

# The ECRIF Framework for enhancing vocabulary learning among Elementary EFL learners in Ecuador

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## Abstract

Vocabulary plays a fundamental part in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A solid vocabulary base allows learners to understand others and, concurrently, communicate adequately. The effectiveness of the ECRIF (Encounter, Clarify, Remember, Internalize and Fluently Use) framework in triggering vocabulary learning among sixth-grade EFL students in a public school in Ecuador was explored using the mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined to assess how students' vocabulary improved and understand the perceptions of the teacher on using the framework. Fifty-six students were assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group used the ECRIF framework for sixteen weeks, whereas the control group did according to the conventional method of memorization. Data were obtained through pre and post-tests and a semi-structured interview with the teacher of the experimental group. The results showed that the experimental group enhanced their vocabulary significantly in comparison to the control group. The qualitative results indicated that ECRIF helps learners to become more involved, autonomous and motivated through its interactive and student-oriented instruction. Overall, the study concludes that the application of ECRIF can increase students' vocabulary development, retention and independent learning, particularly in cases where there is a common use of traditional methods for teaching English. It is thus advised that EFL teachers adopt the ECRIF framework for strengthening students' vocabulary and presenting them with more stimulating learning experiences.

## Keywords:

ECRIF Framework, Vocabulary Learning, EFL Students, Student-Oriented Instruction.

## Introduction

Students who are learning English need to develop their English vocabulary as it is a fundamental aspect of understanding and producing proper language utterances. The function of vocabulary in language use is central because it helps learners construct meaningful and contextually appropriate output (Robiya et al., 2024; Yuldosheva, 2024). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly at the secondary level, vocabulary proficiency is often a reliable predictor of learners' overall



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language competence and academic success (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Webb & Nation, 2020). As Wilkins (1972) noted, "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Before mastering the four skills, students need to acquire vocabulary to support them during their learning process (Mahamed, 2024; Simamora & Oktaviani, 2020). Vocabulary is therefore central to language learning, as it enables learners to construct meaningful communication. The more vocabulary a learner knows, the easier it will become to strengthen other writing and speaking skills (Sari & Aminatun, 2021; Serang & Sahib, 2023). Moreover, having a good grasp of vocabulary directly impacts the capacity to build language proficiency (Nation, 2022).

In Ecuador, English is considered a key component in the national curriculum and is a compulsory subject from basic education through secondary education. In addition, the Ministry of Education has promoted projects for optimizing English language teaching, curriculum updates, and the provision of teaching support materials. Despite curriculum reforms and teacher training initiatives, many students continue to rely on memorization and translation, resulting in limited productive vocabulary use and the ability to participate in more complex linguistic exercises (Ministerio de Educación, 2020). The 2024 Education First English Proficiency Index ranked Ecuador in the 82nd out of 113 countries in the 'low proficiency' category (Education First, 2024). This result reflects overall communicative performance, and it does not necessarily indicate that students' vocabulary proficiency is low. Some studies in Latin American EFL contexts have shown that English proficiency scores mask significant differences across linguistic components, particularly in students' vocabulary knowledge (Caldas & Békés, 2020; Nur & Jusoh, 2022). In Ecuador, classroom observation and curriculum evaluations indicate that many students can identify isolated words but still have difficulties in using vocabulary productively, especially in tasks that require retrieval, contextualization, and fluency (Caldas & Békés, 2020; Ghalebi et al., 2020). Empirical and theoretical work also shows that there is a persistent challenge in English language teaching, where students often assume passive roles and accomplish a limited mastery of vocabulary use (Boers, 2021; Nation, 2022).

Several factors contribute to this issue, including structural weaknesses in the educational system, insufficient initial and ongoing training for English teachers, and the predominance of grammar-based instruction in many institutions (Selvi & Galloway, 2024). As Richards and Rodgers (2014) also explain, English teaching mainly focuses on memorizing grammar rules and structures, without considering communicative

and intercultural dimensions. Although these approaches have provided a theoretical foundation, they have been widely criticized for restricting learners' ability to use English effectively in real-life contexts (Naghiyeva, 2025).

Recent research on vocabulary acquisition highlights the importance of providing learners with opportunities to move from initial exposure to long-term retention and contextual application of new words (Ayana et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2023). This is especially relevant in schools where vocabulary is often taught through translation and memorization, resulting in limited language production. Hence, pedagogical approaches that promote cognitive engagement, interaction, and repeated retrieval are highly recommended to address issues such as vocabulary-use gaps (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Webb & Nation, 2020). To effectively foster vocabulary development, language teachers and scholars have investigated various pedagogical models. The ECRIF framework, sometimes referred to as an approach in the literature, is considered an innovative framework for improving foreign language teaching. This framework, which stands for 'Encounter, Clarify, Remember, Internalize, and Fluently Use,' was proposed by Kurzweil and Scholl in 2007, and has become popular among EFL teachers, as it facilitates vocabulary learning and enhances students' retention in actual social contexts through language interactions pertinent to their needs and interests. Using the principles of this framework, teachers can design interactive activities that promote students' vocabulary learning and use rather than relying on memorization, as in traditional methodologies. Current studies highlight the advantages of ECRIF in increasing students' vocabulary, as it focuses on active learning strategies that help level out students' linguistic differences in various contexts (Caiza Aucapiña et al., 2022; Okumuş Dağdeleler, 2023).

The ECRIF framework proposes clear and defined phases that guide students from passive reception to active classroom participation. ECRIF also improves students' ability to internalize their linguistic competence inside and outside their classrooms. Due to its flexibility, this framework can be used in tandem with constructivist and task-based teaching methodologies as these frameworks also promote students' cooperation and interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Despite the strong support it has received in Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador's public education system, there is a significant lack of research on the use of the ECRIF in foreign language instruction. By situating the research within Ecuador's socioeconomic and educational context, this study contributes to identifying valuable localized insights that align with global discussions on effective EFL instruction. Sixth grade was selected because it

represents a critical stage in the national curriculum, where learners transition from basic vocabulary recognition to more complex communicative tasks, making it an ideal point to assess the pedagogical value of ECRIF. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the ECRIF framework in enhancing English vocabulary learning among sixth-grade EFL students in a public school in Ecuador. Through this local perspective, the findings could enrich existing research on student-centered vocabulary instruction.

This study revolves around the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the implementation of the ECRIF framework improve vocabulary learning among sixth-grade EFL students compared to traditional vocabulary teaching methods?
2. What are the perceptions of the teacher who implemented the ECRIF framework for vocabulary instruction in the sixth-grade EFL classroom?

## Literature Review

### *The Role of Vocabulary in Language Learning*

Acquiring vocabulary is important because it underpins other language skills, as it plays the highest level of importance within people's verbal interactions (Iwaizumi & Webb, 2022; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Linguists have long recognized the importance of expanding English language learners' vocabulary to bridge the gap between the lexical knowledge of native speakers and that required by learners (Nordlund & Norberg, 2020; Zhang & Liang, 2024). Kim and Webb (2022) underscore the necessity for a robust semantic structural framework in global foreign language teaching programs. Building on this foundation, considerable attention has been focused on facilitating vocabulary learning, particularly in foreign language teaching, thanks to the emergence of the lexical framework and the contributions of scholars who have extensively studied vocabulary acquisition (Lei et al., 2022; Nazeer et al., 2023). Central concerns in this area include determining the size of the English vocabulary, identifying instrumental vocabulary, and defining the most appropriate sequence for teaching high-frequency terms (Caldas & Békés, 2020; Chowdhury, 2024).

Nazeer et al. (2023) investigated the vocabulary expansion strategies and their effect on university-level foreign language learners. The results reveal that, regardless of students' academic achievements, the practice of vocabulary learning strategies is directly related to the size of their vocabulary. The students reported that using vocabulary in context also increased their engagement and helped them better understand the material. To improve

vocabulary learning outcomes, their research suggests incorporating a variety of learner-centered frameworks and supporting strategy-based instruction in foreign language classrooms. In line with this, Kazu and Kuvvetli (2023) found that beginning-level learners tend to rely more on basic determination strategies rather than on the use of cognitive strategies, highlighting the need for instruction that supports useful ways to learn new vocabulary. Finally, Andari (2022) carried out an action research that investigated the effect of flashcard use in language retention among elementary EFL learners. The outcomes indicated increased student involvement and motivation, as they benefitted from visual and repetitive process that the strategy provided.

Acquiring a large number of words is essential when learning a foreign or second language at different proficiency levels. Many students usually find speaking and writing exhausting because they frequently use the same expressions and words, and their conversations are abruptly interrupted due to the lack of words to communicate (Ghalebi et al., 2020). One common issue faced by language learners is forgetting new words despite seeking effective methods to improve long-term memory retention (Nur & Jusoh, 2022). One possible reason is that, unlike syntax and phonology, vocabulary lacks rules. That is, it is unclear to learners which rules apply when using vocabulary items in a dialogue or short interaction. Language learners still face constant evaluations, as vocabulary has traditionally been assessed through tests. Consequently, learners often dedicate significant time to memorizing word lists and depending on bilingual dictionaries as their communication tools (Kurniarahman, 2023). As a result, language educators are increasingly acknowledging the significance of vocabulary acquisition and investigating various methods to assist students in expanding their vocabulary (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020).

Much of the research on vocabulary acquisition strategies typically pinpoints the most effective techniques along with the development of strategy taxonomies (Citrayasa et al., 2022; Mohammed, 2023). EFL instructors also underscore the value of incorporating stimulating activities to help students achieve lexical proficiency, thereby fostering confidence and self-esteem (Samachalam et al., 2025). Thus, vocabulary learning is essential to students' academic success, as most formal and informal information is communicated in the English language. Consequently, vocabulary learning strategies in language contexts are crucial tools for EFL teachers to help students achieve their educational goals (Serang & Sahib, 2023). Despite its importance, many EFL students struggle with difficulties in learning vocabulary. Learners frequently experience difficulty remembering and using new words, especially when

instruction presents them in isolation and relies on memorization, which hinders long-term retention and meaningful communication (Boers, 2021). These traditional frameworks often fail to promote effective student participation or accommodate diverse learning styles, resulting in frustration, inadequate vocabulary growth, and poor linguistic performance (Nation, 2022).

### *The Emergence of ECRIF in Vocabulary Instruction*

The ECRIF framework, proposed by Kurzweil and Scholl (2007), focuses on the learning process students experience when using the target language. In this way, the teacher can rely on ECRIF to plan lessons and adapt coursebook materials to activities conducive to learning. ECRIF was later described as a strategy that allows moving from teacher-centered to student-centered lessons. Similarly, it was asserted that ECRIF is a student-centered strategy that allows students to interact with and use materials independently (Al-Qahtani, 2022). Furthermore, ECRIF was described as a 'framework system' in which the student is the center of everything (Iwaizumi & Webb, 2022; Tosuncuoğlu, 2017). It addresses students' needs, promotes learning, and turns lessons into a cooperative and fun environment (Dalkıran & Semerci, 2020). ECRIF examines how students learn a language rather than advising teachers on what they should or should not do. Further studies supported ECRIF as a valuable framework for enhancing vocabulary and fostering lasting learning, which is essential for effective language production (AlSaleem, 2018). The ECRIF framework is one important tool for understanding how students can take an active role in learning a foreign language.

ECRIF is described as a framework that supports teachers in designing their lessons as it permits the adjustment of content to meet students' needs while promoting students' interaction with educational materials (Tamayo et al., 2023). The primary objective of ECRIF is not only to facilitate the acquisition of a new language but also to provide students with various opportunities to employ the target language communicatively both inside and outside the classroom. When learning vocabulary, students face the challenge of forgetting words immediately after the teacher has elicited their meaning, correctly pronouncing English sounds, or spelling long-syllable words (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). Moreover, implementing traditional techniques for teaching English vocabulary has not attracted learners since it does not lead to effective practice. Neither students' motivation nor their level of participation seems to be enhanced since students become distracted easily and demotivated as they may assume that they will not successfully achieve their tasks. Therefore, the ECRIF framework is more effective than traditional

methods in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. The structured sequence of exposure, clarification, repetition, internalization, and fluent use appeared to scaffold learners' understanding in a way that encouraged both retention and practical application of new vocabulary.

Recent research has demonstrated that student-centered strategies are particularly effective in situations where teacher-centered instruction prevails (Nazim et al., 2024). Therefore, positioning ECRIF as a framework that combines structured progression with communication practice responds directly to Ecuador's need for methodologies that are both pedagogically sound and pragmatically feasible in public education. Although other studies analyze the effectiveness of ECRIF in improving oral expression skills and overall participation, few examine its specific role in vocabulary retention and mastery. The framework is investigated in recently published studies that focus on contexts of oral expression or fluency (Caiza Aucapiña et al., 2022; Tamayo et al., 2023). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence on its direct impact on students' vocabulary development, particularly in public schools facing the typical socioeconomic challenges found throughout Latin America. This imbalance within existing research strongly suggests the need to empirically investigate ECRIF's potential role for fostering long-lasting vocabulary knowledge, particularly within instructional contexts that continue to be predominantly traditional.

Selecting instructional frameworks that not only foster lexical development but also align with students' sociocultural contexts is essential. The Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model, for instance, remains widely used; however, it often results in mechanical practice with limited transfer to real-life situations (Harris & Leeming, 2024). This concern aligns with Qureshi et al. (2025), who noted that form-focused approaches restrict opportunities for authentic language use, emphasizing the need for more communicative instructional models. Similarly, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) promotes authentic tasks and communicative competence, but it requires significant preparation on the part of the teacher and is not always feasible in public schools with limited resources (Nurhadi et al., 2024). The Lexical Framework also highlights vocabulary chunks as essential components for fluency, but it lacks sufficient scaffolding for memorization and active use (Thuratham, 2024). While ECRIF provides a cyclical progression from recognition to fluent application, harmonizing structure with student autonomy (Kurzweil & Scholl, 2007), its effectiveness also depends on careful implementation and teacher training, particularly in contexts where traditional methods remain dominant.

### ECRIF and its underlying stages

Every phase within ECRIF is viewed as active, during which students engage with the target language or structure. This implies that language educators should meticulously evaluate students' performance and accomplishments at the end of the lesson based on the intended outcomes. Language instructors must arrange lessons to facilitate content comprehension, maintain an equilibrium between accuracy and fluency exercises, and offer incremental progression toward learning goals (Kurzweil & Scholl, 2007).

Encounter is the first stage in which students are exposed to new information. The teacher activates prior knowledge to introduce background and new situations about the target topics. Generally, the teacher begins by activating the learner's prior knowledge. It includes 'noticing', during which students realize the type of vocabulary they need to perform a specific communicative task. The students do not have to produce a new language during this stage.

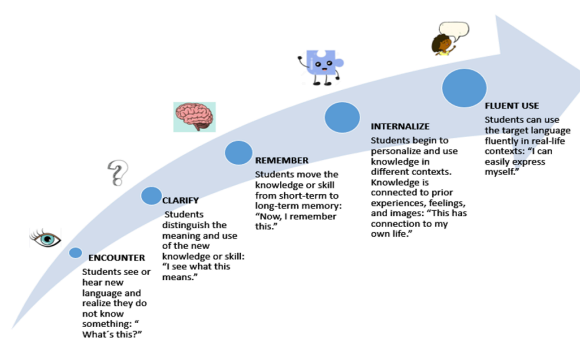
Clarify is the second stage, during which students attempt to understand the meanings and structures of the new language. They explore new meanings and how the words are pronounced and spelled. Students take on a central role, as it is an opportunity to clear up doubts about the target language or the skills needed to produce it. Hence, the students actively participate in assimilating new knowledge by comparing meanings and consciously focusing on the target language. The idea is to encourage students to use the new knowledge they have learned (Tosuncuoğlu, 2017).

Remember is the third stage, which consists of transferring knowledge from short-term to long-term memory. With the frequent use of the information by a student, it appears that it is part of the long-term memory (Tosuncuoğlu, 2017). This stage provides students with the opportunity to practice the new language by repeating, drilling, and referring back to the supporting material provided by the teacher.

Internalize is the fourth stage that relies on less controlled and freer practices without any teacher's support. Students are encouraged to make informed decisions and select the appropriate language based on their specific needs. At this stage, students are expected to be introduced to student-centered activities that apply the new knowledge and help them internalize the target language. As for the teachers, they provide indirect clues to the students to promote self-correction of mistakes in semi-controlled contexts (Tosuncuoğlu, 2017).

In the Fluent Use Stage, the students are required to demonstrate their comprehension and assimilation of the new language and produce it spontaneously. To showcase their abilities, students are encouraged to use the target language according to their needs through meaningful and interactive language tasks. Thus, it is important to create contextual and student-pertinent classroom activities that emulate real-life language interactions and situations where students can choose what they want to talk about. Figure 1 illustrates the five stages of the ECRIF framework.

**Figure 1**  
ECRIF Stages



### Methodology

#### Research design

A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was employed, which integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study was conducted in two phases: an initial quantitative phase, followed by a qualitative phase designed to explain and expand the quantitative results. The first phase evaluated the effectiveness of the ECRIF framework in facilitating vocabulary learning among sixth-grade students, while the second phase examined the teacher's experiences during the implementation, focusing on increased student engagement, autonomy, and the flexibility afforded by the ECRIF framework.

For the quantitative phase, the researchers implemented a quasi-experimental design. This approach was used because sixth-grade classes were already established, and random assignment was not feasible due to institutional constraints. The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews that explored the teacher's in-depth perception of ECRIF in practice.

#### Participants

This research comprised 56 sixth-grade students from two different classes at a public school located in Quito, Ecuador. Thus, each class constituted one

group (one experimental and one control group). The experimental and control groups consisted of 28 students each. The participating students were between 11 and 12 years old, and the majority of them had an A2 level of English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Over 16 weeks, the experimental group received vocabulary instruction using the ECRIF framework. In contrast, the control group adhered to the school's conventional instructional framework, which primarily involves translation, drilling, and memorization strategies. With the approval of the school administration, the selection of classrooms was purposive, but aimed at minimizing selection bias by matching groups based on variables such as age, socioeconomic background, and level of English proficiency. The use of intact groups was necessary, given the real-world classroom setting where random assignment was not feasible.

Regarding the teacher participants, one was a 40-year-old female and the other was a 38-year-old male. Both had a B2 level of English proficiency according to CEFR, as required for English teachers in the country. They each had more than five years of experience in EFL instruction and held a Bachelor's degree in English teaching from an Ecuadorian university. The male teacher was responsible for the experimental group, while the female teacher taught the control group. The teacher from the experimental group was the focus of the qualitative component, participating in four semi-structured interviews. His participation was central because he implemented the ECRIF framework in his classroom to increase students' vocabulary learning.

### Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards approved by the school and academic board. Informed consent was obtained from teachers and all participants' legal representatives after they understood the purpose and scope of the study. Confidentiality was strictly maintained. All data collected were treated anonymously, ensuring the privacy and protecting the identity of participants during and after the study.

### Instruments

#### Quantitative instrument

The researchers developed a customized vocabulary test administered as both a pre-test and a post-test to gauge students' grasp of vocabulary. The test consisted of 50 items covering five vocabulary topics: description of people, description of places, accommodation, weather, and transportation. These topics are included in the EFL curriculum.

Each topic included ten items, which were developed in various formats designed to assess receptive skills (association and recognition) and productive skills (sentence completion and recall), as shown in Table 1. To streamline analysis, raw scores from the 50-item test were converted to a 10-point scale, where a score of 50 would equal a 10.0 and a score of 0 would equal a 0.0. To ensure validity, three experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from local universities reviewed the test items to assess their alignment with the curriculum developed by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education and with the established proficiency level for sixth grade. Based on the experts' suggestion, some test items were refined to achieve greater clarity, contextual relevance, and lexical precision. After incorporating the experts' recommendations, the researchers conducted a pilot administration of the same 50-item test with 15 sixth-grade students from a nearby school. The purpose of the pilot test was to assess the level of difficulty of the test items, time allocation, and the clarity of instructions. Following the pilot test, minor adjustments were made, including rewording unclear instructions and modifying the time limits.

To ensure the test reliability, the researchers calculated its internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed a coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.84$ , indicating high internal consistency (Roco-Videla, 2024).

**Table 1.**  
*Topics for the Vocabulary Test*

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Topic (1) | Description of people<br>Instruction: Which sentence does NOT match the picture?                                     |
| Topic (2) | Description of places<br>Instruction: Choose the word that matches the definition                                    |
| Topic (3) | Accommodation<br>Instruction: Select the word that best completes the sentence                                       |
| Topic (4) | Weather<br>Instruction: Match the vocabulary to the picture.   |
| Topic (5) | Transportation<br>Instruction: Read the description of things found in a bus station. What is the word for each one? |

As detailed in Table 1, the vocabulary test, which was the same for the pretest and the posttest, was divided into five sections. In sections 1 and 4, multiple-choice questions were included. In section 1, students had to read full sentences describing images to figure out which sentences did not match the image. In section 4, there was a vocabulary test with individual words, in which students had to choose the one that corresponded to a provided image. The main difference between these two sections was the length and the way the instructions were set up. In Section 2, students had to match definitions with the correct

answer of familiar places, such as parts of a school. In this case, understanding was crucial because there were no pictures to aid in comprehension. In Section 3, students had to fill in the blanks by selecting the right words from a list to make the sentences grammatically correct. Finally, in Section 5, students had to read short descriptions and choose the correct words.

To clarify how the previously described test sections align with the ECRIF stages, the following examples illustrate the types of questions used in each topic. For the Description of People (Encounter/Clarify) activity, students had to examine an image and choose the sentences that did not match the image. For Descriptions of Places (Clarify/Remember), they had to match the definition, such as a place where students usually borrow books, with the word library. For Accommodation (Remember), students had to complete sentences by selecting the correct word; for example, a hotel room has a \_\_\_\_\_, options: balcony, elevator, garden. For Weather (Encounter/Remember), students had to select the word that matched the image that depicts weather conditions. Finally, for Transportation (Internalize/Fluent Use), students had to read short descriptions, such as a bus station, and identify the correct word. These examples helped demonstrate how each item type was related to each stage of the ECRIF framework and to assess the use of vocabulary in context.

Table 2 shows that the experimental group had a mean of 4.5 and a standard deviation of 0.25. The control group, on the other hand, had a mean of 4.61 and a standard deviation of 0.233. Initial findings indicate that before the intervention, the two groups showed comparable vocabulary knowledge. Also, the standard deviations suggest that the scores were evenly distributed within each group.

**Table 2.**  
*Pre-test scores of the experimental and control groups*

| Groups       | N  | $\bar{x}$ | SD    | t     | p    |
|--------------|----|-----------|-------|-------|------|
| Experimental | 28 | 4.5       | 0.25  | -0.33 | 0.70 |
| Control      | 28 | 4.61      | 0.233 |       |      |

To determine whether there were differences in vocabulary gains between the groups, an independent-samples t-test was applied. Additionally, a paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether there were time-related differences across all groups. All inferential statistical analyses were conducted with an alpha level of  $p < 0.05$ ; all statistical tests were performed in this manner. Consequently, the two groups began the study with similar vocabulary proficiency.

**Qualitative Instrument**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher who implemented ECRIF with the experimental group after a 16-week intervention. The interview protocol was designed to explore their experiences with the ECRIF framework, focusing on student engagement, learner autonomy, and the flexibility afforded by the framework.

To secure the trustworthiness of the qualitative component, the researchers adhered to the procedure suggested by Ahmed (2024). With respect to credibility, the researchers remained at school for a total of twenty weeks. The intervention lasted for sixteen weeks, followed by a four-week period dedicated to conducting the interviews. This time enabled the researchers to develop rapport with the participating teacher and facilitated his willingness to engage in the interviews. Transferability is supported throughout the detailed descriptions provided in this study regarding the context, participants, and the teacher. Concerning confirmability, the researchers conducted the qualitative data analysis independently, and subsequently, they met with the teacher to discuss the results. This process helped minimize subjectivity and strengthen the reliability of the findings.

**Data Collection**

**Quantitative Data Collection**

A pre-test was administered to both groups before the intervention to assess their initial vocabulary knowledge levels. Following this, the experimental group underwent weekly instruction structured around the five ECRIF stages:

- Encounter: Real-life contexts, images, and multimedia introduction
- Clarify: Group activities focused on form, meaning, and pronunciation
- Remember: Repetition and cognitive reinforcement through practice
- Internalize: Semi-controlled tasks promoting autonomous use
- Fluent Use: Role-plays, dialogues, and games encouraging spontaneous production

During the same period, the control group was taught vocabulary with word lists, dictionary definitions, and sentence translation. After the intervention, both groups took the same pre- and post-tests.

**Qualitative Data Collection**

Following the post-test, the teacher in the experimental

group participated in semi-structured interviews that explored the previously described aspects and the results of the quantitative phase. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis. In total, the researchers conducted four interviews with the participating teacher at his school, amounting to approximately four hours of recorded data.

## Findings

### Quantitative Findings

The pre- and post-test quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for both groups. An independent-samples t-test was used to examine whether there were any differences in vocabulary improvement between the two groups, while a paired-samples t-test assessed changes over time within each group. All analyses, including inferential tests, were conducted using an alpha level of  $p < 0.05$ .

The results of the pretest and post-test administered to the experimental and control groups are presented as follows:

**Table 3.**  
*Pretest and Post-test Scores for the Experimental Group*

| Tests    | N  | $\bar{x}$ | SD   | t       | p      |
|----------|----|-----------|------|---------|--------|
| Pretest  | 28 | 4.5       | 0.25 |         |        |
| Posttest | 28 | 8.97      | 0.13 | - 41.31 | <0.001 |

Table 3 shows the mean  $\bar{x} = 4.5$  and standard deviation 0.25 of the pretest of the experimental group. The mean score in the post-test was  $\bar{x} = 8.97$ , and the standard deviation was 0.13. These findings indicate that the students enhanced their vocabulary following the intervention. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant. The results indicated a statistically significant difference ( $t(27) = -41.31, p < 0.001$ ). The effect on the experimental group's vocabulary achievement was quite evident.

**Table 4.**  
*Pretest and Post-test Scores for the Control Group*

| Tests     | N  | $\bar{x}$ | SD   | t      | p      |
|-----------|----|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| Pretest   | 28 | 4.61      | 0.23 |        |        |
| Post-test | 28 | 6.54      | 0.16 | -34.27 | <0.001 |

Table 4 shows that the mean of the pre-test for the control group was  $\bar{x} = 4.61$ , and the standard deviation was 0.23. The mean score of the post-test was  $\bar{x} = 6.54$ , and its standard deviation was 0.16. A paired-samples t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant ( $t(27) = -34.27, p < 0.001$ ). Although the

gain was meaningful, it was less substantial than the improvement observed in the experimental group, highlighting the relative limitations of traditional vocabulary instruction methods. To further examine the difference between the groups, an independent-samples t-test was conducted on the post-test scores, shown in Table 5:

**Table 5.**  
*Post-Test Comparison between Experimental and Control Groups*

| Tests                     | N  | $\bar{x}$ | SD   | t     | p      |
|---------------------------|----|-----------|------|-------|--------|
| Post-test (Exp. group)    | 28 | 8.97      | 0.13 | 59.10 | <0.001 |
| Post-test (Control Group) | 28 | 6.54      | 0.16 |       |        |

Table 5 shows that the experimental group ( $M = 8.97, SD = 0.13$ ) significantly outperformed the control group ( $M = 6.54, SD = 0.16$ ), with a calculated t-value of 59.10 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This significant difference supports the conclusion that the ECRIF framework resulted in more substantial vocabulary gains compared to traditional instruction. The experimental group's post-test scores show a lower standard deviation, suggesting a more consistent improvement across the learners.

### Qualitative Findings

While the quantitative analysis demonstrated significant lexical gains in the experimental group, the qualitative data help explain the pedagogical mechanisms underlying these improvements. To identify recurring patterns in the perspectives of the teacher involved in the implementation of the ECRIF framework, a thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews. The qualitative findings were then used to interpret and deepen the understanding of the quantitative findings. The teacher of the experimental group provided key insights into ECRIF implementation, emphasizing two main themes: increased student engagement and autonomy, and the flexibility of the ECRIF framework.

Increased Student Engagement and Autonomy were evident as the teacher reported a significant shift in the students' motivation and behavior after the implementation of the ECRIF framework. This perspective, especially during the Encounter and Fluency phases, seemed to shift the educational environment from a conventional teacher-centered one to one in which students played a more active role in their own learning. As the teacher explained, "With traditional methods, I felt like I was just throwing words into students' heads, and after a moment, they forgot. However, when I used the ECRIF model, my students were able to identify their own vocabulary and find the meaning of the new words. This learning is also created in groups as a result of active learning strategies. When I use active learning strategies, my

students are more energetic". These lines exemplify how teachers can enhance their classes and vocabulary learning by utilizing ECRIF.

Another aspect of ECRIF addressed by the teacher was the Flexibility of the ECRIF framework. The teacher highlighted this characteristic by mentioning that ECRIF proposes a variety of activities that can be adapted to different learning styles, making the framework responsive to students' diverse needs. The teacher explained this in the following lines: "ECRIF is not a prescriptive framework. It is open enough for teachers to insert their own views of language teaching, which promotes creativity. This dynamism allows students to play a central role in the language learning process".

Based on the teacher's comments, it can be inferred that when teachers plan their activities to teach vocabulary, the ECRIF framework becomes a good alternative, as it provides a series of phases that promote interactions among learners. The dynamic nature of the framework facilitates teaching innovation. Thus, teachers need to develop instructional materials that encourage students' linguistic exchanges, including the vocabulary being learned.

## Discussion

### *Extent of the implementation of the ECRIF framework to improve vocabulary learning*

The improvements in the experimental group's vocabulary indicate that ECRIF-based instruction has the potential not only to facilitate vocabulary learning but also to provide an effective way for students to internalize and actively use new words. This is directly supported by the qualitative feedback from the teacher, who noted an improvement in students' active participation and autonomy. It can also be inferred that this is a result of the flexibility of the framework, which allowed a teaching paradigm shift, placing students at the center of the teaching process.

The significant vocabulary improvement observed in the experimental group reinforces prior research, which demonstrates that ECRIF promotes deeper processing, repeated retrieval, and contextualized practice. These components are highly acknowledged as essential for long-term vocabulary learning (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Webb & Nation, 2020). The findings also aligned with those of AlSaleem (2018) and Al-Qahtani (2022), who reported that instruction based on the ECRIF framework resulted in greater vocabulary retention compared to traditional memorization methods. Similarly, the increase in autonomous use of vocabulary identified in this study supports the argument of Dalkiran and Semerci (2020) that ECRIF encourages learners to take an active approach,

creating conditions for successful vocabulary acquisition. The qualitative insights provided by the teacher are consistent with those of Tamayo et al. (2023), who reported that the ECRIF framework fosters learner autonomy and sustained classroom participation.

A shift in the teaching paradigm has encouraged students' participation in language exchanges as evidenced by the increased vocabulary, which reflects the principles of processing depth and active recall (Soori et al., 2023; Türker, 2024). This could also be related to the interactive and cyclical nature of the ECRIF framework, which motivates teachers to be innovative in developing their class activities that include target vocabulary teaching and strategies revolving around vocabulary use in real-life situations. For example, comprehension activities that result in spontaneous language use, avoiding individual practices and memorization, were followed by discussions on common topics and language practice activities that connect the newly learned vocabulary to real-life scenarios. These activities can increase students' vocabulary, which is the bedrock for communication (Zhang & Liang, 2024). Thus, the role of ECRIF is fundamental in vocabulary acquisition as it allows students to learn it freely, fluently (Hanzawa, 2024), and collaboratively (Ta'amneh, 2021). Furthermore, when the activities center on the students, their vocabulary increases more compared to when their learning is individual (Ayana et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025).

The two stages of the ECRIF framework, 'Encounter' and 'Clarification'; suggest that to teach vocabulary, teachers need to design activities that progressively present students with new words pertinent to their individual contexts, making this significant for them. The next stages, 'Internalize' and 'Fluent use', can develop students' language use autonomously, allowing them to engage in different language exchanges. When students engage in linguistic interactions, they need to retrieve the language they have learned. This corresponds to the 'Remember' phase, which also encourages students to use the language in natural contexts (Webb & Nation, 2020). When these two phases are correctly implemented, students may expand their vocabulary, particularly in social settings.

Additionally, the strong performance of the experimental group aligns with research emphasizing the importance of cognitive involvement and active recall in effective vocabulary development (Ayana et al., 2024; Boers, 2021). Students' ability to retrieve and apply new words during the Internalize and Fluent Use phases aligns with the findings from Hanzawa (2024) and Zhou et al. (2025), who argue that the meaningful use of vocabulary enhances fluency

and supports integration into long-term memory. The data further showed that the control group exhibited some degree of lexical development under traditional instruction, largely characterized by memorization and repetitive practice of isolated vocabulary items. These instructional practices may support initial vocabulary learning; however, such learning often remains confined to short-term memory, thereby limiting transfer to long-term retention and hindering fluent language production (Boers, 2021). In this respect, this study extends current evidence by showing that ECRIF can be successfully implemented within public school contexts similar to those in Ecuador.

In line with the advocacy for more ELT strategies that focus on students' language needs and vocabulary, the ECRIF framework helps them increase their register through processes of clarifying word meanings, reinforcing vocabulary, and internalizing vocabulary through sustained practice and appropriate contexts. Student interaction within a learning-conducive environment, coupled with meaningful peer engagement, can significantly enhance learners' language retention and recall. Apart from the students' vocabulary increase as a result of this study, the use of the ECRIF framework improved students' autonomy and class participation which are considered necessary skills in the 21st century (Kurniawan et al., 2025). These skills are particularly needed in Ecuador, as most of the EFL classes have been conducted using traditional methods that focus on memorization without much peer interaction, thereby diminishing spontaneous language use. Moreover, this interaction can help students notice and correct their mistakes, resulting in the production of accurate vocabulary (Ta'amneh, 2021).

#### ***Teachers' perceptions and roles in implementing the ECRIF framework to improve vocabulary***

The current study's data, which supports the use of ECRIF, highlights the crucial role teachers play in enhancing vocabulary learning outcomes. In ECRIF, the appropriate selection of vocabulary and the opportunities to practice it are essential to attaining the ultimate goal: increasing students' vocabulary. Choosing activities and suitable topics is a process of deep thinking, effective planning, and open-mindedness that will enable students to control their interactions (Ardayati & Ramasari, 2025). Excellent teachers are facilitators of vocabulary learning through ECRIF. Their challenge is to generate realistic environments and provide constant feedback that leads to effective learning, contrary to the traditional role where teachers dominate the class without allowing for interaction (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021).

Interview evidence reinforced these points, showing how ECRIF reshaped the teacher's role. The teacher emphasized that planning activities around students'

interests created more authentic participation, noting: "When I connected vocabulary topics they care about, they were engaged and eager to ask for more examples." He also mentioned the shift in classroom dynamics, explaining: "Instead of me leading every step, some students took initiative using new words in their sentences and correcting each other." Finally, he reflected on the flexibility of the framework, stating: "ECRIF allowed me to adapt tasks considering the group's needs, something I could not do with traditional lesson plans." These insights illustrated how ECRIF empowered the teacher to take the role of facilitator, fostering autonomy and engagement.

It is also worth noting that although the control group experienced some improvement, their progress was neither as steady nor as significant as that of the experimental group. This underscores the idea that methods relying on passive exposure and translation may fall short in fostering substantial vocabulary growth, particularly when learners are not prompted to actively use or engage with new language. Thus, the importance of promoting and using strategies that place students at the center of all EFL practices (Nazim et al., 2024).

The findings of this study bring important implications for theory, practice, and policy in EFL vocabulary instruction. Theoretically, the findings reinforce models of vocabulary learning that emphasize depth of processing and cyclical engagement, positioning ECRIF as a model that can help integrate these principles. From the practical standpoint, the results suggest that teachers can contribute to effective vocabulary acquisition by adopting instructional designs such as ECRIF that promote student autonomy and authentic communication activities. These insights underscore the need for sustained training and professional development that provide teachers with the skills for a successful implementation of these frameworks. At the policy level, the study supports the integration of structured and process-oriented frameworks into the national curriculum and teacher-training programs, especially in contexts where traditional approaches prevail. Incorporating such frameworks into the English curriculum planning could help foster long-term improvements in students' vocabulary development and overall communicative competence.

#### **Conclusion**

This mixed-methods study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the ECRIF framework in enhancing vocabulary skills among sixth-grade EFL students at a public school in Ecuador. Specifically, it addressed two research questions: To what extent does the implementation of the ECRIF framework improve vocabulary learning among sixth-grade EFL students compared to traditional vocabulary

teaching methods? What are the perceptions of the teacher who implemented the ECRIF framework for vocabulary instruction in the sixth-grade EFL classroom? The quantitative findings showed that compared to traditional teaching methods, ECRIF resulted in significantly greater and more consistent vocabulary gains by fostering engagement, cognitive reinforcement, and learner autonomy.

The qualitative findings provided important contextual insight into these results. Teacher interviews revealed that the ECRIF framework fostered learner participation and autonomy, shifting the classroom dynamic from a traditional, teacher-centered environment to one characterized by active and sustained student involvement. The flexibility of the ECRIF framework was identified as a strength, allowing adaptation to diverse student needs and sustaining motivation. Importantly, ECRIF also contributed to activating students' prior knowledge, resulting in an engaging and learner-centered experience. Notably, the experimental group demonstrated consistent lexical development, indicating that ECRIF extends beyond the presentation of new vocabulary by encouraging active participation with the vocabulary, thereby gradually strengthening learners' autonomy and confidence in their language use.

Effective implementation of the ECRIF strategy requires careful scaffolding and progressive changes to meet the learner's needs. It is the teacher's responsibility to create a collaborative environment and favorable conditions that foster meaningful interactions and promote long-lasting cognitive engagement. From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that teachers should view themselves not only as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators who design meaningful activities and adapt instruction to students' interests and contexts.

The results should also be interpreted within Ecuador's broader linguistic context. With the country ranked in the 'low proficiency' category in the EF English Proficiency Index (2024), integrating frameworks like ECRIF into teacher training and diversifying instructional activities in the curriculum planning could help address persistent gaps in public education. Such integration may enhance vocabulary development, communicative competence, and student motivation.

Although the findings highlight valuable insights, care must be taken when generalizing these results. The study relied on intact classroom groups within a single institution, meaning that factors such as educational settings, student background, and teacher and classroom dynamics may have influenced the outcomes. The 16-week duration may have been sufficient to observe some benefits and improvements, but they may not have been long enough to determine whether these improvements last over time or can

be adapted across varying cultural and institutional contexts within Ecuador and Latin America.

To guide future research and strengthen the empirical foundation of ECRIF-based instruction, several recommendations can be proposed. Future research should extend implementation to diverse schools, evaluate long-term retention, and investigate ECRIF's adaptability across different linguistic and socio-economic contexts. Additional studies could also explore how ECRIF interacts with other approaches, examine its effectiveness at various proficiency levels, and analyze specific teacher practices that influence the learning outcomes. Longitudinal designs would be valuable for determining the sustained effects over complete academic years, while comparative studies could clarify how ECRIF performs against traditional vocabulary teaching approaches. At the policy level, educational policymakers and curriculum designers in Ecuador and Latin America should consider ECRIF not only as a classroom strategy but as a sustainable framework that boosts learner autonomy, strengthens communicative competence, and supports long-term language development.

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