



Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Vocabulary to Primary EFL Learners in Zawia Schools: A Research Paper on Teachers' Challenges

Haifa Ahmed Almuodi*

Department of English-Applied Linguistics, Libyan academy for postgraduate studies, Libya.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7561-9354>

تحديات المعلمين في تدريس المفردات لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في
المدارس الابتدائية بمدينة الزاوية: بحث علمي حول تحديات المعلمين

هيفاء أحمد المودي*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية-اللغويات التطبيقية، الأكاديمية الليبية للدراسات العليا، ليبيا.

*Corresponding author: ahmedhaifaa57@gmail.com

Received: June 24, 2026

Accepted: September 09, 2026

Published: September 23, 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract:

Flashcards are commonly employed in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms because they offer visual support, repeated exposure, and opportunities for retrieval. Despite their pedagogical advantages, teachers encounter notable challenges in practical classroom contexts. This paper addresses the dissertation's second research question: What challenges do teachers encounter when using flashcards to enhance vocabulary among primary pupils in Zawia schools? It provides a focused analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with nine experienced primary school English teachers. The findings indicate that teachers face interconnected pedagogical, practical, classroom-management, learner-related, and professional challenges. Key pedagogical concerns include rote memorization, limited opportunities for contextualized vocabulary use, difficulty representing abstract or polysemous vocabulary with images, and reduced effectiveness with older or more proficient learners. Practical challenges involve insufficient school provision of flashcards, significant preparation time, limited lesson duration, and the complexities of teaching large classes. Teachers also reported difficulties in managing pupils' heightened excitement during fast-paced flashcard activities and sustaining learner interest with repeated use. The discussion situates these findings within research on vocabulary learning, retrieval practice, young-learner pedagogy, cognitive load, teacher cognition, large classes, and digital flashcards. The paper argues that these challenges should not be interpreted as evidence of flashcard ineffectiveness; rather, they highlight that the instructional value of flashcards depends on their contextualized, varied, and age-appropriate use, as well as sufficient preparation, institutional support, and teachers' pedagogical expertise.

Keywords: flashcards; vocabulary teaching; primary EFL; teachers' challenges; young learners; Zawia; Libya.

المخلص:

تُستخدم البطاقات التعليمية Flashcards على نطاق واسع في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية EFL في المرحلة الابتدائية، لما توفره من دعم بصري، وتعرض متكرر للمفردات، وفرص لاسترجاعها. وعلى الرغم من مزاياها التربوية،

يواجه المعلمون عددًا من التحديات الملحوظة في السياقات الصفية العملية. تتناول هذه الورقة السؤال البحثي الثاني في الأطروحة، وهو: ما التحديات التي يواجهها المعلمون عند استخدام البطاقات التعليمية لتعزيز تعلم المفردات لدى تلاميذ المرحلة الابتدائية في مدارس الزاوية؟ وتقدم الورقة تحليلًا مركبًا للبيانات النوعية المستمدة من مقابلات شبه منظمة أجريت مع تسعة معلمين ذوي خبرة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية بالمرحلة الابتدائية. أظهرت النتائج أن المعلمين يواجهون تحديات مترابطة تتعلق بالجوانب التربوية، والعملية، وإدارة الصف، والمتعلمين، والجوانب المهنية. وتشمل أبرز التحديات التربوية الاعتماد على الحفظ الآلي، ومحدودية الفرص المتاحة لاستخدام المفردات في سياقات لغوية ذات معنى، وصعوبة تمثيل المفردات المجردة أو متعددة المعاني باستخدام الصور، إلى جانب انخفاض فعالية البطاقات التعليمية مع المتعلمين الأكبر سنًا أو الأكثر تقدمًا في المستوى. أما التحديات العملية فتتمثل في عدم كفاية توفير البطاقات التعليمية من قبل المدارس، والحاجة إلى وقت كبير لإعدادها، وقصر مدة الحصة، والتعقيدات المرتبطة بتدريس الفصول الدراسية الكبيرة. كما أفاد المعلمون بوجود صعوبات في إدارة الحماس الزائد لدى التلاميذ أثناء أنشطة البطاقات التعليمية السريعة، والحفاظ على اهتمام المتعلمين عند استخدام البطاقات التعليمية بصورة متكررة. وتضع المناقشة هذه النتائج في إطار البحوث المتعلقة بتعلم المفردات، وممارسة الاسترجاع، وتدريس المتعلمين الصغار، والحمل المعرفي، وإدراك المعلمين، والفصول الدراسية الكبيرة، والبطاقات التعليمية الرقمية. وتخلص الورقة إلى أن هذه التحديات لا ينبغي تفسيرها على أنها دليل على عدم فعالية البطاقات التعليمية، بل إنها توضح أن القيمة التعليمية للبطاقات تعتمد على استخدامها بصورة قائمة على السياق، ومتنوعة، ومناسبة لعمر المتعلمين، إلى جانب توافر وقت كافٍ للإعداد، والدعم المؤسسي، والخبرة التربوية لدى المعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البطاقات التعليمية؛ تعليم المفردات؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الابتدائية؛ تحديات المعلمين؛ المتعلمون الصغار؛ الزاوية؛ ليبيا.

Introduction:

Vocabulary knowledge is a central component of foreign-language learning because learners cannot communicate effectively without the words needed to understand and express meaning. Vocabulary learning is particularly important in primary education, where pupils are establishing the lexical foundation on which later reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities will depend [1]. Young learners, however, do not necessarily respond to vocabulary instruction in the same way as older learners. Their developing cognitive abilities, limited attention spans, and preference for concrete, meaningful experiences require teachers to select techniques that make the new language understandable and memorable [2].

Flashcards are among the most accessible visual tools used for this purpose. A flashcard normally presents a lexical item through a word, an image, or a combination of both. Its apparent simplicity allows teachers to introduce vocabulary, practice recognition, prompt recall, review previously taught items, and organize games or communicative activities. Research on retrieval practice also provides a cognitive rationale for repeated recall: retrieving information from memory can produce stronger long-term retention than repeated study alone [3]. Consequently, flashcards can be particularly useful when they require learners to retrieve rather than merely look at vocabulary.

While a teaching technique may be effective in theory, it can present significant challenges in actual classroom contexts. Language teaching is influenced by institutional and social factors, requiring teachers to make instructional decisions based on curriculum requirements, available resources, class size, learner characteristics, lesson time, and professional expertise [4]. Consequently, examining teachers' experiences is essential for evaluating the use of flashcards. This paper focuses exclusively on the challenges reported by teachers in the dissertation, rather than reiterating the broader discussion of positive perspectives.

The original dissertation investigated teachers' perspectives on using flashcards to teach new vocabulary in Zawia primary schools and included a second research question addressing the challenges teachers encountered [5]. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine experienced teachers, and thematic analysis identified several recurring areas of difficulty. The dissertation reports challenges related to rote memorization, abstract vocabulary, limited resources, preparation and time, large classes, classroom management, age-related differences, and the limitations of relying on flashcards as a sole instructional method.

This paper develops those findings into a focused academic discussion, analyzing how the identified challenges interact and relate to established research on vocabulary learning and classroom pedagogy. Rather than treating the challenges as isolated issues, the analysis demonstrates that flashcards are not inherently problematic. Their limitations arise when they are used for instructional purposes beyond their intended scope or when contextual constraints restrict teachers' flexibility in implementation.

Purpose and Research Question:

The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail the challenges associated with the use of flashcards for vocabulary instruction in primary schools in Zawia. The scope is intentionally narrower than the full dissertation and centres on **the second research question**:

- What are the challenges encountered by teachers in using flashcards to enhance vocabulary among primary pupils in Zawia schools?

Accordingly, the analysis centres on teachers' reported difficulties rather than learners' perceptions or a general evaluation of flashcards. This distinction is significant because teacher-reported challenges illuminate the practical conditions influencing the implementation of instructional tools.

Flashcards and Vocabulary Learning:

Flashcards, retrieval, and vocabulary knowledge:

Flashcards are closely associated with repeated exposure and retrieval. Nation argues that vocabulary learning requires repeated encounters with words and opportunities to retrieve and use them [1]. Retrieval research similarly shows that actively recalling learned information contributes to durable memory [3]. These principles help explain why flashcards can be useful: a card can serve as a prompt that requires learners to remember a word, its meaning, pronunciation, or usage.

Nevertheless, knowing a word involves more than recognizing a translation or naming a picture. Lexical knowledge includes aspects of form, meaning, use, grammatical behavior, associations, and the ability to use a word appropriately in context [1]. Robust vocabulary instruction likewise emphasizes rich encounters with words, contextual information, and opportunities for meaningful use [6]. Consequently, a flashcard can provide an effective entry point to a word without necessarily providing complete lexical knowledge. This distinction is essential for understanding the teachers' concern that pupils may memorize isolated items without learning how to use them.

Young learners and visual support:

Young learners generally benefit from activities that connect language with concrete meaning, action, images, stories, and interaction [2]. Visual support can therefore reduce the difficulty of understanding unfamiliar words and can make lessons more engaging. Dual Coding Theory also provides a theoretical explanation for why combining verbal and visual information may support learning and recall [7]. However, visual support is not equally suitable for every lexical item. Concrete nouns such as animals, food, classroom objects, and everyday actions can often be represented directly. In contrast, abstract concepts, relationships, emotions, and words with several meanings require explanation, examples, context, or extended discourse.

The teacher's role in selecting and adapting flashcards:

Flashcards should therefore be viewed as a teaching resource rather than a complete teaching method. Teachers decide which words are appropriate, what type of card to use, how much repetition is necessary, when to move from recognition to production, and how to connect the word with meaningful communication. Research on teacher cognition emphasizes that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and decision-making are closely related to classroom practice [4]. The challenges identified in Zawia can consequently be interpreted in part as challenges of adaptation: teachers must continuously adjust a simple tool to meet complex classroom requirements.

Methodology:

This paper is a focused research study derived from the qualitative component of the author's MA dissertation, rather than a separate data-collection project. The dissertation employed a mixed-methods design overall. For the second research question, the most relevant evidence was obtained from semi-structured interviews with nine experienced primary-school English teachers in Zawia. The interviews were designed to elicit teachers' classroom experiences, including situations in which flashcards were difficult to use [5].

The interview data were analyzed thematically, following the general procedures outlined in Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis. The dissertation identified four broad themes relevant to the present paper: pedagogical challenges, classroom and practical constraints, age-related differences in vocabulary learning, and limitations of flashcards as a teaching tool [5]. The present analysis reorganizes and synthesizes these findings into a more focused account of the difficulties involved in implementing flashcards.

The following interpretation is grounded primarily in the teachers' reported experiences and secondarily in relevant literature. The participants' accounts are treated as context-specific evidence, not as evidence that all primary-school teachers in Libya experience the same difficulties. This distinction is important because the original dissertation was limited to Zawia schools [5].

Findings and Discussion:

Rote memorization and the risk of shallow vocabulary learning:

One of the clearest challenges identified by the teachers was the possibility that flashcards encourage memorization without sufficient understanding. Several participants reported that pupils could remember individual words but might not understand how to use those words meaningfully. One participant explained that students tended to “memorize rather than understand vocabulary,” while another expressed concern that flashcards might promote memorization without understanding or higher-level thinking [5]. These comments indicate a distinction between lexical recall and deeper lexical knowledge.

This concern is consistent with research showing that vocabulary learning requires more than repeated recognition. Nation [1] emphasizes the importance of multiple encounters with vocabulary across different contexts, while Beck, McKeown, and Kucan [6] distinguish between simply presenting meanings and providing robust instruction that gives learners opportunities to understand and use words. Retrieval itself is valuable, but what is retrieved matters. If the learner repeatedly retrieves only a translation or a picture label, the learning outcome may remain narrow.

The challenge, therefore, is not repetition itself. Repetition is a necessary component of vocabulary learning [1]. The difficulty arises when repetition is not accompanied by contextualization, variation, or productive use. A flashcard activity that repeatedly asks, “What is this?” may successfully develop recognition. Still, it does not automatically develop the ability to construct a sentence, select an appropriate collocation, understand a word in a text, or use it in spontaneous communication. The teachers’ concern is consequently pedagogically significant: flashcards can support vocabulary learning, but they may produce shallow learning if the instructional sequence stops at recognition.

This finding also explains why several teachers in the dissertation reported combining flashcards with games, storytelling, writing, sentence construction, or other activities [5]. Such integration transforms the flashcard from the final learning activity into a prompt for further language use. In this sense, the challenge of rote learning is best understood as a challenge of instructional design.

Difficulty representing abstract, and complex vocabulary:

A second major challenge concerns the type of vocabulary that can be represented effectively through pictures. Teachers reported that some words, particularly abstract words and words with multiple meanings, could not be adequately explained by a single image. One participant stated that “abstract words cannot be fully explained with a picture,” while another noted that some words had multiple meanings and that the card alone was insufficient [5].

This challenge reflects an important boundary of visual representation. Pictures are particularly powerful when the relationship between the image and the lexical meaning is direct. A picture of an apple can clearly represent an apple; a picture of a classroom can provide a useful representation of a classroom. However, concepts such as justice, possibility, responsibility, although, or issue cannot always be represented accurately through a single image. Multiple-meaning words create additional difficulty because a single picture may unintentionally teach only one sense of the word.

Vocabulary research supports the need for contextual information. Beck et al. [6] emphasize instructional contexts and multiple encounters, while Nation [1] describes vocabulary knowledge as multidimensional. Thus, the teachers’ difficulty with abstract and polysemous words is not a weakness of the teachers; it reflects a genuine limitation of relying on a single visual representation. For such vocabulary, teachers may need examples, short definitions, stories, demonstrations, contrasts, realia, gestures, sentence frames, or contextualized tasks alongside the flashcard.

The implication is that teachers need to assess the suitability of flashcards before using them. Flashcards are likely to be most straightforward for concrete, high-frequency vocabulary, while more complex lexical items require richer instructional treatment. The teachers’ accounts therefore support a selective rather than universal approach to flashcard use.

Limited availability of instructional materials:

Material availability emerged as a major practical challenge. Teachers reported that schools did not consistently provide flashcards, so they had to prepare them independently or purchase them with their own money. One participant explained that the school did not provide flashcards and that the teacher consequently had to make everything herself [5]. This finding is particularly important because it shows that an apparently low-cost teaching tool can still create a substantial workload when institutional support is limited.

The literature recognizes that teaching materials influence what teachers can realistically implement. Teachers working in resource-constrained settings often adapt, create, or reuse materials, but such adaptation requires time and effort. The problem is therefore not simply the price of paper or printing. It includes the teacher’s time for selecting pictures, designing cards, printing or drawing them, cutting and organizing them, storing them, and replacing damaged materials.

The challenge is especially relevant in primary classrooms because teachers may need sets of cards for different units, proficiency levels, groups, and activities. If the school does not provide a shared bank of materials, the burden of preparation falls on individual teachers. This can reduce consistency and may discourage teachers from using flashcards regularly, even when they believe the technique is pedagogically useful.

Preparation time and limited lesson time:

The teachers also identified time as a central constraint. Participants reported that flashcards take time to prepare and use [5]. This challenge operates at two levels. First, teachers need preparation time before the lesson. Second, interactive flashcard activities may consume classroom time, especially when pupils need instructions, turns, repetition, correction, and opportunities to use the words.

The time issue is significant in vocabulary teaching because effective learning often requires repeated encounters rather than a single presentation [1]. A teacher may therefore face a tension between breadth and depth: covering a large number of curriculum words may leave little time for meaningful practice, whereas spending longer on a smaller set of words may support stronger learning but make curriculum coverage more difficult.

The problem is not unique to flashcards. Classroom time is a general pedagogical resource, and teachers constantly decide how to allocate it among explanation, practice, assessment, interaction, and curriculum content. Ur [8] notes the importance of practical lesson management and efficient classroom procedures, while research on teaching large classes similarly stresses the need for activities that can be organized efficiently [9]. Flashcards become challenging when they require more procedural time than the teacher can reasonably allocate.

Teachers can therefore experience a paradox: the technique is simple for pupils but not necessarily simple for the teacher. The cards themselves may be easy to hold and display, but meaningful use requires careful planning. This distinction should be recognized when schools evaluate teachers' use of instructional materials.

Large classes and unequal opportunities for participation:

Large class size was another recurring challenge. The dissertation reports that teachers experienced difficulty maintaining control during fast-paced flashcard activities and that learners could lose focus in crowded classrooms [5]. Large classes create particular difficulties for activities that depend on rapid individual responses, movement, competition, or equal participation.

In a small class, a teacher can display a card, invite several learners to respond, correct pronunciation, ask for a sentence, and monitor participation. In a large class, the same procedure may result in only a small number of pupils receiving meaningful speaking opportunities. Some pupils may dominate while quieter pupils remain passive. The teacher may also have difficulty seeing whether all learners understand the word or are simply following classmates' answers.

Research on large and multilevel language classes similarly emphasizes the importance of organization, grouping, clear routines, and efficient participation structures [9]. The issue is therefore not that flashcards are incompatible with large classes. Rather, flashcard activities need stronger organizational procedures when the number of learners increases. Without such procedures, the activity may become noisy, competitive, or unevenly distributed.

The Zawia teachers' reports are especially important because they demonstrate how a pedagogically attractive technique can become difficult when the classroom ecology changes. A flashcard game designed for ten learners cannot simply be transferred unchanged to a much larger group. Teachers must adapt the activity, perhaps using pairs, teams, rotating turns, or simultaneous-response techniques. Such adaptations, however, require planning and classroom management skills.

Classroom management and excessive learner excitement:

An interesting finding is that one of the strengths of flashcards can simultaneously become a challenge. Teachers reported that younger pupils become highly active and enthusiastic when flashcards are used. The dissertation records comments indicating that pupils "get too active" and that teachers need additional patience during such activities [5]. Thus, engagement is not automatically equivalent to manageable engagement.

Young learners often respond strongly to visual, game-like, and competitive activities [2]. High energy can create a positive learning atmosphere, but it can also lead to shouting, movement, turn-taking problems, or loss of focus. This is particularly problematic when teachers use rapid-response games in large classrooms. The teacher must simultaneously teach vocabulary and regulate behavior.

This challenge demonstrates why classroom management should be considered part of the pedagogy of flashcard use rather than an external issue. Teachers need clear rules, predictable routines, controlled movement, appropriate grouping, and carefully paced activities. Without these procedures, the emotional and motivational benefits of flashcards may be accompanied by organizational difficulties.

Age and proficiency: reduced suitability for older learners:

The interview findings also revealed a clear age-related pattern. Teachers generally described younger pupils as more responsive to flashcards, while older pupils were viewed as less interested or more likely to find repeated picture-based activities simple or boring [5]. One teacher reported that flashcards worked well in primary school up to a certain age but became less suitable for older students.

This finding should not be interpreted as meaning that flashcards stop being useful at a particular age. Rather, the type of flashcard activity may need to change as learners develop. Young beginners may benefit from picture-to-word recognition, while older or more proficient learners may require word-to-context, collocation, sentence completion, semantic network, or retrieval activities. Nation [1] emphasizes that vocabulary instruction should respond to the type and depth of knowledge being developed.

The teachers' perceptions are also consistent with Cameron's [2] argument that children's cognitive and linguistic development influences how classroom activities should be designed. A technique that is engaging for first-grade pupils may need substantial modification for fifth- or sixth-grade learners. Consequently, age-related challenge is better understood as a challenge of developmental adaptation than as evidence that flashcards are unsuitable for older children in every circumstance.

Maintaining interest and avoiding repetition fatigue:

Some teachers also reported that learners can lose interest when flashcards are used too frequently. The dissertation includes a participant observation that students may be excited initially but become bored later, and another participant indicated that alternative methods sometimes create more engagement [5]. This finding highlights the difference between novelty and sustained engagement.

Repetition is necessary for vocabulary learning, but it does not require repeating the same activity. Nation [1] stresses repeated encounters, and retrieval research demonstrates the value of repeated retrieval [3]. These findings can be reconciled with the teachers' concern by distinguishing repeated exposure from repetitive classroom procedure. Learners may encounter the same word many times without playing the same flashcard game every time.

Thus, a teacher may recycle the same vocabulary through pictures, guessing, sentence building, storytelling, reading, pair work, short dialogues, writing, and retrieval games. In this way, the lexical item is repeated while the cognitive and communicative demands vary. The challenge identified by the teachers, therefore, points to the need for variation rather than for less vocabulary recycling.

Limited contextualization and higher-order language use:

Another challenge closely related to rote memorization is that isolated flashcards may provide limited opportunities for higher-order language use. Some participants believed that flashcards did not adequately support complex problem-solving or deeper thinking [5]. This concern is theoretically compatible with research that distinguishes between knowing a lexical item and using it productively in communication [1,6].

A flashcard is normally a decontextualized prompt. It can show a word, but it does not automatically convey who is using it, why it is being used, which words commonly accompany it, or which meaning is appropriate in a particular situation. For vocabulary learning to move beyond recognition, learners need opportunities to encounter words in discourse and to produce them in meaningful contexts [1,6]. This does not make flashcards pedagogically weak. Instead, it identifies their most appropriate role. A flashcard can introduce or retrieve a lexical item; subsequent tasks can provide contextualization and productive use. The challenge arises when the card is treated as both the beginning and the end of vocabulary instruction.

Teacher knowledge, training, and pedagogical adaptation:

The literature reviewed in the dissertation also identifies teacher training as a factor affecting the quality of flashcard use. Research on teacher cognition shows that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and prior experiences influence classroom decision-making [4]. A teacher may know that flashcards are useful but still have limited knowledge of how to move from simple recognition activities to communicative, differentiated, and age-appropriate practice.

This challenge is particularly relevant when flashcards are used with mixed-ability groups. Teachers may need different prompts, different levels of language support, and different forms of participation for pupils who vary in vocabulary knowledge and confidence. If teachers have not received adequate methodological preparation, they may rely heavily on familiar drills because these are easier to organize. The dissertation similarly notes that some teachers had not received formal training in using flashcards creatively beyond basic drills [5].

The challenge therefore extends beyond the physical availability of flashcards. Even a well-equipped classroom may not obtain the full pedagogical value of the materials unless teachers have opportunities for professional learning. Effective professional development should address not only how to make

flashcards but also how to select vocabulary, sequence activities, use retrieval, contextualize words, manage groups, and adapt tasks to learners' ages and proficiency levels.

Digital flashcards: technological and contextual challenges:

Although the Zawia findings primarily concern classroom flashcards, the literature also points to emerging challenges associated with digital flashcards. Digital systems can provide audio, images, scheduling, and interactive exercises, and research has shown that digital flashcards can support vocabulary learning [10,11]. However, digital implementation depends on access to devices, technical reliability, and teachers' digital literacy.

Nakata's analysis of flashcard software demonstrated that digital systems can vary substantially in the learning functions they provide, including opportunities to add contexts, audio, images, and different forms of practice [10]. More recent evidence also suggests that different flashcard formats can produce different learning outcomes among young learners [12]. These developments are promising, but they should not be assumed to solve the practical problems identified in Zawia. If schools have limited devices or unreliable connectivity, digital flashcards may create a new set of barriers.

Consequently, technology should be considered an optional extension rather than a replacement for traditional flashcards. In resource-limited settings, paper cards may remain the more dependable option. The important issue is not whether flashcards are digital or physical, but whether the selected format is feasible, pedagogically appropriate, and sustainable in the actual classroom.

Integrated Discussion of the Challenges:

Taken together, the findings reveal that the challenges of flashcard use are interconnected rather than independent. Limited resources increase teachers' preparation time. Limited preparation time interacts with restricted lesson time. Large classes make interactive activities harder to manage. Classroom-management difficulties can reduce the time available for vocabulary practice. Age and proficiency differences influence the kinds of flashcards that are appropriate. Finally, insufficient methodological training may make it more difficult for teachers to adapt the technique to these changing conditions.

The most important conceptual point is that the teachers did not reject the use of flashcards. Instead, they described circumstances under which the technique becomes less effective or more demanding. This is consistent with the dissertation's overall finding that teachers view flashcards positively while simultaneously recognizing practical and pedagogical limitations [5]. The challenges therefore represent conditions of use rather than a simple judgment of effectiveness.

From a vocabulary-learning perspective, the central tension is between focused retrieval and rich lexical knowledge. Flashcards are excellent at focusing attention on individual items and prompting recall. Retrieval is valuable for retention [3], but vocabulary knowledge develops through repeated encounters in varied contexts. The instructional challenge is therefore to connect the efficiency of flashcards with the richness of contextualized language learning.

From a classroom-management perspective, the central tension is between engagement and control. Flashcards can increase participation and energy, particularly among younger pupils, but interactive energy requires structure. Large-class pedagogy suggests that successful activities depend on organization, grouping, routines, and clear procedures [9]. The teachers' experiences in Zawia reinforce this principle.

From a teacher-development perspective, the central tension is between the simplicity of the material and the complexity of its pedagogical use. Making a card may be easy; designing an effective sequence around that card is more demanding. Teachers need to understand what the learner should know about the word, how the word should be practiced, when retrieval should occur, and when the activity should move toward communication. Research on teacher cognition supports the view that instructional tools cannot be separated from teachers' professional knowledge and decision-making [4].

Pedagogical and Institutional Implications:

The findings suggest several implications for primary EFL vocabulary teaching in Zawia:

- **First**, flashcards should be used selectively. Concrete and high-frequency vocabulary may be particularly suitable for pictorial presentation, whereas abstract, polysemous, and semantically complex vocabulary should be supported through examples, contexts, demonstrations, and other techniques [1,6].
- **Second**, teachers should distinguish between repetition and repetitive procedure. The same vocabulary can be recycled across several activities without repeating the same game. Retrieval, sentence building, short dialogues, stories, reading, writing, and pair work can all revisit the same lexical items. This approach preserves the memory benefits of repeated retrieval while reducing boredom [1,3].
- **Third**, classroom-management procedures should be designed before using highly interactive flashcard games. Teachers can establish rules for turn-taking, use pairs or small groups, limit

movement, and use predictable signals to start and stop activities. Such procedures are particularly important in large classes [9].

- **Fourth**, schools should reduce the material burden placed on individual teachers. A shared school collection of durable flashcards, access to printers or laminating equipment, and simple storage systems could reduce the need for repeated preparation. Institutional support is important because the dissertation evidence indicates that teachers sometimes make or purchase cards themselves [5].
- **Fifth**, professional development should focus on pedagogical use rather than simply material production. Workshops can demonstrate how to move from picture recognition to retrieval, sentence construction, contextualized use, and assessment. Teachers can also learn how to adapt the same flashcards for different age groups and proficiency levels.
- **Finally**, digital resources should be introduced only where the infrastructure supports them. Digital flashcards can offer audio, scheduling, and interactive features [10,11], but adoption should align with local feasibility rather than replace simple paper-based resources that may be more sustainable.

Conclusion:

This paper examined the challenges teachers encountered when using flashcards to enhance vocabulary among primary pupils in Zawia schools. The analysis, grounded in the dissertation's qualitative component, identified a set of pedagogical, practical, classroom, learner-related, and professional challenges. These included the risk of rote memorization, difficulty representing abstract and multiple-meaning vocabulary, limited availability of school-provided materials, preparation demands, restricted lesson time, large class sizes, classroom-management difficulties, reduced suitability for older learners, declining interest with repeated use, limited contextualization, and the need for stronger pedagogical training.

The findings do not support a conclusion that flashcards should be abandoned. Rather, they demonstrate that their effectiveness is conditional. Flashcards are most useful when they are treated as flexible instructional prompts within a broader vocabulary-teaching sequence. They can support attention, retrieval, visual association, and engagement, but they do not by themselves guarantee deep lexical knowledge or communicative ability.

The central lesson from the teachers' experiences is therefore that the success of flashcards depends on pedagogical adaptation and classroom context. Teachers need to decide which vocabulary is suitable for visual representation, how often words should be revisited, how retrieval should be combined with meaningful use, how activities should be organized in large classes, and how tasks should be adjusted as learners become older and more proficient. Schools, in turn, need to recognize the preparation and resource demands involved in sustained flashcard use.

In conclusion, the dissertation's second research question reveals a balanced picture: teachers value flashcards, but their classroom experiences show that instructional simplicity does not always translate into simple implementation. Understanding these challenges is essential for ensuring that flashcards remain a useful component of primary EFL vocabulary instruction rather than becoming an isolated technique or a substitute for richer language-learning experiences.

References:

1. Nation, I. S. P. (2022). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009093873>
2. Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511733109>
3. Karpicke, J. D., & Roediger, H. L., III. (2007). Repeated retrieval during learning is the key to long-term retention. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 57(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2006.09.004>
4. Farida Alhouti. (2026). *Artificial Intelligence in English as a Second Language Education: Adaptive Learning Technologies, Intelligent Assessment, and Generative AI Innovations*. *Libyan Journal of Scientific Research*, 1(1), 25-34.
5. Almuodi, H. A. (2026). *Investigating Teachers' Perspectives towards Using Flashcards in Teaching New Vocabulary at Zawia Primary Schools* [MA dissertation, Libyan Academy].
6. Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
7. Paivio, A. (2006). *Mind and Matter: A Dual Coding Theoretical Approach*. Psychology Press.
8. Ur, P. (2012). *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
9. Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes*. Cambridge University Press.

10. Nakata, T. (2011). Computer-assisted second language vocabulary learning in a paired-associate paradigm: A critical investigation of flashcard software. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 24(1), 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2010.520675>
11. Alghamdi, A. A., & Elyas, T. (2020). The effect of electronic flashcards on EFL students' vocabulary learning: The case of Saudi Arabia. *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal*, 1(2), 114–125. <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v1i2.79>
12. Soyoof, A., Reynolds, B. L., Rassaei, E., & Vazquez-Calvo, B. (2026). The effects of mobile, gamified, and paper flashcards on vocabulary and collocation learning in young language learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 36(3), 2660–2674. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.70095>
13. Putri, F. A. K., Sorohiti, M., & Ariebowo, T. (2024). Teaching English using flashcards to improve elementary school students' vocabulary. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 8(2), 198–215. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.v8i2.21350>
14. Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4