A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF EFL PRIMARY TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING VOCABULARY TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this study, as an on-going article, was to briefly revisit previous studies on vocabulary instruction to young English learners for a working framework of primary teachers’ perceptions and practice along with several of the preliminary and fundamental findings of the current study in connection with the primary EFL learners’ characteristics, contexts to present vocabulary, word meanings in primary classes.

Key words: primary teachers’ perceptions, practice, teaching vocabulary, primary learners

INTRODUCTION

English to primary pupils has become one of the increasing educational demands in ASEAN nations. Vietnam is no exception. Since 2008, a large-scale project, launched by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) - Vietnam, has aimed at the teaching and learning of English in the national educational system, at all levels from primary to tertiary for the 2008-2020 period. One of the prioritized goals of Project 2020 is to successfully introduce a foreign language, mainly English into primary curriculum, which is a challenging task as the majority of in-service teachers of English at primary schools in Vietnam have not been officially trained to teach English to young learners. The missing link in language teacher education between universities with schools in Vietnam is so significant that it needs addressing; therefore, an investigation into primary English in the world, in Asia and especially in Vietnam, an insight on key figures’ perspectives on early language learning and the awareness of the important role of vocabulary in children’s language development aim at shedding light on how in-service English primary teachers should teach English to young language learners effectively. The research hopefully not only creates interactive and dialogic discussions for reflective teaching but also provides information to bridge the missing gaps between university curricula and the young learning communities for quality enhancement, as well as to facilitate well-informed decisions regarding teacher training and language policies of Vietnam.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter not only presents the social context of teaching English to young learners in Asia and in Vietnam but also highlights the leading previous studies that lay strong theoretical framework for teaching vocabulary to young language learners because vocabulary is the critical starting point in as Linse and Nunan emphasized (2005) child foreign language acquisition. In addition to such fundamental theories, a critical review of previous journal articles in this aspect points out the missing gap that is worth researching along with the main areas for an analysis framework on elementary vocabulary instruction.

Key terms:
Young language learners are primary pupils aged from 7 to 11 years age and learning English as a foreign language. Next comes Linse and Nunan (2005)’s very distinctive explanation that vocabulary is the collection of words a child acquires from direct or indirect instruction and word meanings are gradually acquired along with their conceptual development. More specifically, Nunan (2011), from the perspectives of children as aural-visual learners, stated a word consists of a string of letters separated by a white space and of a string of sounds separated by a pause. Words can be classified into nine categories – nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, interjections while vocabulary may be a single word, multi-word units called language chunks and collocations.(p. 109-110). In discussing word meanings, due to their vague boundary, vocabulary and words are used synonymously. Another key term perception, in the applied linguistic light, is regarded as recognition or understanding by Richards and Schmidt (2002) or Borg (2006) so the working definition of teachers’ perceptions of vocabulary instruction in this research is as follows:

Perceptions of teaching vocabulary to primary pupils involves primary EFL teachers’ recognition and understanding of YLEs’ vocabulary learning and teaching which lead to teaching behaviours or teaching practice in primary classes.

Primary English Education
Along with the world trend, Asia has witnessed such a worldwide spread of English language learning for learners of all ages and at various levels. The fact that ASEAN has been established with its increasing membership since 1967 and English has been the common language among the ASEAN community has boosted its very vital role in foreign language education and teacher
Another reason for such recognition that the scope of its users has been expanded to young learners in many Asian countries has brought both opportunities and challenges for not only learners, teachers but teacher trainers, researchers, educational administrators and policy makers as well.

Based on a lot of leading researchers in this field (Arthur & Cremin, 2006; Doyé & Hurrell, 1997; Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011; Gordon, 2007; Moon, 2000), many Vietnamese methodologists and applied linguists, backed with their empirical studies, have drawn attention to young English education through their profound analysis of Vietnamese primary schools settings. For example, at a macro planning level, Nguyen & Nguyen (2008) depicted the picture of Vietnamese early English learning in the model of Language-in-Education policy and planning for merits and demerits while Pham (2013), from top-down and bottom up angles, analyzed both positive impacts of the government primary language policy and the obstacles and factors that hinder primary English teachers from their effective practice. Nguyen (2012) interpreted Vietnamese early English education in rural areas on the framework of Language in Education policy. Unlike the above insiders’ views, David Hayes, after an empirical study on early English education in Vietnam, pointed out five suggestions for the implementation in the contexts (cited in British Council, 2008, p. 85). First is the compulsory introduction of English into primary schools. Along with English are compulsory foreign languages in primary schools. Thirdly, communicative approaches and European testing and assessment should be formally addressed. Fourthly, a baseline survey of existing capacity should be carried out to ensure the success of primary English. Last but not least, in preparation for the introduction of English, integrated planning should range from development of primary ELT pre-service training courses for future teachers/trainer-training, in-service training for teachers presently in school, in-service training for head teachers to transition between primary and secondary sector English teaching. Meanwhile, Moon (2009) highlighted one of the elements for success in the low resourced contexts of Vietnam – it’s the primary teacher of English because they are key players in primary classes who decide what to teach and how to teach. According to the 2014 statistics of the Department of Primary Education – MOET, Vietnam, there were 17,596 primary teachers of English in 63 provinces in Vietnam. However, primary English teacher education has not been very popular; and the majority of primary teachers of English in Vietnam are trained to teach English learners in general instead of the young-aged learner they should learn how to teach. Fortunately, it is until recently that the National Foreign Language 2020 Project has
sparked primary teaching methodology in conjunction with prestigious universities and the British Council.

No matter where the views are from - inside or outside, what both sides have to do in common is the spread and the emphasis on young English learners as well as the elaborate preparation of teaching staff especially in terms of training, language proficiency and language teaching methods.

The characteristics of young foreign language learners:

For an in-depth exploration into primary English teaching and learning, it is very important to study the characteristics of the target learner. A lot of scientists have attracted to the characteristics of young EFL learners in terms of precedent L1 word concepts, language competence, or sociocultural and economic backgrounds. From cognitive lens, Brown (1987) pointed out the variables that distinguish young learners from adult learners are developmental cognition, sensory input, short attention span and concrete thinking ability (p. 87-92), which is align with Howard Gardner’s assumptions that children often bring their personalities into their language classes varying individually across eight types of intelligence – linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. Similarly, Halliwell (1993) looked at child foreign language learning in terms of their ability to grasp meaning indirectly, creative use of limited language resources, instinct for play and fun, imagination and interaction and talk. From another psycholinguistic lens, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) indicated the use of first language as a mediator for interaction is a crucial need in young classes; however, the further their L2 learning progresses, the less L1 can be used. Even, Gordon (2007) employed the Natural Approach to trace back language instinct - an innate ability for L1 learning in order to psycho-linguistically explain children’s natural abilities with a second or foreign language because at the primary school age, young pupils are competent users of their mother tongue. In fact, children who are more incidentally exposed to close-to-life contexts can pick up everyday vocabulary better than those who do not. Such profile was briefly portrayed by Moon (2000) with the following seven psycholinguistic features - using language creatively, going for meaning, using ‘chunks’ of language, having fun, joining in the action, talking their heads off and feeling at home (p. 10). Scott and Ytreberg (1990), while grouping children into their two age groups, mostly shared the above common characteristics during their growth along with their own assumption that children are likely to understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used so they use
language skills long before they are aware of them in their language development (p.10). Contrarily, according to Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincas (1980), McKay (2008), Willmott (2003), the nature of the young learner seems not to differ noticeably from nation to nation. No matter where they are from, vocabulary topics, daily activities and essential needs are related to young children’s life at home, at school, at play grounds, etc..

Vocabulary instruction to children:

From previous leading psycholinguistic and ELT methodological literature review (Halliday, 2003; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; Nation, 2001; Nunan, 2003; Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1986), the common emphasis on vocabulary instruction has been considerably highlighted in young foreign language classes. S. Richards and Villiers (1997), defined vocabulary as the most basic building blocks for young learners initially to employ to express what is going on in their minds. The opinions above are quite aligning with the importance vocabulary plays Cameron stressed (2001, p.72): “Language consists of words. Vocabulary is the collection of words that an individual knows. Building up a useful vocabulary is central to the learning of a foreign language at this stage.” Also Linse and Nunan (2005) suggested six principles for teaching vocabulary to younger and older learners as follows:

1. Emphasize both direct and indirect teaching
2. Teaching vocabulary words before a new activity
3. Teaching to use context clues appropriately
4. Present multiple exposures to new vocabulary items
5. Give opportunities for deep processing of vocabulary items
6. Have students keep vocabulary notebooks.

Such emphasis was highlighted again by the US National Reading Panel (2010) that gave a general picture of vocabulary instruction in reading to children with eight points to ponder - direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text, repetition and multiple exposures, vocabulary types and tasks, computer technology, incidental learning and teaching methods. In *Insights into Non-native Vocabulary Teaching and Learning*”, Maria Do Lorez-Jimesneex pointed out (Chacón-Beltrán, Abello-Contesse, & Torreblanca-López, 2010) there are main lexical aspects in vocabulary teaching practices to FL learners (p. 157) namely selecting vocabulary to teach, presenting vocabulary, practising and recycling vocabulary and, strategy training. In addition, Moon (2005)
highlighted a need to understand young language learners’ characteristics in foreign language development because changing the level from teaching adults to teaching children is a significant challenge to primary teachers in general and to Vietnamese primary teachers of English in particular. It is the need to address the above aspects in young foreign language classes that has opened to the exploration direction in this research.

**A Framework for Elementary Vocabulary Instruction**

From the above literature review, the study framework for elementary vocabulary instruction was adapted from Nunan’s model that synthesizes the above angles in a way that vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly and that the most effective approaches utilize multiple methods of instruction that are appropriate for young aged learners’ young characteristics. Once the primary teachers perceive vocabulary instruction to young learners well does effective vocabulary teaching take place. Considering that effective vocabulary instruction results from both explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction in close connection with the characteristics of young learners for appropriate support, the framework for elementary vocabulary instruction focuses on the primary teacher’s understanding or recognition and their teaching practices in the following aspects:

1. Understanding young language learners’ main characteristics in foreign vocabulary development.
2. Selecting vocabulary to teach.
3. Setting contexts for presenting vocabulary.
4. Communicating word meanings.
5. Establishing words.
6. Practising and recycling vocabulary.
7. Strategy training.

**Research questions**

1. What are primary EFL teachers’ perceptions of teaching vocabulary to young learners?
2. How do the teachers put their perceptions into practice?

**Research methods:**

In search of approaches to teacher cognition and understanding, Barnard and Burns (2012) made a very extensive overview of research methods ranging from questionnaires, narrative frames, focus groups, interviews, observation, think aloud, stimulated recall, oral reflective journals. Consequently, in order to explore into how Vietnamese primary EFL teachers know about
vocabulary and how they see vocabulary instruction to young learners and how they deal with it in class, the study employs a mixed methods approach - quantitative and qualitative as in the working definition is employed in this research, perceptions means primary teachers’ recognition, understanding and beliefs of/about teaching vocabulary and their techniques. Their perceptions can be reflected visually, auditorilly and through their speech so the quantitative and qualitative study employed three approaches respectively questionnaire survey, classroom observations and interviews. To seek for reliability, the quantitative method was attributed to the data collected from a vocabulary instruction-oriented questionnaire while the randomly chosen respondents’ teaching practice for videotaped classroom observations and in-depth reflections upon vocabulary instruction from recorded phone interviews were qualitatively revealed for validity. The purpose of the approach triangulation to perception measurement is for cross-examination for validity and reliability.

**Research subject and scope**

The surveyed subjects were 206 primary EFL teachers from four provinces in Central Vietnam (Binhdinh, Danang, Gialai and Kontum) who were invited to take part in the questionnaire survey with their full agreement. For diversity, the element of localities - both urban and suburban, age, genders, language proficiency level, years of teaching experience, training time, were kept in their confidential records. 86% of the respondents were female teachers aged 21-40 (only 8 males out of 206). As for their English proficiency, their levels ranged from A1 (1 teacher), A2 (7), B1 (25), B2 (127), C1 (10), and the rest kept their language proficiency unrevealed.

**Research Instruments and Procedure**

The study employed three data collection tools in the following order of videotaped class observations, then two questionnaires (one is to explore their perceptions and the other for practice) and then teacher interviews. The instruments that the collected quantitative data from 206 primary EFL teachers were the two 25-item questionnaires for measuring their perceptions and teaching practices. In both questionnaires, all the 25 question items were steered into seven clusters in the framework for elementary vocabulary instruction namely understanding young language learners’
main characteristics, selecting vocabulary to teach, setting contexts for presenting vocabulary, communicating word meanings, establishing words, practising and recycling vocabulary and strategy training. After a small-scale pilot for careful rewording, an official survey was carried out in four provinces in Central Vietnam where 50 primary teachers in each province were randomly invited to fill in the questionnaires with their full consent and careful explanation at their DOETs. Along with the quantitative tools were the two qualitative instruments - videotaped observations and teacher interviews with 24 primary teachers who were randomly chosen from the population of 206 (that is, on average, out of every ten primary teachers, one was randomly chosen for videotaped observations and interviews). Their teaching behaviours in class were monitored to their vocabulary instruction in connection with the 8-clustered framework of the questionnaire. All the observation etiquettes such as prior contact, appropriate schedules, pupils’ distraction minimization were also taken into account. Besides, confidentiality, no evaluation, and returned video clips without any negative influences were reconfirmed to the surveyed teachers for their concerns. Regarding the auditory data, due to geographical barriers and convenience for self-reflection, prior to their recorded phone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews, all the observed teachers were planned to revisit their teaching video clips for phone interviews around their own vocabulary instruction to young learners so that the interviewees felt comfortable and open to share potential issues. Their phone interviews were recorded for multiple reference and evidence illustration with confidentiality.

**Data Processing:**

As mentioned above, the research method is a mixed quantitative and qualitative method. The quantitative data were processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS -version 20.0), which offers a comprehensive set of flexible tools to accomplish a wide variety of data analysis tasks, descriptive statistics, charts and plots of distributions and trends. In fact, with SPSS, both the likert scaled *Perceptions* questionnaire to rate the teachers’ agreement and the 5 likert scaled *Practice* questionnaire to measure frequency of their teaching practices had their Cronbach's Alphas of 0.915 and 0.879 respectively lends the two quantitative instruments their internal reliability scores.

| Perceptions of vocabulary instruction to YLEs | Practice of vocabulary instruction to YLEs |
### Reliability Statistics

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The qualitative data which were used to assess if the teachers’ perceptions of vocabulary instruction matched with their teaching behaviours in classroom involved watching videotaped class observations and then interviewing the target teachers in-depth about their class practice afterwards. Visually, the videotaped class observations were note-taken in an observation form which was categorized on the seven clusters of the questionnaires while the auditory data collected from the recorded phone interviews were used to explore in-depth into underlying reasons or the emerging mismatches between the quantitative and the visual data.

**Findings:**

On the whole, the mean scores of the seven clusters in the working framework indicating the teachers’ perceptions and practice of vocabulary instruction to young learners over 3.00 reflect their positive understanding and teaching practice on this area; however, the differences lie in details as follows:

**Understanding young language learners’ main characteristics**

Teaching young learners differs from teaching adolescent or adult learners; therefore, exploring into perceptions and practice of teaching this learner type provides important insights into what is currently happening in class. As the questionnaire data show there is a noticeable discrepancy between the cluster mean score of perceptions (4.28) and that of their practice (3.94). Their perceptions of the learner’s characteristics seemed to be a little more influential than that of their teaching practice, which could be seen through the quantitative and qualitative data.

Initially, the contribution from instructors is acknowledged during the process of students’ attaining knowledge at the high cluster rate of perception approval (3.9). Nearly one-third of teacher participants, however, were hesitant or even still doubtful about their roles as key players in class.
They seemed to juggle between student-centered teaching and teacher-led instruction, which may probably result from overstressing learner-centeredness, one of the most distinctive features of CLT. Actually, any difference in learner types will decide how much support or scaffolding the teacher should offer to learners. The younger learners are, the more support they need from the teacher. The further young learners progress in their learning, the more support the primary teacher adjusts.

The majority of the respondents (with the mean score of 4.6) agreed about the practical need to gradually increase the difficulty and abstractness levels of vocabulary tasks in order to maintain students’ interest or motivation. In addition, the survey data showed that the primary teachers understood that young learners enjoy learning tasks through games, songs rather than formal learning.

In addition, the visual data of twenty four class observations showed most of the teachers relatively succeeded in conducting practical, stress-free learning activities for young learners. While their teaching went on, the classes were with full of pupils’ happy smiles, bright eyes fixed on the teachers, peers and the blackboards on which they could see the teachers’ big, clear, neat, tidy, print-like handwriting. Or eager hands-up for voluntary engagement, read-aloud, laughters, group competition, running to write or speak, whispers into peers’ ears, movement (sometimes even with tears or long faces for being the losers) were always present in these classes. Such excitement, involvement or participation in primary classes was usually ignited by the teachers who offered input, sometimes walked around to have a look at their pupils’ notebooks, gently stopped during group work or pair work to provide the kids with some vocabulary they wanted to know, or stood so close to the kids that the young learners could see how they visually pronounced some difficult words. Several gentle pats on the kids’ heads, loud instructions for classroom management to attract their attention, detailed reminders for homework, close teacher –pupils rapport through intimately addressing “Cô-Con/ Các Con” could be seen and heard throughout their lessons. These teaching behaviours reflected the teachers’ scaffolding, nurture, encouragement, and various ways to support the learning. All the teachers spent time teaching vocabulary in four skills just as Linse and Nunan (2005) mentioned central of language development was vocabulary learning. All the visual data in young classes which originally stems from language users’ vocabulary repertoire (inner
speech to self or external speech to others) were closely connected with what Linse and Nunan (2005) mentioned central of language development was vocabulary learning.

Regarding to the auditory data, among the twenty four interviewed informants, their English teacher education varied a lot; four teachers received four-year training of English education (hệ thống hợp), three attended four-year program of English education (hệ đại học sự phạm), ten got two-year college degrees (hệ cao đẳng sự phạm), and seven teachers joined in-service programs of English education for four years (hệ đại học tại chức). None of them were formally trained to teach English at the primary level; however, most of them were recently trained by British Council trainers and primary trainers of teachers from Vietnamese universities. They felt confident in their teaching posts but enjoyed learning more about how to teach young learners and get more freedom in their own teaching distribution. In response to the questions about their confidence in teaching, they gave various answers. It was their years of primary English teaching, the real classroom interaction between the teacher and the pupils such as age, classes, kids’ innocence or cuteness, love for teaching children or even their parenting that naturally led them to adjust their teaching, which are the valuable indicators that their perceptions of teaching young learners have been built from original external and internal factors - just those who truly loved children could do.

**Understanding the nature of vocabulary for vocabulary selection**

In comparison of the teachers’ perceptions of vocabulary with their practice in vocabulary choice, there was a very small difference between the two cluster mean scores, 3.88 and 3.79 respectively. It means their understanding went along quite well with their practice choice of vocabulary to teach. To dig deeper it would be essential to see how the teachers responded when they were asked about the nature of vocabulary. Approximately 20% did not agree or make sure that building up vocabulary is central of in child language development while 80.58% stood up for vocabulary instruction. Another concept “Vocabulary and grammar are interdependence” received no or hesitation from 37.87% of the teachers while 62.13% said yes to such connection. Or when being asked whether teaching vocabulary means teaching single words and multi-unit words such as collocations, set expressions or idioms, 66.5% shared the perception whereas 33.5% did not consider vocabulary in that way. Along with the considerable gaps, most of them agreed that to young EFL learners, vocabulary should be largely oral and that vocabulary glossaries. The above considerable differences, to some extent, illustrate that the teachers were not totally aware of the
utmost important role as well as boundary of vocabulary. This gap might go to the explanation that the teachers might be so familiar with their first-hand grammatical concepts of words, phrases or sentences, that they did not realize there is an in-between language unit called lexical chunks that may work as stepping stones for young learners to move from vocabulary to grammar unconsciously and enable them to gain fluency when they communicate. The teachers have a tendency to see vocabulary items analytically whereas young learners regard them as lexical chunks.

From 24 classroom observations, in spite of not fully recognizing the nature of primary learners’ lexical acquisition, most of the instructors picked up words in phrases or collocations to teach and conduct their classes relatively smoothly. One of the explanations for their right choice may belong to the fact that with a view that young learners can communicate quickly, strings of new words in contexts should be taught. Again, according to the data collected from the interviews, primary teachers repeated their analytical tendency to distinguish words, phrases, and sentences clearly as they have been taught. Meanwhile, Lewis (2008) sharing Nation’s assumption about lexical chunks for fluency stressed on these stretches of words in meaningful contexts that enable young learners to be naturally involved in conversations and lead them from words to sentences and then grammar. This is quite in line with the working concepts of vocabulary and young learners’ characteristics employed in this research and adapted to David Nunan’s child-friendly concepts.

**Setting contexts for presenting vocabulary**

Children learn foreign vocabulary in different ways and there are many paths to get children to reach the goals of word learning. The child-friendlier the contexts that primary teachers create are, the better the results in learning vocabulary get as in such age appropriate contexts pupils are actively involved. When a teacher can provide rich and natural physical, linguistic and cultural exposure containing target language that attract pupils’ attention and desire to use, he can use the EFL classroom to simulate the real physical or cultural world, implicitly promote vocabulary awareness, nurture pupils’ linguistic use to help them understand and produce target vocabulary items subconsciously. Such importance reflected through the cluster mean scores of the surveyed teachers’ perceptions and practice of setting contexts for presenting vocabulary respectively 4.21 and 4.07. Their small gap and the slight dominance of perception over practice shed light on the teachers’ understanding and their practice in setting contexts, which might be explained by more
attention has been paid to vocabulary presentation during their previous training and over their real teaching experience at school. In setting contexts, their recognition of the teacher’s impact in their oral proficiency (15.53%) or pupils’ oral activities during implicit presentations 21.37% considerably indicated that their awareness of oral skills in primary classes. Contrary with the low percentages referring to oral activities from the questionnaire, the visual data showed that all the 24 classroom visits were full of songs, sounds, conversations with the support of audio devices such as cassette players, TV, loud speakers. Four of them chose to teach in lab rooms with booths, headsets or headphones, while the rest chose to teach in their traditional classrooms with fixed chairs and tables, chalk and board, however, most classes were equipped with audio equipment such as cassette players, loud speakers. In practice, most of the teachers gave positive attitudes towards oral vocabulary practice and indirect presentation through poems, songs and chants. However, the observation data showed that 24 teachers implicitly presented vocabulary. Songs, TPR activities, pictures, miming, gestures or games for oral practice were mostly preferential but very few of them employed chants and never used poems. One of the explanations for the rare use of poems or chants could be attributed to cultural differences, lack of reference resources and previous training experience while songs and music are quite easily accessible on the Internet. Other activities to set up a new cultural, physical context could facilitate oral practice such as role plays, puppets, pictures, songs or theatrical visual aids were not present. Again the interview data continued to probe for the unseen with the focus on setting up contexts for oral practice. In response to such oral questions, all the teachers knew that children should learn through fun activities, however, they felt too overwhelmed to complete their textbook task loads or to integrate motivating contextual activities within the 35-minute class, not including their weekly teaching overloads. Several factors influencing their creative context designing were time, and rigid physical classroom settings, norms not to make so much noise for the surrounding classes and even their own limited oral proficiency. That was why most of the teachers had the tendency to make best use of cassette players to replace native speaker pronunciation, monitor their time management easily; even some teachers wished to learn how to exploit laboratories effectively or how to organize projects for home links to enhance vocabulary improvement creatively.

**Communicating word meanings**
One of the purposes of setting child-friendly contexts is to convey vocabulary meanings naturally or implicitly to young learners. According to Bloom (2000) p17-22 when children learn the meaning of
words, they have to pick up knowledge associated with a word - *reference* and *categorization*. Two things involved in knowing the meaning of a word are word concept and word mapping, which can be explained to EFL young learners in the following two groups of techniques (Linse & Nunan, 2005), (Stahl & Nagy, 2006), (Takac, 2008) - demonstration through visuals (magazine pictures/flash cards/ filmstrips/ photographs/ images from TV or video); real objects (realia); black/white board drawings; mime, gestures, acting and verbal explanation – giving definition, putting the word in a defining context and translation.

In reaction to the cluster of how to communicate vocabulary meanings, the mean scores of 206 informants’ perceptions and practice are 3.80 and 4.23 respectively, which indicates their practice outdid their perceptions. In spite of having little training in how to convey vocabulary meanings, when interacting with the 35-minute primary classes of English, the teachers had to manage some ways to work out word meanings economically. Due to the teachers’ low English proficiency, L1 translation along with writing L1 equivalents on the blackboard for young learners to copy down may be one of the most preferential strategies which does not only take time or require no preparation but also extend the children’s vocabulary enhancement home from classes for acquaint young learners with their own little responsibility and the welcoming support of their family members.

Another amazing thing is that about one third of the primary teachers hesitated or even seemed not to think that it is essential to explain word meanings to young learners before any activities. The figure reveals that the teachers may either highly evaluate the learners’ compensation capacities to work out when they do not know vocabulary meaning or they may get so familiar with the learner type they have been taught to teach (those are secondary or high school students who are able to guess unknown words from contextual clues). In fact, according to Linse, preteaching new words before any activities will enable pupils to understand and know what to do before being involved in their learning tasks, which results in vocabulary acquisition. The more they understand, the better they use and their deeper processing of the target vocabulary they get.

In feedback to whether to teach new words from the words pupils have known, it is interesting that approximately 50% agreed and strongly agreed, over 20% hesitated and the rest disagreed, which aroused the differences of word concepts that results from cultural differences. The interview data helped to get the explanation for the different responses. For example, according to the interviewed
teachers, they always found it difficult to explain the vocabulary meanings of some kinds of new vocabulary such as food, drinks, animals, clothes, toys, sports, things in the house… Some of them are totally new to young learners and even some known words (i.e. lunch box for kids bringing their own meals to schools) sometimes puzzled teachers and Vietnamese learners (who are just at school half day or even provided with meals at school).

CONCLUSION:
In conclusion, the fact that English is introduced to young children throughout the world has not only urged educational administrators to develop suitable policies and training programs but paved new directions for teachers and researchers to explore as well. In reality, many primary language teachers have had to work in their EFL classes with a lot of struggles and inquiries. It is children’s young characteristics - psycholinguistic, linguistic-cognitive or cultural-cognitive developments that allow them to receive special treatment of instructing English; however, most Vietnamese primary language teachers are not properly equipped with methodological knowledge as well as pedagogical teaching skills to work with young language learners; therefore, what to teach and how to teach English vocabulary to children is worth reconsidering for child-friendly learning. Exploring into the teachers’ perception and practice in the way they teach primary pupils is very fascinating and the more the exploration goes, the more amazing it gets. So far, the above findings about their understandings of the new learner – primary EFL learners, the nature of vocabulary for their vocabulary selection to teach, and the way they explain vocabulary meanings in primary classes have been discussed and revealed in this on-going article.

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