

## The Representation of Vocabulary Knowledge Aspects in Saudi EFL Textbooks

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Received: 09/21/2022

Accepted: 11/22/2022

Published: 12/15/2022

### Abstract

Vocabulary growth is of great importance, and textbooks are the main sources of vocabulary learning for many EFL learners. Previous research has shown that learning vocabulary involves a mastery of several knowledge dimensions. Little research, however, has focused on vocabulary knowledge dimensions in EFL textbooks. It remains unclear how the different word knowledge dimensions are addressed in Saudi EFL textbooks and whether there is a variation among the textbooks in addressing the different dimensions. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating how the different vocabulary knowledge dimensions are addressed in the local Saudi EFL textbooks. It investigates the activities in English textbooks that give attention to vocabulary to explore the amount of attention given to each dimension in a particular activity. To achieve this, all the 12 EFL textbooks used in primary and middle Saudi schools were analysed. Applying Nation's (2013) framework of word knowledge, a total of 1181 activities were examined. The findings showed that textbooks for primary school levels place greater emphasis on form, followed by meaning and finally use, while in intermediate-level textbooks, the greatest attention is given to meaning, followed by use and then form. The results also reveal variations among the textbooks in the amount of attention given to the different vocabulary knowledge aspects. Pedagogical implications for textbook writers are suggested.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, Saudi EFL textbooks, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary teaching

**Cite as:** Alshumrani, H. A., & Al-Ahmadi, N. M (2022). The Representation of Vocabulary Knowledge Aspects in Saudi EFL Textbooks. *Arab World English Journal*, 13 (4) 325 340.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no4.21>

## Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is an essential component of mastering a foreign or second language and a good predictor of general proficiency in the target language – a foreign language (Milton, 2013, Schmitt, 2008). Readers' vocabulary knowledge plays a central part in reading (Nation, 2001) and is “often indeed, the single best predictor of text comprehension” (Alderson, 2005, p. 35). Furthermore, vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in communication (Llach, 2011). For young children, knowledge of words influences the complexities of their thinking, how they express themselves and communicate in oral and written language, and how well they understand written texts (Sinatra, Zygouris-Coe, & Dasinger, 2012). One of the most important elements of the language curriculum is the textbooks, which bring a sense of source and unity to the learning process. However, language textbooks vary in their approaches to teaching the four language strands: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. One language component that is shared between these language strands is the learner's vocabulary knowledge in the target language. The most basic, simple form of meaning is a form-meaning connection, where a learner knows the meaning of a word either by reading it or upon hearing it. Two common approaches to measuring vocabulary knowledge have been used in the literature: vocabulary breadth and depth. Vocabulary breadth refers to the size of a learner's vocabulary, i.e., the number of words a learner knows with at least a minimum knowledge of meaning by linking a form to meaning (Nation, 2001, Qian, 1999). Vocabulary depth refers to “the quality of the learners' vocabulary knowledge” (Read, 1993, p. 375), i.e., how well a learner knows a word, beyond its basic meaning (such as spelling, pronunciation, semantic associations, collocations, etc.) (Nation, 2001, Yanagisawa & Webb, 2019). In this study, we focus on vocabulary depth to examine the multiple aspects of knowledge involved in knowing a word since this is a more useful approach to measuring the strength of each aspect (Webb, 2013).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only three studies have addressed the representations of vocabulary knowledge in language textbooks (Brown, 2011; Neary-Sundquist, 2015; Vu & Michel, 2021). However, these studies have reported inconsistent findings due to variations in the textbooks used (general English and English for specific purposes) and the approach to measuring vocabulary knowledge applied. Applying Nation's (2013) classification of vocabulary knowledge aspects, the present research study aims to complement the former studies in a couple of ways. Firstly, it provides an in-depth analysis of the various activities addressing the different vocabulary knowledge components in a larger volume of English textbooks than any past research, and it is the first to examine this variable in 12 modified English textbooks approved by the Saudi Ministry of Education for Saudi primary and intermediate school levels. Secondly, it examines the prescribed English textbooks from the first grade in the primary stage until the last grade of middle/intermediate school. Specifically, we aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What aspects of vocabulary knowledge are represented in the McGraw-Hill textbooks modified for the Saudi culture for primary EFL learners?
2. What aspects of vocabulary knowledge are represented in the McGraw-Hill textbooks modified for the Saudi culture for intermediate EFL learners?

The next sections present an overview of the literature, followed by research methods and procedures, findings, discussion, research limitations and finally the conclusion.

## Literature Review

### *Vocabulary Knowledge Constructs*

Vocabulary, as a vital feature in language learning, has been reported to be closely linked to success in listening (Noreillie, Kestemont, Heylen, Desmet, & Peters, 2018, Vafae & Suzuki, 2020, Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013), speaking, (Uchihara, & Clenton, 2022, 2020) reading (McLean, Stewart, & Batty, 2020, Schmitt, Jiang, & Garbe, 2011), writing (Dabbagh & Enayat, 2019), and general academic achievement (Schuth, Judith, & Weinert, 2017). Additionally, studies have pointed out that successful communication can be hindered more detrimentally by vocabulary mistakes than by mistakes in other elements of the English language such as grammar (Milton, 2008). Zhang and Zhang (2022) carried out a meta-analysis and reported a medium-to-high correlation between various language skills and vocabulary knowledge. Thus, there is a mutual relationship between vocabulary and the different language learning skills, i.e., the greater a learner's vocabulary size, the more they will develop their language skills. However, the complex nature of vocabulary knowledge makes its learning a daunting task for many ESL/EFL learners (Schmitt, 2010). This has led vocabulary scholars to categorize vocabulary knowledge differently. One of the simple distinctions is made between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, which are two levels of vocabulary mastery. Receptive knowledge of a word refers to the ability of a learner to recognize a form of a word and to retrieve its meaning while listening or reading. On the other hand, productive knowledge is the act of producing or expressing the meaning of a word in speaking or writing. Webb (2005) contended that receptive vocabulary tasks such as looking up the meanings of words in a dictionary, and matching form and meaning are more popular and widely used by language teachers than productive tasks, such as close exercises or writing tasks because the former are easily designed and graded.

Many language learners think that knowing a word involves knowing the meaning and form of that word (Schmitt, 2010). However, vocabulary knowledge is more complicated than that. There is a consensus among lexical scholars that vocabulary knowledge involves many dimensions (Nation, 2013). One of the well-established approaches to conceptualizing vocabulary knowledge is the dimension approach or the 'multicomponential approach' (Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016). To date, Nation's (2013) taxonomy provides the most comprehensive list of word knowledge dimensions. The dimensions are systematically categorized into form, meaning and use. Each of these three broad categories entails three subcategories. For example, knowledge of a word form entails knowledge of its spoken form, its written form, and its word parts. Knowing a word's meaning involves knowing form and meaning, concept and referents, and associations. Knowledge of use entails knowledge of collocations, grammatical functions, and register. Nation (2013) argued that in order to know a word fully, a language learner must possess these nine aspects receptively and productively. Schmitt and Meara (1997) indicated that mastering all the knowledge dimensions of a word receptively and productively would enable a language user to use that word in a native-like manner. Nation's framework serves as the theoretical basis in the present study.

### *Studies on Vocabulary Knowledge in English Language Textbooks*

Textbooks are fundamental resources for word learning, as they provide learners with ample opportunities to acquire language. They are still the most common materials adopted by language instructors around the world and they are believed to impact classroom practice (Brown, 2011). They are one of the essential components of ESL/EFL classes (Richards, 2001). It is stated

that without the use of language textbooks English language teaching and learning across the world could not occur (Richards, 2001). Despite the availability of several potential sources of word learning, such as audio-visual input, video games, songs, and stories, in Saudi Arabia, the context of the present study, it is reported that the majority of Saudi EFL learners rely on textbooks for vocabulary learning and are not taking advantage of the availability of the many sources of English input (Alsaif & Milton, 2012). There is a belief in the literature that textbooks are a vital component of FL learning as they are the predominant source of lexical input (Nordlund & Norberg, 2020). Learners use textbooks to guide their learning inside and outside school. This is particularly true for younger Saudi EFL learners, who neither read English books nor use English outside school (Alsaif & Milton, 2012).

ESL/EFL textbooks come in a range of levels and they provide teachers with guidance and support; many teachers base their teaching and testing of vocabulary on textbooks (Nordlund & Norberg, 2020). Since the textbook is regarded as a source of information, it is believed necessary for the improvement of English language education to analyse ESL/EFL textbooks (Catalan & Francisco, 2008). In recognition of the importance of textbooks in language teaching and learning, and with the growing interest in vocabulary learning and teaching, some studies have looked at vocabulary in ESL/EFL textbooks. Due to their differences with regard to the purpose, scope, and language examined, the systematization of those studies is difficult. Within this section, we will shed some general light on the approaches utilized to examine vocabulary in EFL textbooks, while also reviewing in depth the studies that have looked at the representation of different vocabulary constructs in EFL textbooks.

Researchers have implemented different approaches to investigating vocabulary in textbooks (Sun, Ngoc, & Dang, 2020). The first approach has focused on exploring the number of words required to understand both spoken and written texts (lexical coverage). Researchers have provided different estimates of the number of words required for comprehension (Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). The second approach has examined coverage of high-frequency lexical items in ESL/EFL textbooks. The findings of this line of research are vital as they indicate whether some EFL textbooks provide sufficient exposure to the most frequent words (Loughlin, 2012). The third strand of research on EFL textbooks has counted the repetition of word families in EFL textbooks. The findings of these studies provide useful information regarding the role of repetition in vocabulary learning (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010).

Another main area of research has been the representation of different vocabulary knowledge constructs in EFL textbooks. To our knowledge, only three studies (Brown, 2011; Neary-Sundquist, 2015; Vu & Michel, 2021) have exclusively studied this component; yet, despite their low number, these studies differed in their scopes and the language involved. Brown (2011) has analysed nine ESL/EFL textbooks from different publishers; three beginner level, three pre-intermediate level, and three intermediate level, to establish the aspects of word knowledge that the vocabulary exercises attended to in these textbooks. Applying Nation's (2013) taxonomy of different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, Brown (2011) reported that the knowledge aspect of form and meaning received the greatest attention from the nine textbooks, accounting for almost 51.8% of all the analysed vocabulary activities. It was also found that the second and third knowledge facets that received considerable attention were grammatical functions and spoken form, accounting for 29% and 14.8% of all vocabulary exercises, respectively. Few vocabulary activities attended to the other vocabulary knowledge dimensions. Brown (2011) indicated that the attention given to the aspects of word knowledge varied across the levels of the textbooks. In

another study focusing on five beginner-level textbooks of German as an FL, Neary-Sundquist (2015) discovered the vocabulary knowledge aspects addressed in the vocabulary activities in these five textbooks. The findings showed that the five textbooks paid considerable attention to grammatical functions, followed by form and meaning, accounting for 46.4% and 36.4 % of all vocabulary exercises, respectively. The form was the least emphasized aspect of word knowledge. Neary-Sundquist (2015) also reported that none of the activities in the five textbooks addressed the dimension of word parts. Another interesting finding reported in this study was that the proportions of vocabulary activities attending to the different aspects differed across the five textbooks. In their study, Vu and Michel (2021) looked at the vocabulary knowledge dimensions addressed by four upper-intermediate and advanced textbooks of English for academic purposes. The findings revealed that the aspect of grammatical functions received the greatest attention across the four textbooks, accounting for 36.0% of the total examined vocabulary activities, followed by the associations and word parts, which occupied 15.2% and 11.3% of all vocabulary activities, respectively. The least emphasized aspects in the four textbooks were written form, constraints on use, and spoken form. The study also found variations among the four textbooks in the amount of attention given to the different vocabulary knowledge aspects.

From the above, it is clear that, although past studies have provided some useful information regarding the representations of vocabulary knowledge aspects in a range of EFL textbooks, there are still several areas that need to be studied. All of the cited studies examined textbooks produced by international publishers for ESL/EFL learners across the globe. To the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on the representations of vocabulary knowledge aspects in local primary and middle-school EFL textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education in certain EFL countries. This is astonishing given the fact that the number of local EFL textbooks is far greater than that of global textbooks in EFL settings (Nordlund & Norberg, 2020). Moreover, previous studies have focused on textbooks intended for adult learners of English and there is a distinct lack of research targeting textbooks for young EFL learners. The present study, therefore, contributes to our knowledge by exploring how vocabulary knowledge is addressed in the 12 modified English language textbooks used from grade one in Saudi primary school up until the last grade in middle school.

## Method

### *English Language Textbooks*

This study includes a detailed analysis of English language textbooks prescribed by the Saudi Ministry of Education for the primary stage (1<sup>st</sup>–6<sup>th</sup>-grade levels) and the intermediate stage (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup>-grade levels) across Saudi Arabia. They are designed by well-established authors and published by McGraw-Hill Education in collaboration with the Saudi Ministry of Education. The series used at the primary stage is called ‘We Can’ and it is the 2020 edition. It consists of six textbooks of advancing levels, with each textbook being taught at one grade level. According to the authors, by the time students finish level six, they will have the English ability equivalent to Eiken pre-2 level and the Cambridge Young Learners English Test Movers level. Each textbook, which provides a balance of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and vocabulary activities, contains from five to eight units, and appendices. The series implemented in the middle stage is called ‘Super Goal’ and it is the 2021 edition. It consists of six books that are offered progressively to middle-school students from grades 7–9. The first four books contain eight units and the last two contain six units. The series integrates the four language skills. Both series are specifically

designed to be culturally appropriate to the Saudi context for primary and middle-school students. Each unit of these series centres on/around a specific theme and contains high-interest topics that relate to the students' age and interests.

### **Research Procedures**

The analysis included all of the units in each of the 12 chosen English textbooks. However, it excluded workbooks, additional practice materials, the word lists at the end of the book and the appendices. The first and second authors, English language instructors, independently coded the activities listed in Table one.

Table 1. *The number of analysed vocabulary activities per textbook*

Title series	School grade	Grade Level	Number of analyzed activities
We Can, book 1	Primary School	Primary school grade 1	100
We Can, book 2		Primary school grade 2	93
We Can, book 3		Primary school grade 3	109
We Can, book 4		Primary school grade 4	94
We Can, book 5		Primary school grade 5	142
We Can, book 6		Primary school grade 6	139
Super Goal Book 1	Middle School	Middle school grade 7, 1 <sup>st</sup> term	72
Super Goal Book 2		Middle school grade 7, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term	69
Super Goal Book 3		Middle school grade 8, 1 <sup>st</sup> term	82
Super Goal Book 4		Middle school grade 8, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term	81
Super Goal Book 5		Middle school grade 9, 1 <sup>st</sup> term	95
Super Goal Book 6		Middle school grade 9, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term	105

To achieve a high-reliability rate, the activities were analysed using the following steps. The first step involved identifying the vocabulary activities in the 12 textbooks that met Brown's (2011) description of a vocabulary activity: "any activity that focuses on form, meaning or use of an item or items" (p. 87). This definition takes into account those activities that are integrated within sections of the textbook other than pure vocabulary sections, for example, grammar, listening, reading and speaking activities that reflect some aspects of vocabulary knowledge. Thus, the analysis not only targeted activities that were explicitly labelled vocabulary, but also included any

other activities that were given a different label, such as writing, listening or reading exercises, but were still related to vocabulary. Additional materials found at the end of the textbook in the form of appendices and extra practice were not analysed since these are not necessarily taught by the teacher in the class.

In the following step, the extracted activities were classified utilising Nation's (2013) classification of vocabulary knowledge components. The coders first reviewed Nations' taxonomy of vocabulary knowledge, along with the examples provided by the similar studies of Brown (2011) and Vu and Michel (2021) and then decided which vocabulary knowledge dimension(s) the identified activities addressed. Some of the identified activities were straightforward in the sense that they attended to one knowledge dimension. For example, the aspect *word parts* were explicitly addressed in some activities: 'complete the sentences, using the correct form of the adjectives. Other analysed activities were less straightforward as it was sometimes difficult to decide on the vocabulary knowledge dimension that the activities attended to. A good example of this is activities that ask students to find and write greetings and farewells. This activity could target more than one knowledge aspect. To form a correct decision, the activity instructions were carefully considered, and the teachers' manual was consulted. After coding, the inter-rater reliability between the raters was 98%; for activities where the coders disagreed on the vocabulary knowledge aspects involved, these were discussed until a consensus was reached.

## Findings

### Primary Stage English Coursebooks

As can be seen from Table two, the general category of vocabulary knowledge that received the greatest attention across the six textbooks is *form*, as it accounted for 55% of all activities in the six books. However, in this category, the number and percentages of activities that addressed the different aspects of form were uneven. The spoken form represented more than 45% of the total activities, while the written form accounted only for 8%. However, word parts were not targeted in any of the six language textbooks. The attention devoted to the spoken and written forms differed noticeably in the six textbooks. What stands out is that the number of activities addressing spoken form knowledge increased in the higher grades two and six ( $n = 59$  and  $60$ , respectively) compared to the lower grades. However, there was no such increase for the written form; the lower grades two and four contain the highest number of activities attending to the written form ( $n = 13$  and  $12$ , respectively).

Table 2. *The number and percentage (in brackets) of activities addressing the different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge across the six English language textbooks adopted in the primary stage*

Vocabulary Knowledge dimensions		English Language Textbooks Used in the primary Stage						Mean%	SD %
		Grade1	Grade2	Grade3	Grade4	Grade5	Grade6		
Form	Spoken Form	45 (45%)	49 (52%)	54 (49%)	41 (43%)	59 (41%)	60 (43%)	45.5	4.1
	Written Form	6 (6%)	13 (13%)	4 (3%)	12 (12%)	10 (7%)	10 (7%)	8.0	3.7

	Total for Form	51 (51%)	62 (66%)	58 (53%)	53 (56%)	69 (48%)	70 (50%)	55.8	10.2
Meaning	Form and Meaning	43 (43%)	29 (31%)	42 (38%)	37 (39%)	58 (40%)	59 (42%)	38.8	4.2
	Total for Meaning	43 (43%)	29 (31%)	42 (38%)	37 (39%)	58 (40%)	59 (42%)	38.8	4.2
Use	Grammatical Functions	6 (6%)	2 (2%)	9 (8%)	4 (4%)	15 (10%)	10 (7%)	6.17	2.8
	Total for Use	6 (6%)	2 (2%)	9 (9%)	4 (4%)	15 (10%)	10 (7%)	6.17	2.8
Overall Totals		100 (100%)	93 (100%)	109 (100%)	94 (100%)	142 (100%)	139 (100%)		

The second general category of vocabulary knowledge that received a considerable amount of attention was *meaning*, representing 38.8% of the activities found in the six language textbooks. However, only one knowledge aspect within this category, *form and meaning*, was addressed in the six textbooks. The percentage of activities that attended to form and meaning was 38.8% of the total activities. The higher grades five and six dedicated more attention to this dimension of vocabulary knowledge (58% and 59% respectively) than the lower grades. No activities in any of the six textbooks attended to any other components of this category.

The least emphasized general knowledge category in the six textbooks analysed was *use*, which accounted for only 6.17% of the total activities. Similar to meaning, only one aspect (grammatical functions) within this general category was represented in the six textbooks. However, the six textbooks represented this aspect differently. The highest percentage of activities (10%) attending to this aspect was found in the grade five textbook. The grade two textbook dedicated the least amount of attention (2% of activities) to the grammatical functions aspect among the six graded textbooks.

### ***Intermediate Stage English Textbooks***

Regarding the intermediate textbooks, of the three general categories of word knowledge, it was evident that *meaning* consistently received the greatest attention across the six different textbooks, representing 50% of the total number of activities that focused on the different aspects of word knowledge (Table three). The number of activities addressing this category in the six textbooks was, however, disproportionate. Within this category, it was clear that the subcategory *form and meaning* were by far the most common, accounting for 41% of the activities focused on the general category of *meaning* across the six coursebooks.

Table 3. *The number and percentages (in brackets) of activities addressing the different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge across the six English language textbooks adopted in the Intermediate Stage*

Vocabulary Knowledge dimensions		English Language Textbooks Used in the Intermediate Stage						Mean%	SD %
		1-1	1-2	2-1	2-2	3-1	3-2		
Form	Spoken Form	8 (11.1%)	8 (11.5%)	8 (9.7%)	8 (9.8%)	6 (6.3%)	6 (5.7%)	8.5	2.5
	Written Form	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.0	0.0
	Word Parts	2 (2.7%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.2%)	5 (5.2%)	4 (3.8%)	2.0	1.7
	Total for Form	10 (13.8%)	9 (13.0%)	8 (9.7%)	9 (11.1%)	11 (11.5%)	10 (9.5%)	11.0	1.7
Meaning	Form and Meaning	21 (29.1%)	18 (26.0%)	15 (18.2%)	17 (20.9%)	16 (16.8%)	29 (27.6%)	22.6	5.3
	Concept and Referents	16 (22.2%)	11 (15.9%)	13 (15.8%)	16 (19.7%)	24 (25.2%)	25 (23.8%)	19.8	4.2
	Associations	4 (5.5%)	10 (14.4%)	16 (19.5%)	8 (9.8%)	10 (10.5%)	6 (5.7%)	10.3	5.4
	Total for Meaning	41 (56.9%)	39 (56.5%)	44 (53.6%)	41 (50.6%)	50 (52.6%)	60 (57.1%)	54.0	2.7
Use	Grammatical Functions	21 (29.1%)	21 (30.4%)	30 (36.5%)	31 (38.2%)	34 (35.7%)	35 (33.3%)	33.5	3.5
	Total for Use	21 (29.1%)	21 (30.4%)	30 (36.5%)	31 (38.2%)	34 (35.7%)	35 (33.3%)	33.5	3.5
Overall Totals		72 (100%)	69 (100%)	82 (100%)	81 (100%)	95 (100%)	105 (100%)		

The other two subcategories, concept and referents and associations, received some attention. The second subcategory, concept and referents, accounted for more than 36% of the activities addressing *meaning* found in the six textbooks. The least attention was devoted to the component *associations*, which accounted for around 19% of the activities attending to meaning in the six textbooks, with no clear trends across the six textbooks. Although the attention afforded to this general word knowledge category, *meaning*, was somewhat varied in the six textbooks, there was an increase in the number of activities attending to *form and meaning* in the last level ( $n = 29$ ) compared to the first five levels ( $n = 21, 18, 15, 17,$  and  $16$ , respectively) and similarly in the last two levels ( $n = 24$  and  $25$ , respectively), compared with the first four levels ( $16, 11, 13,$  and  $16$ , respectively), as was the case for *concept and referents*.

The second general category of word knowledge that merited a considerable amount of attention was *use*. It accounted for more than one-third of the total activities (33.5%) addressing the various dimensions of word knowledge in the six examined textbooks. However, the aspect of grammatical functions was the only aspect addressed within this global category, *use*. The other

two aspects (collocations and constraints on use) were not been addressed in any of the six textbooks. The grammatical functions aspect was the most prominent in the six textbooks. They placed a clear focus on grammatical functions and there was a noticeable increase in the number of activities from the first two levels ( $n = 21$  and  $21$ , respectively) to the next four levels ( $n = 30$ ,  $31$ ,  $34$  and  $35$ , respectively).

The third general category, *form*, was the least attended to category across the six analysed textbooks, representing only 11% of the total analysed activities. The most outstanding aspect in this category was *spoken form*, which accounted for 8.5% of the total activities. Word parts received some attention in each of the textbooks except coursebooks 2-1. No activities were attended to the *written form*. Looking at Table three, it can be seen that there were some differences in the amount of attention given to each word knowledge aspect within this global category. There was a noticeable decrease in the number of activities addressing the spoken form as the level increased. That is, in the first four levels eight activities were focused on *spoken form*, and this decreased to six in the last two levels. In contrast to this finding, fewer activities addressing word parts were found in the first four levels ( $n = 2$ ,  $1$ ,  $0$ , and  $1$ , respectively) compared to levels five and six ( $n = 5$  and  $4$ , respectively).

## Discussion

The current study investigated the aspects of vocabulary knowledge represented in the McGraw-Hill books modified for the Saudi context. It focused on the “We Can” series, which is taught to primary levels one to six, and “Super Goal”, which is aimed at the intermediate school level (grades seven to nine). The main findings of the first research question were that textbooks placed a greater weight on activities that targeted form (55%), followed by meaning (38.8%) and finally use (6.3%). Regarding the study’s second research question, the findings revealed that meaning was the highest word knowledge aspect targeted (41%), followed by use (33.5%) and then form (11%). The following sections discuss the main findings of the 12 textbooks according to their form, meaning and use.

### Form

Concerning the form, it received the highest level (55.8%) of attention of the three vocabulary knowledge aspects at the primary textbook level, while it was the least attended to the aspect of word knowledge (11%) in the intermediate books. Regarding the aspect of knowledge of the spoken word, there was a noticeable difference in its weight in the primary (45.5%) and intermediate textbooks (8.50%). One explanation for this is that at the primary levels, greater importance is attached to building up EFL learners’ receptive (Listening and reading) vocabulary mastery, which is generally mastered before productive mastery (writing and speaking) because the latter requires knowledge of more words (González-Fernández & Schmitt, 2017, Schmitt, 2010). Another proposed reason to stress the spoken vocabulary form is its crucial role in oral communication. Regarding English, there is a consensus that knowledge of around 2,000-word families provides the lexical coverage required to engage in short daily conversations (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2003; Nation & Meara, 2010, Schmitt, 2000). This could explain why the “We Can” series stressed this aspect the most at the primary stage, especially in the latter grades five and six.

To our surprise, aspects of the written form of vocabulary knowledge were scarcer in the six intermediate books (0.0%) than in the primary stage (8.0%), which were both less than the spoken form. This was also found in Brown’s (2011) study as the average content of the spoken

vocabulary form in the nine language textbooks investigated in his study was higher (14.8%) than the written form (2.7%). The same findings were also reported by Vu and Michel (2021) in their study of vocabulary aspects addressed in EAP textbooks. One reason for this put forward by us is that due to the different orthographic systems used by Arabic and English, young EFL learners must be exposed early on to the written form of the target language. It was found that the primary textbooks provided some experiences of the written aspect but it differed randomly across the six textbooks.

Interestingly, activities on word parts were not found in the primary textbooks, only in the intermediate books (14.3%). One possible reason for this might be that some word knowledge aspects are amenable and can be learnt intentionally word part while others like collocations are much more difficult to teach; they are unintentionally acquired through exposure to the EFL/ESL language (Schmitt, 2008). This also explains the absence of collocations in all the books investigated in this study. A second reason is that at the primary stages, Nation (2001) recommends that words should be learnt as wholes, and at the latter stages of learning the strategy of word parts can be introduced. Knowledge of word parts is a vital strategy for learners as it affects their success (positively and negatively) in inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words (Nation & Webb, 2011). Another possible reason for the lack of activities on word parts could be that these books were modified and adapted to suit Saudi learners, who use English as a foreign language and not as a second; thus, more stress is placed on crucial aspects of word knowledge like form meaning, rather than on word parts or collocations. In addition, this could be related to the basic primary language level of the learners using the primary textbook, which is why the aspects of word parts began to appear later in the intermediate-level textbooks, especially for the highest-level textbooks 3-1 (5.2%) and 3-2 (3.8%).

### *Meaning*

Regarding the dimensions of vocabulary knowledge, only form and meaning were found in the primary textbooks, while form and meaning, associations, concepts and references were found in the intermediate-level textbooks. Knowledge of vocabulary meanings affects children's abilities to understand and thus use words appropriately in the four language skills (Sinatra, Zygoris-Coe, & Dasinger, 2012). This explains why the aspect of form and meaning was the most highlighted in the primary textbooks, while for the intermediate textbooks it was the most stressed vocabulary activity. Regarding form and meaning in the primary textbooks, there was a slight difference between the last two textbooks, with one activity more for Grade six, while Grade two had the least activities focusing on meaning. On the other hand, the intermediate textbooks focused the most on form and meaning word knowledge in the highest book (3-2), interestingly followed by books 1-1, which was the lowest language book at this stage. Overall, by looking at these different levels at the primary and intermediate levels there seems to be a trend to focus on form and meaning aspects in these early stages and gradually increasing until the last school levels. Thus, as learners progress in their learning, they are exposed to more words (Brown, 2011). In some levels (for example, Grade 2, 2-1) this gradual increase pattern was not maintained. We rationalize this due to the modified version of the book, thus limiting some topics and thus words which are not appropriate for the Saudi context.

Next, concepts and referents were the second largest meaning aspect found in the six intermediate textbooks, accounting for 19.8% of the vocabulary activities. Lexical activities targeting concepts and referents were found in books 3-1 and 3-2, the highest proficiency level

books for the “Super Goal” series. According to Neary-Sundquist (2015) and Nation (2001), concepts and referents and associates provide learners with insights about the target language culture, since their underlying assumptions about what is included in a word are influenced by cultural factors.

Surprisingly, concepts and referents and associations were not found in any of the low-level primary textbooks. One proposed explanation is due to the culturally modified textbook for the Saudi context, some topics including their concepts and referent and associations might be absent in the primary textbooks. Another explanation lies in the fact that at young primary levels, the focus is on learning the meaning of words and building learners’ vocabulary size with the basic form-meaning aspect. Then as learners progress, they can be slowly introduced to concepts and referents and associations for inadequate knowledge of these aspects might lead to a breakdown in communication (Vu & Michel, 2021).

Finally, the least attention was given to associations; activities for these varied across the six intermediate textbooks, with the most activities in the two highest-level books, 3-1 and 3-2. In Neary-Sundquist’s study (2015) on German textbooks, associations (mean 2.7%) were found more than concepts and referents (mean 0.8%), which contradicts the findings of the current study where more activities targeted concepts and associations than associations (Table three). One explanation is that this is due to the differences in the L1 languages German and English, and how the textbooks’ authors incorporated the importance of these vocabulary knowledge aspects and their importance for the EFL learner.

### *Use*

In the present study, this was the vocabulary knowledge aspect least included in the six primary books (6.17%), while it was the second largest in the intermediate ones (33.50%). Only activities related to the grammatical functions of the vocabulary items were found in the current study. At the primary level, most activities for grammatical functions were found in the Grade five textbooks (10%), followed by Grade six (10%), while the Grade two textbooks had the least activities (2%). On the other hand, there was a gradual increase in these activities throughout the intermediate textbooks, with the highest number in the advanced book, 3-2. It is clear to see that the coursebook writers have placed the greatest weight on the vocabulary used in the form of grammatical functions, not only as the books go up a level but also in terms of moving from primary to intermediate textbooks.

Interestingly, there were no activities that stressed collocations or constraints of use throughout the 12 books. One explanation for this is indirect vocabulary learning. Ellis (1994) suggested that form, collocations and grammatical functions can be learnt by a learner indirectly through exposure (reading, listening) and that learning can be enhanced by raising students’ consciousness through explicit instruction (direct learning). This is also supported by other researchers (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008), who recommend that word form and meaning should be taught directly, while more contextualized aspects such as grammatical functions and collocation should be taught incidentally (indirectly). However, as learners progress in their language learning, they need to understand how lexical words fit together (Brown, 2011). Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case in the intermediate textbooks, which should begin to expose learners to such words.

As previously mentioned, to the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated the vocabulary knowledge dimensions represented in local EFL textbooks approved by the Saudi

Ministry of Education for Saudi primary and intermediate school students. This study is thus the first to do this, but it also has some limitations. First, the study only investigated the aspects of vocabulary knowledge represented in the primary and intermediate McGraw-Hill course books. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of which word aspects are represented in the above series would also entail investigating the secondary-level textbooks. This would help to understand how the representation of words and their aspects increase, change or decrease as learners progress in their language levels. For example, a word's written form, grammatical functions and constraints on use were not found in the intermediate textbooks in our study, but they could become a critical aspect at the secondary level. The second limitation is that only the textbooks were studied in this research – the teachers' and students' workbooks were not part of the current study. Including the teachers' textbooks could reveal the author's aim, focus, and approach to teaching vocabulary. Such insights could be triangulated with teachers' classroom observations to see which vocabulary knowledge aspects are taught in class. Interviewing the textbook authors would allow us to further understand the rationale underpinning the language exercises, their presentations and their distribution in the textbook. A final limitation of the current study was that the workbooks, appendices (phonic practice) and repetition drills were not analyzed.

### Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the aspects of vocabulary knowledge represented in the McGraw-Hill course books modified for Saudi primary and intermediate EFL learners. It was found that word form was the most represented word aspect at the primary level, while for the intermediate level it was meaning. More specifically, the spoken form was stressed more for the primary learners while form and meaning were emphasised for the intermediate learners. Another interesting finding was that word parts were only presented at the higher language level. Regarding the aspects of meaning, concepts, and referents, followed by associations, were only found in intermediate-level textbooks. Finally, in terms of vocabulary use, grammatical functions were found in both textbooks but were given more weight in the intermediate textbooks.

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