' average pre-and post-test scores based on the criteria.

The questionnaire data were analyzed to determine the overall student attitudes towards activity-based learning. The responses were categorized based on the five-point Likert scale to calculate the mean and standard deviation for each item, providing insight into how students perceived the effectiveness and enjoyment of the learning method.By combining quantitative data from the tests and questionnaires with qualitative data from the interviews, a more holistic evaluation of the activity-based learning instruction's effectiveness and impact on students' vocabulary knowledge and attitudes was achieved.

The Findings of the Study
Research question 1

The Comparison of Pre- and Post- Vocabulary Test

| | Paired Differences | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
	Mean	Std. Deviation			
Pair 1 Pre-test	43.64	7.45	10.948	24	<0.001
Post-test	94.080	23.31			

Table 1 presents a comparison of mean scores from the pre- and post-vocabulary knowledge tests, analyzed using a paired samples t-test. The results indicate that the post-test scores were significantly higher than the pre-test scores at the 0.05 significance level. This suggests that the implementation of activity-based learning instruction in vocabulary classes for EFL students can lead to significant improvements in vocabulary knowledge.

Research question 2

Table 2 presents the findings of the questionnaire, which covered three aspects of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning, and use. The participants' opinions were analyzed and summarized to provide insights into their perceptions of the activity-based learning instruction.

Table 2 The Results of Questionnaire

Vocabulary Knowledge	Items	$(\bar{X})$	S.D.	Level
Form	1. Activity-based learning instruction is useful to help me to correctly spell the words.	3.92	0.81	High
	2. Activity-based learning instruction is useful to help me to correctly pronounce the words.	3.88	0.78	High
	3. Activity-based learning instruction is useful to help me to recognize the words.	4.12	0.83	High
	4. I like spelling the words via activity-based learning instruction.	4.16	0.75	High
Meaning	1. Activity-based learning instruction is useful to help me to understand the meaning of the words.	4.48	0.65	High
	2. Activity-based learning instruction helps me understand parts of speech in English.	4.2	0.70	High
Use	1. Activity-based learning instruction is useful to help me to correctly use the words in a real context or sentence.	3.64	0.76	High
Five Stages of ABL Instruction	2. I think the activities in the leading in step were useful, fun, and appropriate with activity-based learning instruction.	4.56	0.58	Very high

	3. I think the activities in the experiencing step were useful, fun, and appropriate with activity-based learning instruction.	4.76	0.52	Very high
	4. I think the activities in the applying step were useful, fun, and appropriate with activity-based learning instruction.	4.24	0.72	High
	5. I think the activities in the discussion and reflection step were useful, fun, and appropriate with activity-based learning instruction.	4.2	0.91	High
	6. I think the activities in the evaluating step were useful, fun, and appropriate with activity-based learning instruction.	4.52	0.71	Very high
Overall	1. Learning vocabulary via activity-based learning instruction is useful for me.	4.52	0.58	Very high
	2. I enjoy learning vocabulary with activity-based learning instruction.	4.48	0.58	High
	3.. I think learning vocabulary by category helps me improve vocabulary learning skills.	4.68	0.48	Very high
	Average	4.29	0.69	High

1) Word From

According to the questionnaire, the results of the data collection showed that the participants thought activity-based learning instruction supported them learn how to spell the words ($\bar{X}$ = 3.92, S.D. = 0.81). Therefore, they like spelling the words in the classroom where activity-based learning instruction is implemented. The approach also helps them learn how to pronounce a word correctly ($\bar{X}$ = 3.88, S.D. = 0.78). Besides, they agreed that they can recognize the words better afterlearning with activity-based learning instruction ($\bar{X}$ = 4.12, S.D. = 0.83). Lastly, in terms of word form, the participants revealed that they enjoyed learning how to spell the words through activity-based learning instruction ($\bar{X}$ = 4.16, S.D. = 0.75). All of the items in this part are at a high level.

2) Word Meaning

According to the results from items 5 and 9, the participants believed that activity-based learning instruction significantly supports their understanding of word meanings ($\bar{X}$ = 4.48, S.D. = 0.65). Similarly, they also felt that this instructional method helps them understand the parts of speech of each word ($\bar{X}$ = 4.2, S.D. = 0.7). Both items were rated at a high level.

3) Word Use

It illustrates the participants' perceptions of activity-based learning instruction in terms of word use. The results indicated that the instruction tends to help students learn how to use words correctly and appropriately in real situations or sentences ($\bar{X}$ = 3.64, S.D. = 0.76), rating it at a high level.

The questionnaire explored participants' opinions on learning vocabulary through activity-based instruction, focusing on form, meaning, and use. Results indicated that participants believed activity-based learning significantly supported their ability to spell words, pronounce them correctly, recognize words, and enjoy spelling. Regarding word meaning, they felt it helped them understand word meanings and parts of speech. Additionally, they reported that this instructional method assisted in learning how to use words correctly and appropriately in real situations. Overall, participants enjoyed the activities throughout the teaching process, found the approach useful for learning vocabulary, and expressed a high level of preference for this type of instruction.

Interview responses indicated unanimous enjoyment of learning vocabulary through activity-based instruction. Participants noted that it facilitated learning new words and their usage in real-life contexts. They unanimously anticipated higher post-test scores, attributing this improvement to the effectiveness of activity-based learning on their vocabulary knowledge.

Discussions and Implications

The study's findings suggest that activity-based learning is a highly effective approach for improving vocabulary knowledge among primary school students. The study aimed to enhance understanding of vocabulary across three aspects: form, meaning, and use. Results indicated significant improvements in the participants' post-test scores (mean = 94.08) compared to their pre-test scores ($\bar{X}$ = 43.64). This demonstrates a substantial increase in vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Interviews and questionnaires revealed that students found activity-based learning both enjoyable and useful, displaying positive attitudes towards this instructional approach. They particularly appreciated the interactive and engaging nature of the activities, which made learning more dynamic and less monotonous. The inclusion of collaborative activities, such as teamwork and group tasks, was especially well-received. Students enjoyed these activities, noting that they provided opportunities for peer learning and social interaction. However, some students pointed out challenges related to unequal participation within groups, suggesting a need for strategies to ensure more balanced involvement.

Previous research supports the effectiveness of learning 5 to 10 words per lesson. In this study, students learned an average of 7 words per unit through activity-based methods, aligning well with recommended practices. This balance ensured that students were not overwhelmed while still making significant progress in their vocabulary learning. The vocabulary exercises, in particular, were appreciated for their role in skill development, reinforcing the words learned and providing practical applications.

Further research should delve into several areas to build on the current study's findings on activity-based learning instruction for enhancing vocabulary knowledge among Thai primary school students. Future studies could investigate the long-term retention of vocabulary improvements through follow-up tests and compare the effectiveness of activity-based learning with other instructional methods to identify the best approach for students struggling with vocabulary. Additionally, examining various activity-based learning strategies, including different durations, frequencies, and categories, could provide insights into optimizing student learning and engagement. Including students from various grades would help determine the approach's effectiveness across different educational levels. Comparative studies between experimental and control groups, as well as exploring the impact of activity-based learning on other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are recommended. Furthermore, the influence of teachers' experience and attitudes on student outcomes, improving the application stage for better practice and fluency, and using larger participant groups to enhance study reliability should be considered. Examining the effectiveness of activity-based learning across different proficiency levels and exploring cultural factors that influence student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes in activity-based settings would also be beneficial. Lastly, offering a range of vocabulary categories, such as Academic Word Lists (AWL) or varying frequency words, could enrich activity-based learning classrooms.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that activity-based learning instruction is a valuable tool for enhancing vocabulary knowledge among Thai primary school students, leading to improved learning outcomes and positive student experiences. By integrating active learning techniques, collaborative activities, and cultural relevance into instruction, educators can create engaging and effective language learning environments. The students were satisfied with the activity-based learning instruction and demonstrated a positive attitude towards this learning approach. Overall, activity-based learning has the potential to significantly enhance

vocabulary acquisition and foster a more enjoyable and effective educational experience for students.

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