



Original Research Paper

The Impact of Word and Theme walls on visual Language Learning in Iraqi EFL Classrooms

¹ Sanaa Muhammed Ali Saifullah, ² Prof. Dr. Madeha Saif Al-Deen Saleh

sanaa.saifullah654@st.tu.edu.iq

University of Tikrit \College of Education for Women \Department of English Language.

dr.al-sumaidai@tu.edu.iq

University of Tikrit \College of Education for Women \Department of English Language.

Abstract

The current investigation focused on the impact of interactive Word Walls and Theme Walls discovery vocabulary proficiency, reading performance and writing skills for junior Iraqi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university level Freshers. The study is based on Dual Coding Theory and Constructivist learning theories, adopting a purposive sample of 90 third-year students of English, University of Kirkuk. This study was a three-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design with two experimental (n = 30) and one control group (n = 30). The experimental groups were led through different visual wall strategies combined with L.G. Alexander's Fluency in English for 1 complete academic semester, while the control group underwent traditional textbook-based instruction. For this, the researchers have used standardized achievement pre- and post-tests, an extensive affective questionnaire, and systematic classroom observational instruments. With ANCOVA and MANCOVA all inferential statistical analyses demonstrated significantly higher scores (< 0.01) for both visual strategy groups than the traditional method in spelling, contextual vocabulary use, and reading fluency. In particular, Theme Walls accelerated above others exclusively for overall reading comprehension scores. In contrast, there were no statistically significant differences for isolated rote word meanings and creative story writing production. Thematic analysis of the questionnaires and observations showed on a qualitative level that these visual scaffolds lowered students' affective filters, decreased language anxiety, and encouraged self-engaged independent learning habits. The empirical findings, reported in this investigation support the systematic integration of interactive visual scaffolds to NEST-mediated EFL curricula and instructional methodologies, as well as modern textbook designs within higher education contexts.

Keywords: Word Walls, Theme walls, Visual scaffolds EFL Vocabulary Iraqi Higher Education

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the problem

The ability to communicate effectively in English is now crucial for the next generation to join the global network (Mubarakah) as a result of globalisation. Nevertheless, visual language acquisition and vocabulary retention present significant challenges for Iraqi EFL university students. This is because students have little opportunity to practise their English outside of class, because traditional teaching techniques place an emphasis on memorisation rather than interaction and visual tools, and because students are taught grammar by rote. Students' lack of interest, short-term memory, and visual-spatial language processing are all effects of these methods (Jassim, 2020; Panjaitan & Siahaan, 2024).

Word walls and theme walls are dynamic visual methods that effectively promote engagement and memory consolidation (Reading Rockets, 2023). However, there has been no empirical testing of these tactics at the university level in Iraq. These inexpensive tactics assist overcome certain obstacles, such as L1 Arabic interference, but there are no evidence-based recommendations for them in higher education programs. The fact that visual and textual information together provide more brain connections and vocabulary depth than verbal input alone has not been able to bridge this gap (Panjaitan & Siahaan, 2024).

The researcher filled this need by observing classes for two years. When compared to more conventional approaches, the results demonstrated that word and

*Corresponding Author:

Received: 25th May, 2026; Revised: 6th June, 2026; Accepted: 8th June, 2026; Available Online: 27rd July, 2026

(DOI): 10.70102/AEJ.2026.18.2s.11

theme walls considerably improved students' motivation, self-assurance, thematic knowledge, vocabulary engagement, and overall learning experience. Consequently, in order to offer statistical significance, theoretical insights, and practical pedagogical recommendations for enhancing English instruction in Iraq, this study systematically assesses the effects of word and theme walls on the visual language learning outcomes, motivation, and communicative competence of Iraqi EFL university students.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are to:

- 1-measure whether students exposed to word/theme walls show greater gains in vocabulary knowledge (meaning, spelling, usage) compared with those who are not.
- 2- how word/theme walls affect students' reading comprehension and reading fluency. By providing a stable visual reference, word walls may help learners recognize vocabulary more quickly, thus facilitating reading and comprehension.
- 3-the influence of word/theme walls on students' writing performance .Word walls serve as reference tools during writing tasks, helping learners correctly spell and use vocabulary, and encouraging more varied vocabulary usage.

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

The aims of the study are supposed to be achieved by verifying the following hypotheses:

- 1- There is no statistically significant difference in vocabulary retention between students taught with word/theme walls and those taught with traditional methods.
- 2-Word/theme walls have no statistically significant effect on students' reading comprehension and reading fluency.
- 3- There is no statistically significant difference in writing performance between students who use word/theme walls and those who do not.

1.4 Limits of the study

This study is limited to:

1. Third-year EFL University students/ Department of English/ College of Basic Education at Kirkuk University during the first semester of the academic year 2025-2026.
2. Reading textbook (Fluency in English) by L.G. Alexander (1967).

1.5 Value of the Study

The present study is supposed to be valuable for the following:

1. Word and theme walls provide instructors with interactive visual tools that promote student independence, boost classroom participation, and

reinforce vocabulary , improve grammar and communication skills.

2. Learners benefit from improved vocabulary acquisition, spelling fluency, and reading comprehension via visual repetition and thematic organization, making abstract language more concrete and memorable and increasing motivation, reduce anxiety in language use.

3. Designers can incorporate modular visual elements like detachable word walls or theme-based graphics to align with EFL curricula, enhancing supplementary materials for visual learners.

1.6 Definitions of Basic Terms

Basic terms can be defined as follows:

1.6.1 Impact

in educational research, impact refers to the measurable and observable effects or outcomes that a particular teaching method, tool, or intervention has on learners' performance, attitudes, or behavior over a certain period of time (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The operational definition of impact, in this study means the change or improvement in students' English vocabulary learning after using word walls and theme walls. It is measured by comparing their vocabulary test scores and classroom participation before and after the intervention.

1.6.2 Word Wall

is an ongoing, cumulative display of vocabulary words arranged alphabetically or by category, serving as a visual reference throughout the school year. It promotes spelling, reading, and vocabulary development and encourages independent learning (Harmon et al., 2009).

The operational definition of word wall , a classroom display of essential vocabulary words arranged alphabetically or by topic. It helps students visually interact with language, build vocabulary, and improve spelling and word recognition.

1.6.3 Theme Wall

A theme wall is a visual display organized around a specific concept or unit (such as weather, animals, food), presenting related vocabulary, phrases, and visual representations to help students build conceptual and linguistic connections. It contextualizes words, aiding comprehension and application (Wang, 2020).

The operational definition of theme wall is Similar to a word wall, but organized around a specific theme or topic (e.g., seasons, food, travel, historical events). It allows students to learn vocabulary in a meaningful, contextualized way

1.6.4 Visual Language Learning

refers to acquiring language through visual means such as color-coded charts, images, spatial layouts, and diagrams rather than solely through oral or written explanations. It is particularly effective for students

who process and remember information visually (Mayer, 2005).

The operational definition of, visual language learning means students learning English through pictures, charts, symbols, colors, and written words. Learning is measured by how well students remember and use vocabulary after using visual tools like word walls and theme walls.

2.0 Theoretical Background

Memory is seen as a complex tapestry of sensory materials, not a mere file cabinet, according to modern pedagogy, which emphasises the need of engaging the whole human being in learning. It was progressive educators like Montessori (1912) and Fernald (1921) who used tactile and spatial tactics to operationalise the multisensory approach that had been pioneered by pioneers like Orton (1925) and Hinshelwood (1917) to overcome "word blindness" via visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic pathways. These multimodal methods are an absolute must for Iraqi university students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) as they make the monumental leap from Arabic to English (Farrel & Sherman, 2011). Based on contemporary theories of cognition and constructivism, turning classrooms into living language landscapes generates a "external brain" and tangible anchors that facilitate natural rather than forced vocabulary storage, retrieval, and consolidation.

2.1 Dual Coding Theory

The Dual Coding Theory makes use of the two separate but complementary pathways in the brain—the verbal and imagery systems—to aid Iraqi university-level EFL students in understanding and using the abstract orthography and complicated rules of English. By combining text with visual icons on word and theme walls, children are able to engage in referential processing, which is crucial for language acquisition. By acting as a psychological "redundancy effect" (Clark & Paivio, 1991), this duality guarantees that, in the event that verbal memory fails, persistent visual signals will activate recollection. In the end, these visual aids reduce mental strain, speed up the process of "orthographic mapping" (Ehri, 1992) to ensure memory retention over time, and provide an immersive setting for English that makes up for the absent real-world exposure outside of the classroom.

2.2 Constructivist Theory

According to Piaget's (1974) Constructivist Theory, students actively construct their own knowledge by assimilating and accommodating new information to their prior knowledge. Students of English as a second language in Iraq can benefit from theme walls by using them as a platform for group work and discussion

(Donovan et al., 1999). Continuous instructional scaffolding is another way this method operationalises Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The wall in huge Iraqi classrooms serves as a constant "more knowledgeable other" who provides students with topic signals and sentence stems, allowing them to self-regulate their thinking and engage in higher-level discourse (Lantolf, 2000).

2.3 Previous Related Studies

Yin (2022) investigated the effects of student-centered thematic education on the listening, speaking, and general competency of university multimedia design students in Taiwan. The study lasted 16 weeks and used coherent themes and real multimedia to demonstrate the improvement. Results showed that thematic coherence gave adult learners important situational contexts to relate new language to their lives, which in turn reduced learning anxiety by making the learning environment more safe, which increased intrinsic motivation and confidence.

Ikbali (2018) conducted a quantitative study with second graders in Yogyakarta to assess the visual Word Wall technique. The results showed that the kids' average performance improved significantly after prolonged exposure to the targeted vocabulary. As a result, word walls serve as an educational scaffold that decreases cognitive strain, increases reading and spelling confidence, and motivates students to actively participate in class by providing constant visual access to words, which speeds up word recognition and long-term retention.

3.0 Methodology and Procedures

This study used a three-group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental approach to assess the impact of creative visual displays on the vocabulary and learning outcomes of Iraqi university students studying English as a foreign language (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2019). The research framework established three separate groups of participants: one that received traditional teaching, another that received the Word Wall method, and a third that received the Theme Wall technique. The interventions were evaluated in a comprehensive manner by collecting data in three different ways: first, through quantitative pretests and posttests that measured academic progress and vocabulary retention; second, through an extensive questionnaire that measured student attitudes and autonomy; and third, through a structured observation sheet that monitored real-time classroom participation and engagement patterns.

3.1 Population and Sample

For quantitative research in education to be valid, reliable, and applicable to a wide range of situations, it must first define its target population and then choose a representative sample. Fifteen hundred third-year English majors from the University of Kirkuk's College of Basic Education made up the study's

overall population. To help with data collecting and get trustworthy statistical conclusions, a random selection of 90 students, half male and half female, was made from this pool. In order to meet the criteria of a Quasi-Experimental Design, the sample was divided into three equal groups of 30 participants, reflecting the demographics of the larger student body in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender. The sample size was 90 participants.

Table (3-1) The Sample of the Study

Groups	Section	Number	Total
Experimental	A	30	90
Experimental	B	30	
Control	C	30	

3.2 Post-Test Structure

This Study Includes two post-tests, the Word Wall Post-Test and the Theme Wall Post-Test, were developed to measure students' progress in learning following the implementation of two different types of lessons. This paper offers a thorough summary of both tests. Despite sharing five primary questions that evaluate both receptive and productive language abilities, reading comprehension, and different cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy, the two hundred-mark assessments diverge significantly in their instructional emphasis. A critical essay, multiple-choice definitions, academic matching, and text completion (gap-filling) are some of the ways in which the Word Wall Post-Test measures comprehension of both literal and abstract language. On the flip side, the Theme Wall Post-Test measures students' ability to visually classify information and creatively produce language in response to visual and thematic prompts; it places an emphasis on conceptual organization and visual literacy through the use of image-word associations, thematic vocabulary classification into separate domains, and visual-situational interpretations.

3.3 Questionnaires Structure

There are a total of 24 questions spread among the three surveys; eight questions on attitudes, eight on efficacy, and ten on autonomy (independent learning). We use a five-point Likert scale, where 5 is very agree and 1 is very disagree, to quantify student answers (1).

3.4 Face Validity

When evaluating an instrument's face validity, experts use their subjective assessments to decide if the tool seems to accurately measure the target variables. All of the linguists and EFL instructors who reviewed the surveys and exams for this study came to the same conclusion: the questions were well-designed for college-level students and presented in a straightforward, understandable way.

3.5 Content Validity

The term "content validity" refers to the degree to which a test accurately gauges the specified domain and aligns with predetermined learning goals. That each item successfully evaluates its intended knowledge or skill was achieved by analysing them using Bloom's Taxonomy to align cognitive processes, from lower-level recall to higher-level assessment and production.

3.6 Pilot Administration

A pilot research was carried out on December 24, 2025, with 20 third-stage EFL students at the University of Kirkuk who were excluded. The purpose of the study was to assess the clarity of the instrument, decide the best time to administer it, and perform psychometric analyses, such as finding the item difficulty, discriminating power, and item-total correlations. Taking an hour or more for the accomplishment exam and forty-five minutes for the questionnaire, the results showed that the study instruments were easy to understand and navigate. Psychometric testing confirmed that the items were sufficiently difficult and discriminatory, allowing them to be included in the final analysis.

3.7 Reliability of the Post-Tests

Test results' consistency, stability, and repeatability under same settings throughout time is what dependability is all about, according to the given text. The post-tests were rigorously tested using three methods to guarantee they evaluated the target constructs: test-retest, inter-rater reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha, which measure internal consistency.

An inter-rater reliability coefficient of 0.90, a test-retest coefficient of 0.87, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88 were all shown by the empirical data for the post-Word Wall Test. Results from the post-Theme Wall Test were similarly strong, with Cronbach's Alpha, test-retest, and inter-rater reliability readings of 0.87, 0.88, and 0.89 correspondingly. All computed coefficients significantly surpass the 0.70 criterion commonly used in educational research, indicating that both assessment tools have an unusually high level of psychometric reliability. This is the most important conclusion from the study.

Table (3-2): Reliability Coefficients of the Post Word Wall and Theme Wall Tests

Instrument	Cronbach's Alpha	Test-Retest Reliability	Inter-Rater Reliability	Reliability Level
Post Word Wall	0.88	0.87	0.90	High
Post Theme Wall	0.87	0.88	0.89	High

Average Reliability	0.88	0.88	0.90	High
----------------------------	------	------	------	------

3.8 Reliability of Questionnaire Items

All areas of the questionnaire's psychometric soundness and excellent internal consistency were confirmed by the reliability analysis. With Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.867 for the Attitudes domain and 0.829 for the Effectiveness scale, we can see that the items on both scales are quite uniform. Given the intricate and multi-dimensional character of autonomous learning behaviours, the Autonomy domain's lower alpha of 0.650 is nonetheless considered adequate for exploratory study in education. Overall, the instrument's strong cumulative Cronbach's Alpha of 0.860 confirms its reliability and consistency as a measure of students' reactions to visual wall methods.

Table(3-3) . Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Questionnaire	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Attitudes	0.867	Acceptable
Effectiveness	0.829	Acceptable
Autonomy	0.650	Moderate/acceptable for exploratory analysis
Overall Questionnaire	0.860	Acceptable

4.0 Analysis of Data and discussion of Result

4.1 Results Related to the First Aim: Vocabulary Knowledge

This section demonstrates how the use of visual aids in the classroom may greatly enhance vocabulary acquisition. The empirical data reveals a distinct difference in how students absorb language. It shows that while visual aids like Word Walls and Theme Walls greatly improve students' mechanical skills like spelling and contextual usage, they don't help them independently expand their understanding of core word meanings. In the end, the results show that the Theme Wall technique is the best since it improved students' comprehensive vocabulary scores and demonstrated that organised visual input is more effective than conventional ways of instruction.

4.2 Results Related to the Second Aim: Reading Performance

Reading abilities are not universally affected by classroom visual methods, according to these results. Students' ability to read quickly and fluently is greatly

improved by these strategies, which involve maintaining the target words in front of their eyes at all times. The ability to read and comprehend complex texts, however, is unaffected by visual familiarity as it needs higher-order cognitive processing beyond simple word identification. Overall, the tests showed that the Theme Wall setting was the best tool for improving reading metrics.

4.3 Results Related to the Third Objective: Writing Performance

Instead of providing a comprehensive answer to students' writing problems, visual walls have a very targeted effect, serving as a localised help with structure. The data clearly demonstrate that students' written vocabulary performance significantly improves when words are put on the walls. This suggests that students actively seek out and include those particular target words into their writing assignments. Although a wall can assist students in finding the proper word, it cannot resolve more systemic issues with organisational structure, text flow, or grammatical synthesis; hence, this does not enhance their overall writing output or overall writing scores.

4.4 Discussion of Vocabulary Learning Findings

The researcher explains these vocabulary effects by saying that having Word and Theme Walls up all the time makes it so students are constantly seeing them and then remembering them, which helps them spell and use words more effectively. Semantic comprehension necessitates more in-depth conceptual integration and cognitive processing than a static wall could offer, which is why vocabulary meaning did not see the same development. In this context, Theme Walls excelled because they allow pupils to more easily make strong mental associations between related words by organising them according to certain subjects, which is similar to how the brain naturally categorises information.

4.5 Discussion of Reading Comprehension and Reading Fluency

Visual methods are highly effective in developing word automaticity, which in turn decreases the cognitive effort required to decipher words and directly increases reading fluency, according to the more in-depth examination of reading mechanics. On the other side, reading comprehension remains a challenging mental task that requires prior knowledge, abstract reasoning, and analytical reasoning; this is further demonstrated by the absence of noteworthy advancements in this area. Thematic walls serve as an intellectual scaffold by grouping words in a contextual way, allowing pupils to better understand and make sense of the content they are reading.

4.6 Discussion of Writing Performance Findings

In writing, this conversation emphasises the educational divide between micro-linguistic

competence and macro-compositional abilities. The Theme Wall group did a fantastic job of choosing terms that were appropriate for the given circumstances since visual walls are a great way for kids to access their vocabulary while they're under time constraints. Having visual aids is helpful, but it won't improve students' writing on its own because of the importance of macro-skills like paragraph and essay construction, logical structure, and grammar.

4.7 Discussion of Attitude, Effectiveness, and Learner Autonomy

The talk concludes by stressing the emotional and psychological worth of these visual methods, which extends well beyond standardised exam results. The two kinds of walls have wonderful complementing effects on students' minds; word walls directly encourage students' autonomy and self-efficacy, while theme walls promote very positive attitudes due to their relevant and interesting subject organising. These visual aids are a great example of constructivist pedagogy in action; they allow students to actively and autonomously oversee their own vocabulary development by offering a designated area for self-monitoring and independent evaluation.

References

1. Aliwie, A. N. A. (2026). A Pragmatic Analysis of Gendered Speech Acts and Politeness Strategies in Judges' Feedback on 'Britain's Got Talent'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes1141>
2. Abd Aliwie AN. A Pragmatic Analysis of Wish Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL Learners. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología - Serie de Conferencias* [Internet]. 2024 Aug. 12 [cited 2024 Sep. 6];3:.1151. Available from: <https://conferencias.ageditor.ar/index.php/sctconf/article/view/1151>
3. Aliwie, A.N.A., 2024. A Pragmatic Study of Irony in Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities'. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 6(6): 147–161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i6.7056>
4. Abd Aliwie, A.N., 2025. A Pragmatic Analysis of Persuasive Arguments in the 2011–2020 US Presidential Campaign Speeches. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(1): 480–494. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i1.7243>
5. Aliwie, A. N. A. (2025). Conversational silence in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: A pragmatic perspective. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 25(2), 115–144. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v25i2.860>
6. *Frontiers in Psychology*. (2022). Guidelines for establishing reliability and validity in quantitative educational research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 894321.
7. Gu, Y., *Language Testing Journal*, & Psychological Assessment Association. (2021). Psychometric properties and consistency in language testing. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 18(4), 312–328.
8. Harmon, J. M., Wood, K. D., Hedrick, W. B., Vintinner, J., & Willeford, T. (2009). Interactive word walls: More than just reading the wall. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(5), 398–408.
9. Hinshelwood, J. (1917). *Congenital word-blindness*. H. K. Lewis & Co.
10. Ikbal, M. (2018). The effectiveness of using word wall media to improve students' vocabulary mastery: A pre-experimental study at the second grade of SMP Yogyakarta (Unpublished bachelor's thesis). Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta.
11. Jassim, A. A. (2020). Obstacles of learning English vocabulary among Iraqi EFL university students. *Journal of Language Studies*, 4(2), 85–102.
12. JStage. (2020). Statistical standards for reliability in test-retest methods. *Journal of East Asian Language Teaching*, 11(3), 45–59.
13. Kadiya, S. (2023). Visual learning strategies and vocabulary retention in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(1), 112–126.
14. Lantolf, J. P. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford University Press.
15. Mayer, R. E. (Ed.). (2005). *The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning*. Cambridge University Press.
16. Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori method* (A. E. George, Trans.). Frederick A. Stokes Company.
17. Sari, D. P. (2024). Reducing language anxiety through thematic and visual scaffolding in higher education. *Asian EFL Journal*, 26(2), 89–105.
18. Springer. (2016). *Evaluation, reliability, and measurement tools in behavioral sciences*. Springer International Publishing.
19. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
20. Wang, T. (2020). The power of theme walls in contextualized vocabulary learning. *ELT Journal*, 74(3), 241–253.
21. Yin, C. (2022). The effects of student-centered thematic instruction on oral communication and learning attitudes of multimedia design university students. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL*, 19(1), 35–62.