THE EFFECTS OF USING DIGITAL VOCABULARY JOURNAL IN MUET WRITING PERFORMANCE AMONG PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: AN ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

In learning English as a second language, the importance of vocabulary competency has long been recognized for its significance. An area where vocabulary knowledge has demonstrated significant promise is in the realm of writing as the breadth and depth of students' vocabulary are reflected in the general quality of their writing. Hence, the introduction of vocabulary journal is essential as it has been used to create interactive and immersive learning experiences that help learners acquire and retain new words more effectively. This classroom-based action research investigated the impacts of keeping digital vocabulary journal towards writing performance of ten pre-university students in a pre-university center in Sabah. It sought to to find out whether there is any difference in the students' writing scores prior to and after keeping vocabulary journal as well as to assess the students' attitudes toward maintaining a digital vocabulary journal. This action research used a mixed-method approach. Pre-test and post-test writing scores comprised the study's quantitative component, while the qualitative approach used semi-structured interviews and product analysis. The results indicated significant difference with large effect size and positive students' attitudes towards digital vocabulary journal. As a result, the assertions regarding the advantages of digital vocabulary journals were empirically supported by this action research study. By engaging in this type of research, teachers can gain valuable insights into how to optimize their use of digital vocabulary journal in the classroom, and ultimately improve the effectiveness of their teaching practice

Keyword(s): *action research, digital vocabulary journal, writing performance, MUET, pre-university students*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial factor for academic excellence and societal achievement (Santillan & Daenos, 2020; Jambari et al., 2021). Without a sufficient vocabulary, comprehension of written materials and precise expression of their thoughts and ideas may fail (Javed & Ghani, 2019). The breadth and depth of one's vocabulary immediately affect their writing descriptiveness, accuracy and general quality (Nor et al., 2019). Susanto (2017) and Aisyah (2017) concur that vocabulary acquisition is crucial to learning a second language. The way that new words are processed also affects how well they are remembered; more in-depth and sophisticated processing yields higher word retention. However, vocabulary learning can be a

daunting task for language students, especially when they have to learn this through the four skills (Nation, 2011). Memorizing long lists of words can be boring and frustrating, and students may find it challenging to remember what they have learned (Chong & Kee, 2019).

In the context of this action research, at the beginning of every academic year, prior to actual classroom teaching and learning activities, a debriefing session is held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of previous teaching and learning activities and areas for further development of those activities. At the session conducted with pre-university students at the beginning of 2024, those who experience difficulties in their writing regarded vocabulary as their main obstacle. One major issue brought forward by the students was the limited exposure to the language of instruction, which makes it difficult for them to understand the nuances of the language, hinder their ability to learn new vocabulary and negatively affect their writing. The hesitancy to employ new vocabulary in their writing is mainly due to their fear of making mistakes or sounding unnatural. Besides, students also reported that they often struggle to understand how words are used in context when they are presented with words in isolation. Some students highlighted the part where they tried to memorize newly learned words without fully understand its meaning, which lead to further confusion and incorrect usage. Moreover, students' lack of motivation to learn new words is mainly due to their inability to recall and retain the words.

Reflecting on ways to improve instructional practices in teaching vocabulary resulted in the realization that although the improvement in their vocabulary knowledge is parallel with the enhancement in students' writing abilities, there is no assurance that this will occur automatically. The nature of vocabulary learning itself complicates the learning process. There is no set of rules governing vocabulary formation and acquisition, in contrast to syntax, phonology, and grammar. (Alqahtani, 2015). Therefore, the vocabulary mastery relies on students' own motivation and interest on the words.

However, in a class of diverse learning abilities and varying levels of English proficiency, conventional ways of teaching vocabulary such as memorizing long list of words or relying on their bilingual dictionary, might not result in satisfying educational gains. The intervention method ought to be able to provide sufficient repetition and reinforcement of the new words to assist the students to retain the new information, thus, the researcher resorted to vocabulary journal. Several benefits ascribed to the use of vocabulary journal include increase in students' awareness of the vocabulary acquisition (Chong & Kee, 2019; Lai, 2019), convenient revisitation and review (Lewis, 2000; Pinter, 2006), and growth in self-assurance, participation and proficiency that helps to promote students' autonomy (Fowle, 2002; Nation, 1990).

Although there are myriad techniques related to the teaching of vocabulary, the main concern of this action research is to ensure successful comprehension and memorization of the new words. Coupled with the insightful feedback derived from the debriefing session with the pre-university students, one effective solution to their predicament is through vocabulary journalling. This is a technique in which students keep track of their newly learned vocabulary by listing the word, its definition, example sentence and sometimes a picture or other mnemonic devices. Consequently, this action research sought to investigate the impacts of keeping digital vocabulary journals towards the writing performance of pre-university students in Sabah. These research questions guided the implementation of the action research.

RQ1: To what extent does keeping vocabulary journal improve students' writing scores?
RQ2: What are students' attitudes towards keeping vocabulary journal?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Concepts of Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is defined by Alfaki (2015) and Alqahtani (2015) as the words either individual or phrase, that are used to express ideas and communicate intended meanings. Wilkins (1972) highlighted the value of vocabulary when he advocated that vocabulary is the catalyst to communication because nothing can be communicated without vocabulary. Similarly, Afzar (2019) pointed out that meaningful communication in a second language is difficult without words that can convey a wide variety of meanings

A substantial body of research indicates that vocabulary provides the foundation for understanding all aspects of the English language, including speaking, writing, reading, and listening (Aisyah, 2017; Lestariningsih, 2008; Iriyana, 2007). Insufficient vocabulary competence can hinder language mastery (Nor et al., 2019; Marlina & Nurdini, 2017). Furthermore, Arikan and Alemdari (2012) emphasized that understanding spelling, pronunciation, word category, antonyms, synonyms, contextual usage, connotative and denotative meanings, and register are all components of comprehensive vocabulary knowledge.

Four major guidelines for teaching vocabulary were presented by Blachowicz and Fisher (2000). This first principle emphasizes the importance of word categorisation using semantic mapping, morphological and contextual signals. The second principle allows customisation of their vocabulary acquisition by selecting words to study and use mnemonic devices to help them remember new meanings. Immersion in a word-rich environment through reading or listening (Benati, 2020) is the third principle of vocabulary instruction. The last principle highlights language acquisition through repeated exposure. Definitional explanations coupled with writing (Duin & Graves, 1987), contextualization (Rapaport, 2003), or deep engagement with words (Beck & McKeown, 1983) are among the effective measure for vocabulary retention.

Vocabulary Journal and Its Effects on Writing

Previous research investigated the relationship between second language learners' writing performance and vocabulary knowledge resulted in favorable reaction to writing proficiency (Nor et al., 2019). The more vocabulary knowledge the students have, the more effectively they can express themselves in writing. Although a stronger vocabulary can improve students' writing skills, this improvement is not guaranteed to occur automatically.

Corona et al. (1998) posit that vocabulary enhancement positively impacts writing skills only when the learning environment supports the development of writing. Several strategies can foster a writing-focused classroom environment. One approach is to share vocabulary-rich literature. Sloane (1996) describes how she selected books that serve as excellent models of writing to help her students become better writers. Teachers can introduce new words and encourage discussion by assigning students to read books, poems, and stories.

Another strategy for leveraging vocabulary to enhance writing involves encouraging students to search for and become mindful of interesting words. This can be accomplished in various ways. Students could, for instance, collaborate in pairs to identify appealing words in novels and compile a list of potential replacements. Additional strategies include having students display words they discover on an "Interesting Word Wall" (Sloane, 1996, p. 268); build a word bank by introducing "word-of-the-day" terms drawn from class readings (Corona et al., 1998, p. 25); act out dynamic verbs; or document unfamiliar words in "literature-response journals" for further exploration (Manning, 1999, p. 3).

According to research, students can improve their awareness of vocabulary learning by keeping a vocabulary journal (Chong & Kee, 2019; Lai, 2019). Students who maintain a vocabulary journal are required to record new terms along with definitions and any pertinent information, including synonyms, antonyms, collocations, and example sentences. According to Chong and Kee (2019), a vocabulary journal can be a useful tool for vocabulary acquisition because it is accessible to all students and does not rely heavily on expensive resources or high-tech equipment (McCrostie, 2007). However, students require additional support and instruction when starting their own vocabulary journals. As a result, maintaining a vocabulary notebook triggers a complex thought process.

Vocabulary journals can take various forms; notebooks, or leaflets (Turnuk, 2017). Participants of this action research were required to keep digital notebooks as their vocabulary journals. At the end of the intervention, their journal can serve as language glossary for their own reference. Furthermore, the participants had all the freedom to choose the types of words to be entered into their vocabulary journal. The pace of obtaining vocabulary knowledge was set by the teacher by making it compulsory for the participants to keep at least 100 words a month in their vocabulary journal.

The primary justification for resorting to vocabulary journaling is that it requires students to write down unknown terms along with their definitions and any pertinent information, including synonyms, antonyms, collocations, and sample sentences. This cognitive activity raises their awareness of vocabulary acquisition by triggering a complex mental process that occurs during word recording (Chong & Kee, 2019; Lai, 2019).

Additionally, vocabulary journal is an accessible tool to all students (Chong & Kee, 2019) and is not too dependent on high technology or expensive resources (McCrostie, 2007). Consequently, it enables students to revisit each word and make full use of the new words they have just learned (Lewis, 2000). Fisher et al. (2019) suggested that while students can rapidly learn new vocabulary, they often struggle with long-term retention. However, by allowing students to revisit the content at any moment, digital vocabulary journals can help to mitigate this issue. Hence, keeping digital vocabulary journal seems to be an effective intervention as it helps students not only to retain and recall previously learned words but also enhances their ability to use those new words in their writing.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised Kemmis and McTaggart's (1982) cyclical model of action research - plan, act, observe, and reflect – to investigate the impacts of keeping digital vocabulary journal towards pre-university students' MUET writing performance. This action research employed purposive sampling method. In the preliminary vocabulary test, a total of 32 students in that pre-university class took the test. Out of these 32 students, ten students were selected to participate in this action research. There were only three female students among these ten students. All of them came from non-English speaking background and were of intermediate language proficiency level. They were informed that this vocabulary journaling is a program conducted by the researcher who is also their subject teacher to help them with their vocabulary mastery and writing performance.

Research Implementation - Problem Review and Problem Review Analysis

Table 1: Problem Review

Date	Target Group	Purpose	Instrument
21 May 2024	32 students	To determine the participants' vocabulary size	Vocabulary Test (30 marks)
23 May 2024	10 students	To assess the participants' writing scores	Pre-test (60 marks)

Table 2: Problem Review Analysis

Date	Action	Analysis
21 May 2024	Vocabulary Test (30 marks)	10 students were unable to answer the MCQs correctly. They obtained below 15 marks for this test.
23 May 2024	Pre-test (60 marks)	10 students were unable to obtain good scores in their writing paper. Out of 60 full marks, their scores fall in between 27 and 32 marks.

Actions Taken- Implementation Plan

Preliminary evaluation in the form of vocabulary test (Appendix A) and CEFR writing pre-test were conducted at the end of May 2024. Ten students who were unable to do well in both tests were selected to be participants in this action research.

The implementation stage began after both tests (preliminary vocabulary test and CEFR writing pre-test), within a duration of three months (June to August). A short briefing session on expectations and vocabulary learning strategies were shared with the participants. They are allowed to choose the types of words to be entered into their vocabulary journal. However, the pace was set by making it compulsory for the participants to keep at least 100 words a month for a duration of three months, totaling to 300 words at the end of August.

Table 3: Implementation Plan

May	Vocabulary Journal			Sept
	June	**July**	**August**	
• Vocabulary Test • Writing Pre-test	100 words	100 words	100 words	• Writing Post-Test • Self-reported Survey

The post-test writing scores were obtained after the three-month intervention period, hence was conducted in September. Effect size was used to analyze the difference in the writing scores between the results of pre-test and post-test. Besides post-test, the researcher also used semi-structured interview to elicit participants' perceptions on their attitudes and outcomes of the program. This method was employed to obtain firsthand and more in-depth information from the participants. As the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) are open-ended, participants can freely express their views in their own terms, thus providing rich, detailed responses that can provide insights into their experiences and perspectives.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Writing Scores – Pre-test and Post-test

The table below presents pre-test and post-test writing scores, standard deviation, and effect size of both writing scores.

Table 4: Effect Size of Pre-test and Post-test Writing Scores

Students	Scores (60 marks)		Differences
	Pre-test Scores	Post-test Scores	
1	29	33	4
2	30	32	2
3	31	34	3
4	31	35	4
5	30	34	4
6	32	36	4
7	30	33	3
8	27	31	4
9	29	32	3
10	28	32	5
Mean	**29.7**	**33.2**	**3.5**
SD	**1.49**	**1.54**	**-**
Pooled SD	**1.52**		**-**
ES	**2.31**		**Large**

The mean of the all the pre-test writing scores were compared against the mean of the post-test writing scores. Both means were utilized to calculate the effect size of the difference in the writing scores between pre-test and post-test via the formula:

Effect Size (ES) = Mean of the post-test scores – Mean of the pre-test scores
Pooled standard deviation

Effect size measures the strength of the relationship between variables. Cohen suggested that d = 0.2 be considered a "small" effect size, 0.5 represents a "medium" effect size and 0.8 a "large" effect size. In another words, a large effect size means that the finding has practical significance, while a small effect size indicates limited practical applications. As indicated in Table 4, with Cohen's d of 2.31, the finding indicated practical significance after the intervention of Digital Vocabulary Journal.

Product Analysis

Apart from pre-test and post-test writing scores, product analysis was conducted. This analysis was conducted three times throughout the three-month program. Participants' vocabulary journals were collected at the end of June, July and August for monitoring and checking purposes. Some samples of participants' vocabulary journals are as below:

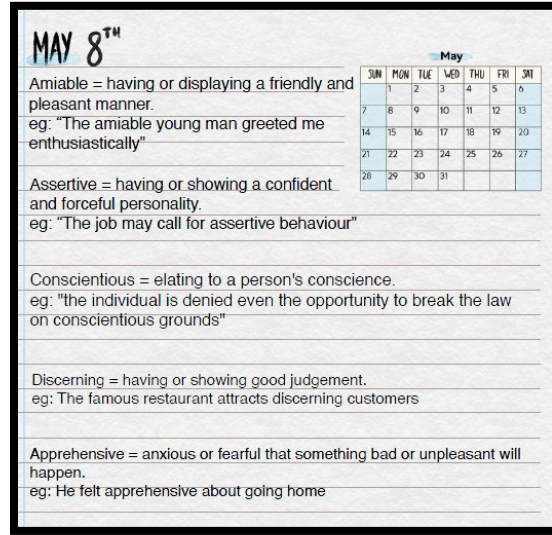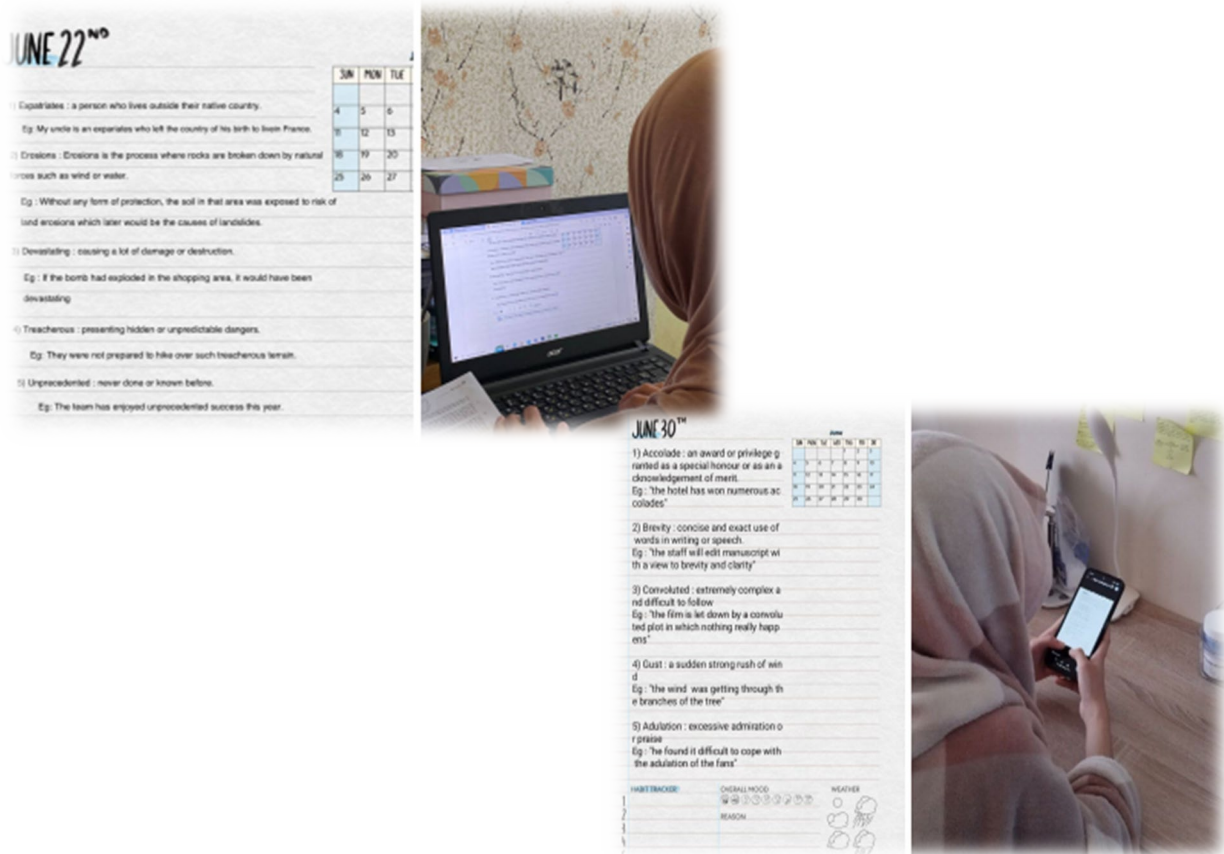**Figure 1.1** Sample of Digital Vocabulary Journals

Figure 1.2 Participants' Keeping Digital Vocabulary Journals

The checking indicated that at the end of June, 90% of the participants managed to enter at least 100 words into their journal. However, there was one participant who only managed to reach up to 85 words. July and August saw very satisfying results with all the participants managed to have at least 200 words in July and 300 words in August in their Vocabulary Journal (Table 5).

Table 5: Product Analysis (June to August)

	June	July	August
Students Reaching Targeted Number of Words	9	10	10
Students Unable to Reach the Target	1	0	0
Students Exceeded the Targeted	2	3	3

The product analysis also found out that three participants exceeded the required number of words needed each month. There was also an increase in the number of participants within those three months. In June, 20% of the participants exceeded 100 words. An additional participant joined this group in July and all the three of them exceeded the required number of words in August.

When questioned on their reasons for exceeding the required number of words, they reported:
- *I get excited when I know many new words so I keep on looking for more words. [S1]*
- *I feel happy because I learned many new words….so I want to learn more. [S6]*
- *It is exciting to learn new words and I enjoy searching for the words. [S10]*

When cross-checked with their pre-test and post-test writing scores, the researcher found out that these three participants were among the participants who achieved the largest increase in their writing scores, which were an increase of either four or five marks in their post-test writing scores.

Semi-structured Interview

In the attempt to achieve the second research objective, semi-structured interview was another instrument used in this action research. Ten semi-structured questions (Appendix B) were used to invite the participants to provide answers in their own words, thus providing qualitative data for this study. Although these questions are more difficult to analyze, they can produce more in-depth responses, and the researcher was told by the participants what was in their mind and not being restricted by rating scales or categories.

Table 6: Students' Attitudes towards Keeping Vocabulary Journal

Self-Reported Survey	
Positive Attitudes	**Negative Attitudes**
8 participants (80%)	2 participants (20%)
- Like the vocabulary journal	- Tedious task for them
- Happy with vocabulary journal	- Stressful to keep 100 words per month in the journal
- Very good idea	- Lazy to do the journal
- Encouraging idea	

Based on the semi-structured interviews, eight participants reported having positive attitudes towards keeping a vocabulary journal. They reported that they like keeping a vocabulary

journal and were happy with it. They also reported that vocabulary journal is a very good and encouraging idea. When questioned about the reasons behind the positive attitudes, all eight of them reported that keeping vocabulary journal enables them to learn new words. Six participants reported that the program improves their writing whereas another seven of them mentioned that the program improves their English.

When the participants were questioned on how this program helped to improve their writing performance and English, they reported that:

- *I can use the new words that I learned in my essays. [S4]*

- *I found many new adjectives…so I used them in my essays to describe something…or someone. [S5]*

- *I feel that the words in my essays now are better words…and I have so many words now…of course I want to show off a bit when I write. [S7]*

In Table 6, two participants showed negative comments towards keeping vocabulary journal. According to them, keeping a vocabulary journal was a very tedious task as it is stressful to keep 100 words per month in the journal. When further questioned on this aspect, their responses were:

- *100 words are too many. I need to do homework on Monday to Friday…can only do this on Saturday…Sunday I want to rest [S2].*

- *I like this vocabulary journal actually…but I have many things to do. I cannot focus on other things because I keep on doing this [S9].*

They also reported that they were unable to memorize or use all the words they keep in the vocabulary journal. According to them:

- *I cannot remember all the words. Until now, I have more than 100 words in the journal, but I still don't know how to use all of them [S2].*

- *I just write the meanings but I don't really understand them..so cannot use [S9].*

Discussion of the Findings

The study emphasizes the importance of vocabulary mastery and its impacts on writing performance. The pre-test and post-test writing scores revealed that there was a significant increase in the students' writing performance after the intervention of vocabulary journal. It is intriguing to learn that students' writing abilities can be improved by having a larger vocabulary. However, it should be noted that automation of this transformation is not guaranteed. Therefore, teachers must create a conducive writing environment for the students in order to ensure improvement in writing skills (Deane, 2022).

Another research objective of this action research is to find out how students feel about keeping digital vocabulary journals. The findings revealed that although they considered the time and effort needed in keeping digital vocabulary diary to be difficult, the results showed good sentiments regarding the value of vocabulary journal. Additionally, students seemed to take pleasure in utilizing the digital vocabulary journal during class activities.

Therefore, the strengths of this intervention lie mainly in students' positive attitudes towards keeping vocabulary journal. As they perceived this task as positive, they were more intrinsically motivated to learn new words, be more competent in the language and be more confident in using it. The positive sentiments shown in this study mirrored the opinions of Thompson and von Gillern (2020) as well as Mahdavy (2021). One could also argue that the students gained an appreciation for and useful training in the application of an efficient vocabulary acquisition method. This is a good feature that could influence language learning generally, especially when combined with the favourable sentiments regarding the vocabulary journal.

The data analyses also identified some detrimental effects of keeping vocabulary journal. The most prominent adverse consequence is the inability to sustain their interest to keep vocabulary journal. This

could probably be due to the reason that the task was tedious and burdening for low proficiency students. However, this detrimental effect can be mitigated with the aid of the four vocabulary teaching concepts proposed by Blachowicz and Fisher (2000). This is because the researcher had observed that students are more inclined to devote their time and energy to learning vocabulary at their own pace when they are actively creating their own understanding of the words, are aware of how to learn them, and can customize their word learning experience. Hence, teachers should make sure that all students have access to the immersion in word-rich environment. This ensures that students are given constant exposure from multiple information sources.

Another weakness of keeping vocabulary journal that has been identified was the inability of the students to recall the new words they have learned. This is also put forth by Pinter (2006) who stated that many students learn quickly but also forget quickly. This point was also being discussed in Uzun's (2013) study on vocabulary learning and retention. The results revealed that additional information about unfamiliar terms and frequent teacher feedback had favourable effects on vocabulary acquisition.

Suggestions for Future Research

As this action research only dwelt ten pre-university students in a pre-university center in Sabah, it is envisaged that the second cycle or future research can include more students from other classes. Larger sampling in future studies can cater for context generalization. Further and larger scale study might provide more comprehensive results. Another possible improvement to this study is the number of targeted words. In this cycle, as the students were given the freedom to choose the types of words that they wanted to learn, perhaps, in the next cycle, students can also have the autonomy to determine the number of words they prefer to learn in a month. Close monitoring, however, is necessary in order to ensure students achieve the minimum required number of words per month.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, vocabulary journals have been advocated for many years, yet their benefits have been largely descriptive or speculative. This action research has demonstrated empirical support for those claims on the benefits of vocabulary journals in terms of vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, students have exhibited positive attitudes not only towards vocabulary journals themselves, but also towards their inclusion into activities in the language classroom, nurturing the students to become autonomous learners and helping them develop other skills as well.

As keeping a vocabulary journal has positive effects towards students, it is therefore recommended to include this in the language yearly plan or school-based project to be made compulsory for all the students in this school. It is also hoped that this evaluation provides useful insights to all the stakeholders and offers encouragement for future researchers who are interested in researching into vocabulary instruction and learning.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

VOCABULARY TEST

1. One day, I want to climb Mt. Everest. That's a goal I want to ___ .
   a) achieve
   b) invent
   c) respect
   d) acquire

2. Jack ___ did a thing at work today day. He spent most of his time chatting with the secretary.
   a) seldom
   b) hardly
   c) rarely
   d) slightly

3. Weather experts have ___ that next summer will be extremely hot.
   a) reflected
   b) predicted
   c) included
   d) prescribed

4. Lisa is ___ buying a pet but she's not sure what kind to get.
   a) recalling
   b) regretting
   c) considering
   d) counting

5. It is very ___ to shop on the Internet. All you need is a credit card.
   a) polite
   b) enthusiastic
   c) convenient
   d) foolish

6. Diamonds are ___ , which is probably one of the reasons they are valuable.
   a) broad
   b) talented
   c) flexible
   d) rare

7. John recently changed his ___ . He used to be an accountant, but now he's a real estate agent.
   a) source
   b) profit
   c) mood
   d) career

8. For a company to succeed, good management is ___ .
   a) tough
   b) broad
   c) essential
   d) affordable

9. I take the stairs in my apartment building because the elevators aren't ___ .
   a) behind
   b) honest
   c) regular
   d) reliable

10. Jean has a red stain on her carpet where she ___ wine.
    a) spilled
    b) blamed
    c) acquired
    d) baked

11. The Louvre is a famous museum in Paris that was designed by Chinese ___ I.M Pei.
    a) plumber
    b) architect
    c) mechanic
    d) interpreter

12. Forest fires can start naturally; for example, when ___ strikes the ground during a storm.
    a) thunder
    b) rubbish
    c) gasoline
    d) lightning

13. There is still some doubt among scientists about the ___ of global warming.
    a) review
    b) effort
    c) cause
    d) flood

14. Tim's job ___ communicating with newspapers and magazines about his company's products.
    a) appreciates
    b) regards
    c) adores
    d) involves

15. After two hours of hard training, the coach felt that his players ___ a break.
    a) deserved
    b) identified
    c) encouraged
    d) wasted

Appendix B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. How do you feel about vocabulary journal?

2. Why do you feel such way? Please elaborate.

3. Do you use monolingual or bilingual dictionaries? Why?

4. How do you look for new words?

5. What are the advantages of keeping vocabulary journal?

6. What are the disadvantages of keeping vocabulary journal?

7. Does vocabulary journal help you to improve your vocabulary knowledge?

8. Are you able to use the words you learned in your essay?

9. Are 100 words a month too much for you to handle? Why? Please elaborate.

10. Will you continue to do this in the future? Why?