



From Problem to Practice: Thai EFL Teacher Narrative on Vocabulary Learning Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the experiences of Thai EFL teacher in addressing vocabulary learning challenges within a rural primary school context. This research employed a qualitative method with a narrative inquiry design. The participant was selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and video recordings as research instruments. The data were analyzed using narrative analysis supported by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the teacher's experiences. The results show that students' vocabulary learning difficulties are influenced by limited concentration, short memory span, weak foundational literacy, and minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. To address these challenges, the teacher implemented adaptive instructional strategies, including repetition, multimodal input (games, songs, and visual aids), and contextualized learning. The findings also reveal that teacher-student interaction, emotional support, and continuous reflective practice play a significant role in improving vocabulary learning. Overall, the study highlights that effective vocabulary instruction in under-resourced EFL contexts depends on teacher adaptability and contextual awareness. The findings suggest the importance of strengthening reflective and adaptive competencies in teacher education while promoting flexible curriculum support for rural schools.

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Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in learners' ability to understand texts, express ideas, and participate meaningfully in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) communication. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners often struggle to make sense of input and to produce language beyond basic expressions (Biseko, 2025; Nation, 2017). This challenge becomes more pronounced in EFL contexts where opportunities to encounter English outside the classroom are limited. In many expanding-circle countries, English is rarely used in daily life, leaving classroom instruction as the primary if not the only source of lexical exposure (Fengyu, 2023). As English continues to function as a global language for academic, economic, and social mobility (Rose et al., 2021), limited vocabulary mastery may restrict learners' broader language development and their participation in communicative practice beyond school settings (Chung & Wan, 2025). For this reason, vocabulary instruction has increasingly become central concern in EFL pedagogy (Moustaghfir, 2026). Teachers are expected not only to introduce new lexical items but also to support learners in developing meaningful, usable, and retained vocabulary knowledge, often within classrooms marked by time constraints, curricular demands, and diverse learner abilities (Hussain & Khan, 2025; Moodie, 2020).



Learning vocabulary in a school setting involves complex processes that extend beyond the memorization of isolated word lists. Learners are required to construct meaning, understand relationships between lexical forms and their functions, and apply vocabulary appropriately across different communicative contexts (Shmuel, 2023; Van Den Broek et al., 2022). Effective vocabulary development therefore requires the integration of knowledge of form, meaning, and use through repeated and contextualized exposure, enabling learners to develop deeper and more functional lexical competence (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). This pedagogical reality places EFL teachers in a complex position. They must constantly make instructional decisions that balance linguistic objectives with learners' cognitive readiness and classroom conditions. In contexts such as Thailand, where exposure to English beyond school is relatively scarce, teachers often serve as the main mediators of vocabulary learning, shaping not only what is taught but how learners engage with new words (Farrelly & Sinwongsawat, 2021). This pedagogical reality highlights the importance of understanding how teachers experience, interpret, and address vocabulary-related challenges in their daily instructional practices.

Over the past decade, research on EFL vocabulary learning has largely concentrated on instructional strategies, technological interventions, and learner-related variables such as motivation, learning strategies, and cognitive processing (Aljasir, 2025; Lei et al., 2022; Radzuan & Arif, 2025). These studies have provided important insights into effective vocabulary teaching practices and learning outcomes, frequently reporting measurable gains in learners' vocabulary size, retention, or test performance. Nevertheless, this body of research is predominantly outcome-oriented and method-driven, with a strong emphasis on what instructional approaches work rather than how teachers experience, interpret, and respond to vocabulary learning challenges in situated classroom contexts (Shube, 2022). As a result, teachers are often positioned as implementers of pedagogical techniques, while their reflective reasoning, experiential knowledge, and contextual decision-making processes remain insufficiently explored.

Although recent qualitative studies have begun to acknowledge the role of teacher cognition and reflective practice in language teaching, teachers' lived experiences of vocabulary instruction remain underexplored. Previous research has examined various dimensions of EFL teaching and teacher development, including reflective practice as a tool for professional development (Quoc Lap et al., 2024; Rozimela et al., 2025), teachers' beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning (Alshumrani, 2024; Chung et al., 2025), and the development of teacher identity in diverse contexts (Nguyen & Tesar, 2024). While these studies have contributed valuable insights into teachers' instructional approaches, reflective practices, and professional growth, they predominantly employ survey-based designs, experimental interventions, or focus group discussions that foreground method effectiveness and measurable outcomes rather than teachers' narrative sense-making processes.

Furthermore, research in Thai EFL contexts has highlighted how teachers' professional experiences and sociocultural circumstances shape classroom practices (Ulla, 2021). Existing studies have also examined pedagogical innovation in urban and rural settings (Karanjakwut, 2023; Uthaikun et al., 2024). However, limited scholarly attention has been directed toward how EFL teachers in rural, under-resourced areas of Northern Thailand narrate their vocabulary-related challenges and construct practical solutions through reflective practice. This gap is particularly evident in under-researched educational settings, where institutional constraints, low vocabulary exposure among learners, and contextual factors interact in complex ways that are not adequately covered in research focused on strategy,



method-centred, or intervention-based approaches. Without understanding how teachers narratively construct and negotiate these challenges in their daily practice, theoretical frameworks and instructional recommendations risk remaining disconnected from the reality of classroom teaching.

While previous studies have extensively examined vocabulary teaching strategies, learner outcomes, and instructional interventions (Tachom, 2021), they predominantly emphasize measurable effectiveness rather than teachers' situated reasoning and lived classroom experiences. Research in Thai EFL contexts has also explored pedagogical challenges and professional development (Ulla, 2021; Uthaikun et al., 2024), yet limited attention has been given to how rural Thai EFL teachers narratively construct and interpret vocabulary learning difficulties within under-resourced environments.

The novelty of this study lies in its narrative exploration of a rural Thai EFL teacher's reflective meaning-making process in addressing vocabulary challenges. Unlike intervention-based or survey-driven studies, this research foregrounds teacher agency, contextual negotiation, and experiential knowledge as central elements shaping vocabulary instruction. By shifting the focus from strategy effectiveness to teacher narrative cognition, this study contributes a context-sensitive and experience-based perspective to EFL vocabulary pedagogy.

Addressing this gap is important because teachers' narratives offer rich insights into the realities of vocabulary instruction that are often obscured in large-scale or method-centered studies (Rahmani Doqaruni, 2023). By foregrounding teachers' voices, narrative-based research can illuminate how pedagogical decisions are shaped by experience, reflection, and contextual negotiation, as documented in research where teacher perspectives on vocabulary instruction revealed how their classroom knowledge and strategic choices are grounded in lived experience rather than abstract methods alone (Deni & Fahriany, 2020). Such insights are essential for bridging the divide between theoretical approaches to vocabulary learning and the practical demands of classroom instruction, thereby contributing to a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of EFL pedagogy.

Responding to the gap in vocabulary research that largely neglects teachers' real experiences and contextual pedagogical reasons, this qualitative study uses a narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of a Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher in addressing vocabulary learning challenges and developing instructional solutions in a rural state primary school in Northern Thailand. Based on the assumption that teachers' narratives are a meaningful source of pedagogical knowledge, this study focuses on how vocabulary-related difficulties are experienced, interpreted, and overcome in a specific classroom context. This study aims to explore the experiences of a Thai EFL teacher in addressing vocabulary learning challenges within a rural primary school context. The study contributes to the literature by shifting attention from the effectiveness of instructional strategies to teachers' lived experiences and narrative meaning-making processes. In doing so, it provides a context-sensitive understanding of how vocabulary instruction is adapted to the realities of rural EFL classrooms and offers insights for teacher development and vocabulary pedagogy in similar under-resourced contexts.



Research Method

This study employs a qualitative method using a narrative inquiry design to explore Thai teachers' experiences in teaching English vocabulary. Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables researchers to explore and interpret individuals' lived experiences through the stories they tell, providing a deeper understanding of how participants make sense of challenges and instructional practices within specific contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enables the researcher to capture personal narratives and construct meaningful interpretations of how vocabulary learning issues are encountered and addressed in real teaching contexts.

The study was conducted in a rural primary school located in Northern Thailand. The participant of this study was a Thai teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who teaches at the primary school level. The participant was a Thai EFL teacher with more than five years of teaching experience in a rural primary school in Northern Thailand. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Education and taught English to students in Primary 1-3 during the period of data collection. The participant was selected purposively because of her extensive experience in teaching vocabulary to young learners and her willingness to provide detailed accounts of her instructional experiences and reflections. To ensure confidentiality, the participant's identity was protected through the use of a pseudonym.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and video recordings. The interview was conducted to obtain in-depth narrative accounts of the teacher's experiences, including vocabulary teaching challenges, instructional practices, and reflections. The interview questions were adapted from Seidman's interview structure to encourage the participant to recall experiences, describe classroom events, and reflect on their meaning. In addition, classroom observations and video recordings were conducted during two instructional sessions to document teaching practices in natural classroom settings, focusing on teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, and student responses. These multiple data sources were used to ensure data triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

The data analysis technique applied narrative analysis. Interview data were transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the teacher's experiences. Observation notes and video recordings were analyzed to contextualize classroom events. The data were then organized chronologically to construct a narrative storyline describing how vocabulary learning challenges were encountered and addressed. Furthermore, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns within the narratives, such as vocabulary learning challenges, instructional solutions, and reflective practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final outcome of the analysis was a coherent narrative account illustrating how the teacher interpreted and responded to vocabulary learning challenges in everyday teaching practice.

Results and Discussion

This section presents findings obtained from narrative interviews with teacher and discusses them in relation to the research questions in this study. The findings are organised according to the order of the research questions, focusing on How does a Thai EFL teacher describe and interpret vocabulary learning challenges in EFL classrooms? And how are teaching solutions and reflective practices developed to overcome challenges in daily teaching practice. These results are presented descriptively, as this narrative study emphasises the formation of meaning and real experiences rather than statistical generalisations.

**Vocabulary Learning Challenges in the EFL Classroom****Table 1. Summary of Vocabulary Learning Challenges Identified from the Narrative Interview**

Vocabulary Learning Challenges	Description from the Participant's Narrative
Limited Concentration	Students had difficulty maintaining focus during lessons, which affected vocabulary retention.
Short Memory Span	Vocabulary was often remembered only during class activities and quickly forgotten afterward.
Weak Foundational Literacy	Some students could not recognize or remember the alphabet, making reading and vocabulary learning difficult.
Limited Exposure to English	English was new for most students and rarely encountered outside the classroom.

Narrative data shows that students experience ongoing difficulties in learning English vocabulary, particularly in relation to limited concentration, short memory span, and weak basic literacy skills. The teacher explains that many students find it difficult to stay focused during lessons, especially when new vocabulary is introduced. She observes that although students appear engaged during class activities, newly learned words are often forgotten immediately afterwards.

Another challenge repeatedly emphasised by the teacher is the students' limited mastery of basic literacy skills. She recalled several cases where students had difficulty recognising letters of the alphabet, making it difficult to introduce vocabulary through reading activities. Because vocabulary teaching often requires repetition of basic alphabet and phonics, the process of teaching new words becomes slow and tedious. From the teacher's perspective, this situation is closely related to the fact that English is rarely encountered outside the classroom, so students have few opportunities to strengthen their vocabulary outside of school hours.

In general, teachers see students' vocabulary problems as a difficulty influenced by their cognitive preparedness, attention span, and limited exposure to English, rather than just a problem with word knowledge. Consequently, vocabulary retention in this rural setting is heavily reliant on teacher support and classroom engagement. These findings can be interpreted through the perspective of classroom ecology, which views language learning as a product of interactions among learners, teachers, classroom practices, and the broader learning environment. From this perspective, the vocabulary difficulties described by the teacher were shaped not only by students' cognitive characteristics but also by the contextual conditions surrounding the learning process. In particular, the limited use of English outside the classroom reflects a condition of input scarcity, where learners have insufficient exposure to the target language to support vocabulary acquisition (Gonzaga et al., 2025). As a result, the classroom becomes the primary and often the only source of linguistic input, which in turn amplifies the role of teacher support and classroom engagement in facilitating vocabulary learning. Ultimately, these challenges emerge from the interaction between learner factors and environmental constraints, rather than from learner limitations alone.

**Instructional Strategies to Address Vocabulary Difficulties****Table 2. Observed Vocabulary Teaching Practices**

Vocabulary Learning Challenges	Description from the Participant's Narrative
Teaching Methods	Varied methods were used, including pictures, games, songs, phonics, and contextual learning.
Teaching media	The teacher used textbooks supported by flashcards and audiovisual media via LCD (television).
Instructional Focus	Vocabulary instruction started from alphabet recognition (A–Z), phonics, and simple three-letter words.
Teachers Support	The teacher provided corrective feedback on students' pronunciation and reading.
Classroom Atmosphere	The classroom environment was conducive and supported active student participation.

In response to these challenges, the teacher employed a range of adaptive and learner-centered instructional strategies. The findings indicate that repetition, multimodal input, and active participation were central to her vocabulary teaching practices. The teacher frequently asked students to repeat new vocabulary three times and integrated songs, games, pictures, and storytelling to reinforce memory and engagement.

When students struggled to understand new words, the teacher adjusted her instruction by providing visual support and physical actions. Pictures and gestures were used to scaffold meaning before expecting students to produce the vocabulary. This approach reflects a move away from abstract explanation toward concrete and experiential learning. Another important finding was the teacher's flexibility in adjusting instruction based on individual learners. the teacher emphasized observing students' strengths and learning preferences and adapting her teaching strategies accordingly. Rather than applying a fixed method, she viewed vocabulary instruction as a dynamic process that required continuous adjustment.

Students' responses to these strategies were generally positive. According to the teacher's narrative, students showed higher motivation and willingness to learn when games were incorporated into vocabulary lessons. This finding highlights the role of enjoyment and emotional engagement in supporting vocabulary learning among young EFL learners.

Teacher–Student Interaction and the Teacher's Role

Findings indicate that teachers play a greater role as supportive guides than as conveyors of knowledge in the vocabulary learning process. Classroom interactions are characterised by guidance, encouragement and patience, with an emphasis on encouraging student participation and gradual understanding rather than instant accuracy. This interactional approach allows teachers to respond sensitively to students' difficulties and create a supportive learning environment, where students feel more confident to interact with new vocabulary. Given students' limited vocabulary knowledge and low confidence, the relational and affective dimensions of teacher-student interactions play an important role in maintaining student engagement during vocabulary lessons (Sun & Shi, 2022).



Reflection is an integral part of teachers' professional practice and closely influences their instructional decisions. The teacher reported that she routinely reflected on vocabulary learning issues by noting difficulties in class and discussing them with fellow teachers. Through this continuous reflection process, she refined her instructional strategies and developed more flexible responses to recurring challenges (Yuan, 2024). The teacher's narrative suggests that effective vocabulary teaching in rural classrooms requires continuous learning, adaptability, and sensitivity to students' evolving needs, rather than rigid reliance on predetermined teaching methods.

Reflective Practices and Professional Learning

Reflection emerged as a central element of the teacher's instructional practice. The findings indicate that she engaged in ongoing reflection by documenting vocabulary-related difficulties encountered in the classroom and discussing these issues with fellow English teachers. Through professional consultation and peer sharing, the teacher was able to generate new instructional insights and gradually refine her teaching strategies in response to students' needs.

A strong pedagogical belief that vocabulary learning is most effective when incorporated in meaningful settings rather than taught through rote memorizing or separate word lists was also molded by the teacher's accumulated teaching experiences. She stated that brief texts, visual aids, and real-world examples were used to introduce new vocabulary. This was followed by practice exercises like role-playing, games, and sentence construction. In order to promote deeper processing and better retention, these exercises were created to promote active vocabulary use in both speech and writing.

Importantly, the findings reveal that the teacher did not view vocabulary instruction as a fixed or one-size-fits-all process. Instead, she emphasized adaptability as a core principle of effective teaching, acknowledging that instructional roles and strategies must be continuously adjusted whenever learning difficulties emerge. This reflective and flexible approach highlights the teacher's responsiveness to classroom realities and learner diversity.

The findings of this study indicate that vocabulary challenges in rural Thai EFL classrooms are multi-dimensional, arising from limited target language exposure, learners' low literacy support, and motivational barriers. These results align with recent research highlighting that rural and under-resourced EFL environments constrain students' vocabulary acquisition due to systemic input scarcity and limited English use outside formal instruction, underscoring the importance of ecological classroom contexts for language learning (Gonzaga et al., 2025). However, Different from previous studies that mostly focused on measurable learning outcomes after instructional interventions, this research emphasises teachers' narrative reasons for real-time pedagogical choices, providing deeper insights into how educators adapt instructional choices contextually. This narrative framework enriches our understanding of how vocabulary teaching operates in the reality of the classroom, instead of as an isolated pedagogical intervention.

In contrast to intervention-based studies that conclude specific strategies (e.g., vocabulary games, direct instruction) universally enhance lexical retention, the current study reveals the processual and situational nature of choosing strategies based on moment-by-moment classroom dynamics. Previous work suggests that multimodal activities and repeated contextualized input yield significant improvements in vocabulary retention among young EFL learners (Patra et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021). While these studies document strategy effectiveness quantitatively, the present study highlights teachers' reflective classroom judgments as central to instructional adaptation, supporting the view that contextual



responsiveness, rather than pedagogical prescription, may be a more powerful driver of vocabulary learning in low-input environments.

The teacher's use of engagement-oriented tools such as songs, drills, and visual aids is consistent with research emphasizing affective and motivational constructs in EFL vocabulary learning, especially for young learners. For example, (Ghalebi et al., 2020) found that learners' emotional engagement significantly correlated with sustained participation in vocabulary tasks, while (Wilcox et al., 2025) point to the efficacy of learner-centered materials in reducing anxiety and promoting lexical uptake. However, unlike these studies that validate specific materials through outcome measures, the narrative data from this study suggest that teacher agency in adjusting materials on the fly shaped by social and emotional cues in the classroom is a key determinant of instructional success, thereby extending the literature beyond fixed

Strategy effectiveness to teacher-driven material adaptation.

The relational aspect of teacher-student interaction emerging in this study echoes broader research on social support and communal learning in language acquisition. Studies by (Yao et al., 2025) demonstrate that supportive teacher attitudes and affective scaffolding not only reduce learner anxiety but also foster risk-taking in vocabulary use, which is critically important in low-proficiency contexts. Similarly, (Ahmad Musa, 2023) reveal that dialogic instruction and responsive feedback build confidence and language willingness to communicate among EFL learners. While these studies frame teacher support primarily as a pedagogical variable, the present inquiry situates such support within the teacher's constructed identity as a facilitator of positive learner affect, showing that emotional attunement and encouragement are inseparable from vocabulary instruction in real classroom practice.

Reflective practice emerged as a central mechanism in shaping classroom action, supporting recent claims that teacher reflection is crucial in navigating instructional ambiguity, particularly in under-resourced EFL settings. Research by (Prough et al., 2024) suggests that reflection enables teachers to reinterpret curriculum demands through locally meaningful practices, while Kırmızı & Mutlu Gülbak (2025) document how ongoing reflection fosters adaptive expertise among language teachers. Building on these studies, the current research demonstrates that narrative reflection articulated through writing and teacher self-observation enabled iterative refinement of vocabulary instruction, substantiating the argument that reflective cognition operates not only as post-hoc evaluation but as a continuous pedagogical compass during teaching episodes.

This study has several strengths. The use of narrative inquiry allowed for an in-depth exploration of vocabulary teaching from the teacher's perspective, capturing dimensions of practice that are often overlooked in quantitative or intervention-based research. The inclusion of classroom observation strengthened the credibility of the findings by triangulating narrative data with observed instructional practices. However, the study also has limitations. The focus on a single participant restricts the transferability of the findings to other contexts, and the absence of direct learner achievement data limits claims about the effectiveness of specific strategies in improving measurable vocabulary outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer meaningful practical implications. For EFL teachers in similar rural or under-resourced contexts, the study underscores the importance of multimodal and contextualized vocabulary instruction, particularly when learners have weak foundational literacy skills. Teacher education programs may benefit from emphasizing reflective practice and peer collaboration as essential components of



professional development. At the institutional level, providing basic instructional facilities and creating opportunities for professional dialogue can support teachers in adapting vocabulary instruction to local classroom realities. Overall, this discussion highlights that vocabulary learning challenges and instructional solutions are deeply context-dependent. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences and reflective practices, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of EFL vocabulary instruction that complements method-oriented and outcome-driven research.

Conclusion

The findings show that students' vocabulary difficulties are not merely related to limited lexical knowledge but are shaped by an interplay between limited concentration, short memory span, weak foundational literacy, and minimal exposure to English, reflecting broader cognitive and contextual constraints. In response, effective vocabulary instruction is realized through adaptive, student-centered practices that emphasize repetition, multimodal input, emotional engagement, and contextualized learning, rather than reliance on fixed methods. The study further reveals that the teacher's role extends beyond knowledge transmission to include facilitation, emotional support, and responsive interaction, supported by strong teacher-student relationships and affective scaffolding. Reflective practice emerges as a central mechanism enabling the teacher to continuously evaluate and refine instructional strategies, transforming classroom challenges into practical pedagogical actions. Overall, these findings highlight that successful vocabulary teaching in under-resourced EFL settings depends on teacher adaptability, autonomy, and contextual awareness, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical approaches and the realities of classroom practice.

Recommendation

1) For EFL Practitioners

- EFL teachers in rural or under-resourced contexts are recommended to adopt flexible, student-centered vocabulary teaching approaches that emphasize repetition, multimodal input, and contextualized learning to address learners' cognitive and contextual challenges.
- Teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous reflective practice and peer collaboration to refine their instructional strategies and respond effectively to classroom realities.

2) For Teacher Education and Institutional Support

- Teacher education programs are recommended to integrate narrative inquiry and reflective practice as core components of professional development, which can better prepare teachers to adapt theory into practice.
- At the institutional level, support should be provided through access to basic teaching resources and opportunities for professional dialogue among teachers.

3) For Future Research

- Future studies are recommended to involve a larger number of participants and include diverse educational contexts to enhance the transferability of findings.
- Researchers should incorporate students' perspectives as well as measurable learning outcomes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary learning and teaching effectiveness in EFL classrooms.



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