The Impact Of English Antonyms On Intermediate-Level Arab Learners: A Study Of Reading Comprehension And Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of teaching English antonyms to intermedia level Saudi students having Arabic as a second language. It utilizes a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of teaching English antonyms on intermediate-level Arab learners, with an emphasis on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Recognizing antonyms as an important part of vocabulary, this research argues that learning antonyms through specific multiple-choice question strategies improves learners' ability to grasp word meanings and apply them in different contexts. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the study reviews specific literature to draw variables showing the impact of these strategies in teaching antonyms. The variables show the impact of antonym teaching strategies, specifically on vocabulary retention. Following these activities, survey questions were distributed along with semi-structured interviews of selected students, and the collected data were gathered for analysis. The findings show that explicit instructions when teaching antonyms not only improve both comprehension and retention but also boost confidence and belief in their learning and vocabulary increase. Qualitative analysis of the students' responses also demonstrates the same impacts, which are compared with the quantitative results, showing how antonym-focused activities through different contextualized methods in ESL pedagogy in the Saudi context lead to the conclusion about using a targeted instructional approach focusing on the teaching of antonyms.

Keywords: Antonyms, Vocabulary Acquisition, Reading Comprehension, Explicit Instruction, Arab Learners, English as a Second Language (ESL)

Introduction

Whereas vocabulary acquisition is recognized as a central point in language proficiency, it also links communication with comprehension (Nation, 2001 & 2022). While teaching vocabulary involves a diversity of methods and approaches, the pedagogy of antonyms within vocabulary teaching instructions poses a challenge. Mastery of antonyms not only widens language competence but also sharpens comprehension and facilitates communication. It is interesting to note that in the ESL context, specifically in Saudi Arabia, teaching antonyms demonstrates how the local language equivalents of these antonyms reflect mirror-images (Altakhaineh & Hajjo, 2019). This research, therefore, investigates how specifically tailored activities in language acquisition, with a focus on antonyms, boost students' language learning abilities and instill in them greater confidence through an expanded vocabulary.

Various studies have been utilized in this type of experimental research to frame vocabulary instructional approaches (Schmitt, 2000), with a primary focus on antonym-focused activities (Altakhaineh & Hajjo, 2019). This research aims to demonstrate how teaching English antonyms to a specific group of students selected from Saudi colleges, using mixed methods, impacts their language learning abilities. This will be achieved following a literature review on vocabulary instruction and antonym teaching, specifically focusing on teaching antonyms to Saudi intermediate level students.

Literature Review

Regarding vocabulary teaching, and specifically the teaching of antonyms, Saleh Al-Shuwairekh is perhaps the first Saudi researcher to complete a doctoral thesis on strategies that learners in Saudi Arabia use to become independent learners (2001, pp. 254-256). This study underscores the importance of individual approaches that learners use in vocabulary acquisition and their impacts on learning. It aligns closely with earlier research by Schmitt (1997), who emphasized the learning of vocabulary and the strategies adopted for second language acquisition (p. 199). Interestingly, while Al-Shuwairekh argued about the overreliance on incidental vocabulary learning quoting Gu and Johnson (p. 255-258), who advocated for making a priority list of such learning, preferring it over intentional learning (p. 646). With focus on the explicit learning process adopted for vocabulary acquisitions, AL-Shuwairkeh has provided a valuable input about Teaching of Arabic as af foreign language, though, it does not directly relate to the

impact of antonym learning in English by Arabic speakers, yet it provides a good starting point about antonym learning in Saudi context.

Another notable study is by Aysha Abdel-Moneim Selim, submitted as her doctoral dissertation at the American University in Cairo. Her main argument centers on the effects of Same Language Subtitling on Arabic language learners, specifically in the field of vocabulary acquisition, without categorization of levels (2011, p. 78-82). However, it seems related to students' engagement and motivation when looking at and reading subtitles. This is almost the same argument that Schmitt (1997) made, that manipulating a wide array of metacognitive strategies for learning words facilitates learners (p. 107). While Selim is relevant in suggesting vocabulary learning strategies that students use, the thrust of her argument is on subtitles used in multimedia tools, and her focus is not on antonyms.

Similarly, Alsaeedi (2017), in his doctoral dissertation, argued about the role of morphological awareness in learning vocabulary and its acquisition within the Saudi EFL context. This Taif-based study led him to conclude that students with advanced morphological awareness scored well on advanced-level vocabulary tests, indicating that such awareness helped them improve their foundational knowledge (pp. 52-53).

Another doctoral thesis by an Arabic researcher is by Nevine Kamal El-Gazzar (2006) from the American University of Sharjah. Similar to Selim's focus on vocabulary acquisition, El-Gazzar's work investigates the use of lexical cohesive devices in the academic writing of Arab students. She argues that the insufficiency of knowledge of collocations, synonyms, and antonyms (p. 98) in the English language is critical for learning vocabulary. She also emphasizes the explicit transmission of vocabulary through pedagogical practices to be applied in the classroom. Her focus on targeted teaching interventions for vocabulary acquisition aligns with the main focus of this research, which is teaching through antonyms.

Although all these studies are linked by their main thematic focus on vocabulary acquisition, they differ in their approaches: learning strategies (Al-Shuwairekh, 2001), motivating tools such as SLS (Selim, 2011), and the importance of lexical cohesion, collocations, and antonyms in pedagogy for vocabulary enhancement (El-Gazzar, 2006). However, a noticeable missing point is the impact of antonym teaching through different ESL activities. Collectively, all of them recommend a holistic approach to vocabulary teaching that addresses both motivation and cognition for ESL learners.

Various studies have stressed the importance of code-switching when learning vocabulary. For example, Majedah Abdullah Alaiyed has highlighted the issue of code-switching with patterns and functions of lexical items. He points out that when teaching English, students strategically alternate between Arabic and English to learn vocabulary. This use of bilingual strategies, according to him, not only aids in comprehension—the main task of teaching—but also adds to vocabulary (2020, p. 262). The suggestion that using code-switching techniques could engage learners more through dynamism and contextualization indicates the use of difficult lexical items (p. 274), though he does not explicitly mention antonyms and related activities.

Moving forward, Zainab Abdullah Al-Kandari (2022), a Kuwaiti scholar and ELT specialist, sheds light on the relationship between comprehension and vocabulary learning. Although her context differs, including the level of students, her insights relate to this research. She discusses how obstacles in English learning are often related to vocabulary knowledge, which hinders comprehension abilities (p. 31). Her perspective emphasizes that an increase in vocabulary leads to improved comprehension, which includes antonyms, though antonyms are not the primary focus of her research.

The same applies to strategies that other learners use for vocabulary acquisition. Nation's (2022) latest analysis has proven that antonyms lead to lexical depth and good comprehension among learners. He stated that specifically antonym-based learning not only increases vocabulary but also stimulates the cognitive processes of learners (pp. 137, 215). His argument aligns with the main aim of this research, though contexts and methods may differ. In an earlier study, Altakhaineh and Hajjo (2019) underscored the same point, focusing on the use of visuals in the classroom for teaching antonyms. They paid particular attention to the learners' abilities, their grasp of English vocabulary, and the benefits of learning antonyms (p. 17). This perspective, however, leads to the usage of multimedia in the classroom. Another study by Elyas and Al-Zahrai (2019) also focuses on the Saudi context of EFL vocabulary retention, arguing that critical thinking skills play an important role. They suggest that studies support the argument that targeted pedagogical interventions increase vocabulary acquisition (pp. 27-28). They conclude that more efforts are required to integrate these strategies into the EFL syllabi and classroom materials (p. 28). However, they do not specifically address antonyms or their impacts. Nonetheless, their conclusions about vocabulary acquisition strategies and their impact on students are noteworthy.

An in-depth review of these studies demonstrates that while the acquisition of English vocabulary and its impact on learners, particularly in the EFL Saudi context, has been

explored, there is a lack of in-depth and specifically targeted research on intermediate-level students. This review highlights several critical areas where gaps exist in understanding the impacts or variables relevant to learners. Specifically, there is a significant gap regarding the experiences of intermediate-level learners, their strategies, and how antonym-based activities impact them.

While Al-Batal (2013) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) emphasized vocabulary acquisition and its significance in ESL in general, the specific role of antonyms in language learning remains an unexplored area in the Saudi context. Similarly, Nation (2022) and Altakhaineh and Hajjo (2019) advocated for organized antonym learning strategies for vocabulary retention, and Al-Kandari (2022) established a link between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, recommending antonym instruction. However, empirical evidence supporting these claims is limited.

Furthermore, some hints about antonym instructional approaches can be found in Selim (2011) regarding the usage of multimedia, or in Schmitt (1997) and Alsaeedi (2017) concerning metacognition and morphology. This indicates that antonyms and their instruction in EFL classrooms, specifically in the Saudi setting, require further analysis. This shows the gaps in these key areas that need to be explored. These objectives and research questions of this research will highlight these gaps and how to cover them through data, its collection and analysis.

Objectives and Research Questions

Objectives

1. Investigating the extent to which explicit teaching of English antonyms increases Saudi intermediate-level students' reading comprehension ability.
2. Examining the impact of antonym-based activities on vocabulary acquisition and retention.
3. Identifying and analyzing teaching English antonyms to intermediate-level Arab learners and their impacts on their learning ability.

Research Questions

1. To what degree does instruction for antonyms teaching improve reading comprehension scores for intermediate-level Arab learners?

2. How does participation in antonym-focused activities affect retention of the English vocabulary in Saudi intermediate-level learners?
3. Which specific impact emerges among the students following antonym vocabulary teaching exercises?

Methodology

Selection of Variables

The following key variables have been identified to be analyzed for understanding the impact of English antonyms on intermediate-level students:

- **Learner Perceptions:** It has been found that students' perception of antonym learning is essential for developing effective pedagogical approaches (Schmitt, 1997). This study investigates these perceptions through a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.
- **Antonym-Focused Activities:** The literature review also shows that student engagement in activities specifically targeting antonyms can improve vocabulary acquisition and retention (Altakhaineh & Hajjo, 2019). This study investigates the impact of various antonym-focused activities on vocabulary improvement.
- **Reading Comprehension:** The literature review also establishes a strong link between vocabulary knowledge, including antonyms, and reading comprehension improvement (Al-Kandari, 2022). This study, therefore, examines the direct impact of antonym learning on the reading comprehension performance of the selected students.

Participants

This study sample included 200 intermediate-level Saudi students (mean age = 19.5 years, SD = 1.2) enrolled in English language courses at four Saudi colleges: Jubail College of Excellence, Yanbu Industrial College, Jazan University Community College, and Najran University Community College. The selection of the students was based on their English level, determined by standardized English language tests prevalent in each college. A sample size of 50 students from each college was determined using a power analysis (Cohen, 1992) to ensure sufficient statistical power for detecting effects. The reasons behind the selection of these students from these colleges were demographics to evaluate the entire intermediate-level student population of Saudi Arabia.

Materials

Authentic texts from the syllabi of the intermediate-level classes in Saudi Arabia were selected in collaboration with their instructors for instructional activities (Nation, 2001). Focusing on the antonym-based activities, specific lessons were selected, which also included excerpts from newspapers, academic articles, and online sources. Each exercise comprised 50 multiple-choice questions (MCQs) designed to assess understanding of antonym pairs. A wide range of activities included selecting the correct answer, matching, sentence completion, and contextualized usage (Nation, 2001). The materials were carefully curated to ensure relevance to the interests and proficiency levels of the students.

Procedure

A mixed-method approach was applied in the collection of relevant data (Creswell, 2014) using questionnaires for a survey and semi-structured questions for interviews. The students first completed a reading comprehension assessment test comprising pairs of antonyms. This assessment evaluated comprehension and understanding of antonym contexts. The selected students were then given various tests comprising multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, and definition-matching tasks to assess antonym knowledge. Following this, semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) were arranged for a subset of 40 students (10 from each college) to explore their experiences with antonyms, impacts, and strategies. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed among all the students to collect data about their perceptions of antonyms and their impact on learning outcomes.

Data Analysis and Results Discussion

Quantitative Data Analysis of Instructional Activities

The analysis of various instructional activities, comprising different types of questions, shows that students who received explicit instruction in antonyms demonstrated a higher accuracy rate compared to those who did not. This indicates that explicit instruction plays a crucial role in enhancing learners' understanding of antonyms. However, the results from the questionnaire responses differ, as detailed below. They were more advanced in

conversation and forward looking in thinking as shown during the semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire and Research Basis

The construction of survey and interview questions was guided by educational methodologies. Creswell (2014) informed the design of the survey questionnaire, incorporating a diverse set of questions used for tests. The design was further refined through Patton (2002), who advocated for integrating semi-structured interview questions. In the first case, validity and reliability were ensured by aligning the questions with the research questions and objectives, while flexibility was maintained in the case of semi-structured interviews. Dörnyei (2003) also influenced the design with his language learning approach, enhancing the reliability of the questions. Furthermore, Bryman (2016) highlighted the importance of testing and rectification in data administration. Concerning scoring, as it was a quantitative approach to measure student perceptions and attitudes following antonym tests, each response was assigned a value ranging from +2 for "Strongly Agree" to -2 for "Strongly Disagree," allowing for a direct calculation of total scores. This scoring method, suggested by Creswell (2014), facilitated the analysis of trends and patterns in the collected data, highlighting areas where explicit instruction proved most effective.

| Survey Question	1. Strongly Agree (+2 pts)	2. Agree (+1 pt)	3. Neutral (0 pts)	4. Disagree (-1 pt)	5. Strongly Disagree (-2 pts)
1. How confident are you in identifying and understanding antonyms in English texts during tests?	80 * 2 = 160	60 * 1 = 60	30 * 0 = 0	20 * -1 = -20	10 * -2 = -20
2. To what extent do you think learning antonyms has improved your reading comprehension?	70 * 2 = 140	70 * 1 = 70	40 * 0 = 0	15 * -1 = -15	5 * -2 = -10
3. How effective do you think the use of	62 * 2 = 124	60 * 1 = 60	45 * 0 = 0	25 * -1 = -25	8 * -2 = -16

multiple-choice questions to assess antonyms?					
4. Do you think fill-in-the-blank exercises are helpful in learning and using antonyms?	53 * 2 = 106	55 * 1 = 55	50 * 0 = 0	30 * -1 = -30	12 * -2 = -24
5. How beneficial do you consider definition-matching tasks in antonym understanding?	71 * 2 = 142	70 * 1 = 70	35 * 0 = 0	18 * -1 = -18	6 * -2 = -12
6. In your opinion, does understanding antonyms contribute to expanding improve vocabulary?	94 * 2 = 188	65 * 1 = 65	25 * 0 = 0	12 * -1 = -12	4 * -2 = -8
7. Have antonym-focused activities increased your ability to use English language?	50 * 2 = 100	45 * 1 = 45	55 * 0 = 0	35 * -1 = -35	15 * -2 = -30
8. How satisfied are you with the materials used to teach antonyms in your English courses?	60 * 2 = 120	65 * 1 = 65	48 * 0 = 0	20 * -1 = -20	7 * -2 = -14
9. To what extent do you think antonym-focused instruction should be integrated into English language curricula?	92 * 2 = 184	75 * 1 = 75	20 * 0 = 0	10 * -1 = -10	3 * -2 = -6
10. How will you rate the impact of antonym learning activities on your English	92 * 2 = 184	80 * 1 = 80	18 * 0 = 0	8 * -1 = -8	2 * -2 = -4

language proficiency?					

(Table-1, Survey Question Statistics)

Rank	Question	Total Points	Percentage of Achievable (400)
1	To what extent do you believe antonym-focused instruction should be integrated into English language curricula?	243	60.75%
2	How will you rate the impact of antonym learning activities on your English language proficiency?	252	63.00%
3	In your opinion, does understanding antonyms contribute to expanding your English vocabulary?	233	58.25%
4	How beneficial do you consider definition-matching tasks in antonym understanding?	182	45.50%
5	How confident are you in identifying and understanding antonyms in English texts?	180	45.00%

(Table-2, Top Variables Percentage)
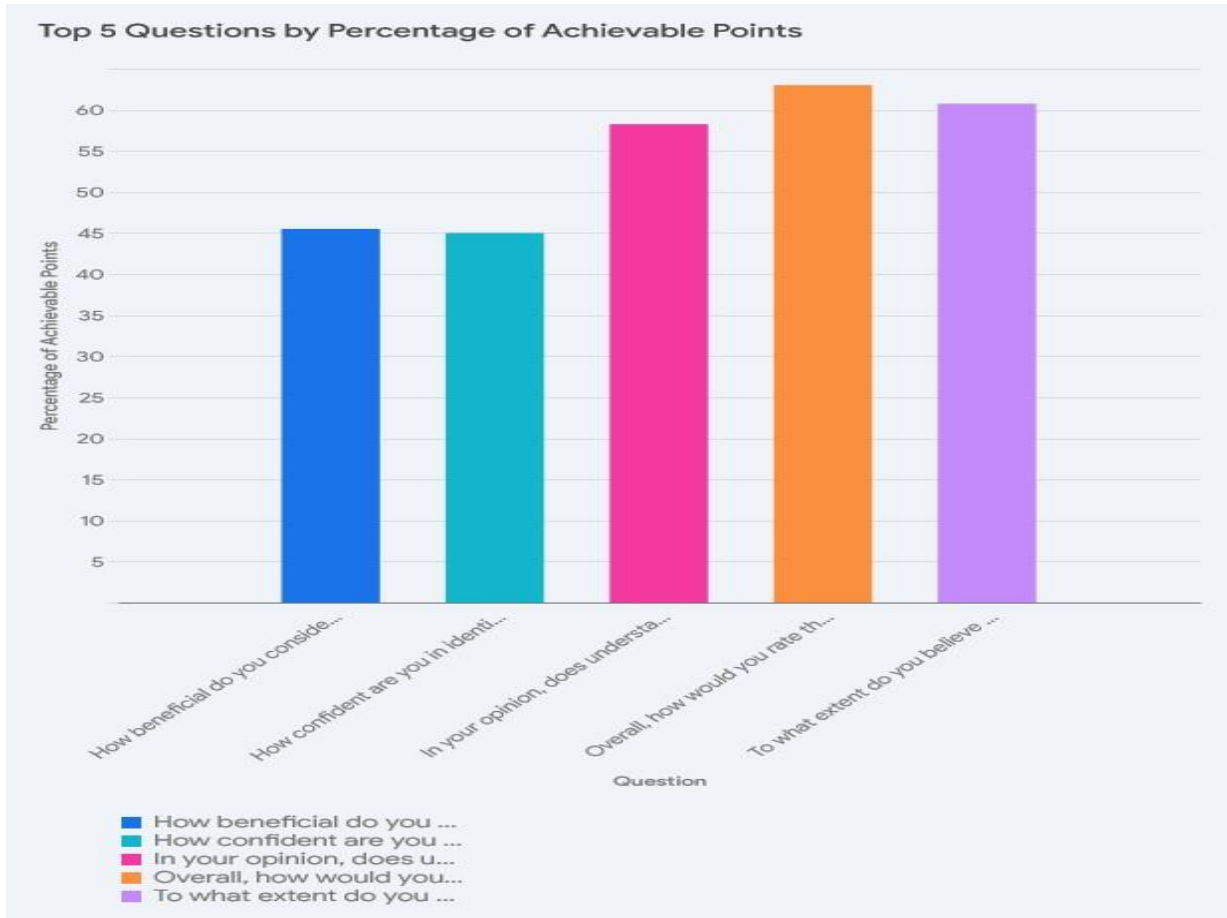
(Figure-1, Variables Graph)

Discussion on Impacts of Top Variables

i.   **To what extent do you believe antonym-focused instruction should be integrated into English language curricula?** This variable about the belief of the students has scored 60.75%, achieving the highest impact with a total of 243 points. It highlights that students believe an antonym-focused instructional approach should be part of their syllabi. They see its benefits in learning vocabulary and have also observed significant improvement in their comprehension.

ii. **How will you rate the impact of antonym learning activities on your English language proficiency?** Although with 63%, this variable has scored higher than the belief variable. Students have agreed with a total of 252 points that antonyms increase their language proficiency in every way. Its high score aligns with their belief.

iii. **In your opinion, does understanding antonyms contribute to expanding your English vocabulary?** Despite being lower on the scale with a total of 233 points and 58.25%, this variable of understanding shows that understanding antonyms plays an important role in learning vocabulary, specifically in the English language. This percentage indicates the effectiveness of the instructional approach as well as the contribution of the pairs of antonyms.

iv. **How beneficial do you think definition-matching tasks in increasing antonym understanding?** With a total of 182 points on the scale, this variable of student opinion stands at 45.50%. This shows that students believe tasks involving antonyms are useful for their knowledge of English vocabulary. Therefore, among the ten variables selected for evaluation, this stands in fourth place, highlighting its academic importance.

v. **How confident are you in identifying and understanding antonyms in English texts? (45.00%)** ? This variable stands in 5th place with a 45.00% impact rate regarding the identification and understanding of antonyms in the textual material provided to the students. It shows their confidence in the effective instructional approach and the validity of the activities. This suggests that the use of such textual material in curricula could serve as a significant booster for the students.

Analysis of Interview Questions

The interview data, as transcribed, has been tested with reference to the variables selected for the quantitative data, revealing five themes based on the variables that have emerged prominently, showing broad-based representation. The responses demonstrate a comprehensive insight into students' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to learning antonyms, highlighting both the benefits and challenges, with significance, proficiency, vocabulary enhancement, definition exercise, and confidence as the top recurrent variable themes in their conversations, as analyzed below.

i. **Importance of Antonyms:** The majority of the students have expressed their belief that teaching antonyms through such activities has given them more knowledge of vocabulary and increased their English proficiency. For example,

one student commented, "Antonyms have given me a good understanding of pairing things together that are opposite." This clarifies that the students apply this learning in real-life situations, as some of them have mentioned using opposite words for ironic purposes in "common life situations." This indicates that they have a good understanding of how learning antonyms provides them with contextual clues about meanings.

ii. **Increase Language Proficiency:** The thematic data shows that student conversations revolve around a correlation between learning antonyms and improving language proficiency. For example, one student commented that he feels more confident in debates and discussions when thinking about antonyms. He says this exercise "has helped me to use words by thinking about antonyms." Additionally, most students have used terms like "confidence," "fluent," and "capable" when discussing their confidence in language proficiency.

iii. **Increase in Vocabulary:** The "increase in vocabulary" theme or variable has come in third place in the thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions. Most of the students have used the words "increase" and "enhance" several times in their conversations about how it impacts vocabulary. Some students state that it provides double learning by suggesting both opposite words and near-opposite words. One student commented, "It is like learning two words for the price of a single word." This comment has echoed in other transcriptions several times with the specific word "double." It has also emerged during manual assessment that students deeply engage with meanings, indicating an intensification of their cognitive processing of lexical items.

iv. **Definition-Matching Task:** Regarding the definition matching task, students have expressed satisfaction, noting that it works as reinforcement. Most of the answers to questions related to this process were positive in tone. One student commented that it is simple but provides more clues about the meanings of a word. These additional clues have shown that they often make visual representations of words with the definitions. Another student remarked, "It is more engaging." Both of these comments are representative of the students' views on their instructional material and this specific activity.

v. **Confidence Building Activity:** This is the fifth theme that has recurred in the transcriptions. Several sentences are highly reassuring about the students' confidence in improving their English reading comprehension. One student shared that "Learning antonyms through MCQs has given me a new way to learn

vocabulary quickly, giving me an edge over others when I use antonyms for sarcasm." Another student commented that after this activity, he often reads newspapers from this perspective, making opposites in his mind. This shows the effectiveness of the teaching approach used for antonyms.

Value of Antonyms and Learning Strategies

Further analysis of the responses also reveals that antonyms play three important roles in learning the English language. The first role is significant in increasing short-term vocabulary through classroom instructional approaches, specifically with the use of multimodality and pre-tailored multiple-choice activities. The second role is the increase in understanding the meanings of words even when there is minimal use of context. The third role of teaching antonyms at the intermediate level is the overall improvement in language proficiency, including reading, writing, and, above all, speaking. Students have commented on their increased confidence in speaking the language with clarity in the meanings of different words, having been taught through antonym activities.

Other than these, the students have used an array of different learning strategies when attempting tests. Although memorization and previous learning have played their roles in their attempts, some students have highlighted the role of cognitive processes in double translation—first finding Arabic equivalents and then retranslating them to discover English equivalents. This double learning has increased their vocabulary and reinforced reading comprehension. Some interviews have also correlated this learning to the confidence discussed above. It is important to interpret this as a positive sign of accelerated learning.

Conclusion

This analysis of interview data and survey quantification shows that learning antonyms through different activities and the use of multimedia enhances learning significantly. The findings reveal positivity, confidence building, vocabulary increase, and improved reading comprehension. This indicates that antonym activities are not just supplementary learning materials but a great way to improve overall language proficiency and increase students' word power. Also, students have recognied that antonyms learning in English is not just an activity but a great way to understand the meanings of a word used in different contexts with a multiplicity of interpretations. It has also transpired during this research that increasing the instructional approach can maximize benefits through the use of diverse sources, materials, and tools for teaching antonyms in different contexts to Saudi

students. The role of specifically Arabic equivalents has come to light for the first time regarding antonym learning, whereas further practice and feedback could improve the learning and instructional material further. Challenges remain, which could be surmounted with specific training in teaching particular sets of antonym pairs to specific student groups at specific levels. However, determining all this, or even one part of it, requires further exhaustive field research.

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