



Investigating Emotional Experiences in Vocabulary Learning Among EFL Learners: A Constructed Emotion Theory Perspective

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Abstract: The present study investigates the emotional experiences of ten English as a foreign language (EFL) female students during an English vocabulary-building course, through the lens of Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE). The data were collected using a background questionnaire, reflection paragraphs, and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed primarily by applying thematic analysis methods. The TCE was used to explain the wide range of emotions experienced and the reasons for fluctuations within a single EFL vocabulary course. The results revealed a diverse spectrum of emotions, including enjoyment, confidence, pride, anxiety, boredom, embarrassment, and blame, underscoring the TCE's premise that emotions are intricately constructed and influenced by personal learning experiences, the appraisal of learning events, contextual factors, and social interactions. Moreover, the study found that emotions are not only influenced by the situational context but also shape the situational context in turn. Thus, the findings highlighted the open and interactive nature of the systems students use to construct their emotions. Importantly, the study uncovered the strategies students employ to manage their emotions, highlighting the active role students play in shaping their emotional experiences. The findings provide valuable insights for EFL teachers, suggesting the need for a supportive and empathetic teaching environment that acknowledges the emotional dimensions of EFL vocabulary learning. By understanding and addressing these emotional aspects, teachers can better assist learners in managing their emotions, thereby optimizing vocabulary acquisition and enhancing overall learning outcomes.

Keywords: Emotions, English as a Foreign Language, Vocabulary Learning, Theory of Constructed Emotions, Higher Education.

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Introduction

Research is increasingly focusing on the implications of emotions in second language (L2) learning, highlighting their importance alongside traditional elements such as cognition and motivation ([Dewaele, 2005](#); [Dewaele & Li, 2020](#); [Lantolf & Swain, 2019](#)). This body of research has substantially examined the impact of negative and positive emotions on language learning, emphasizing the restrictive nature of negative emotions and the facilitative function of positive emotions ([Plonsky et al., 2022](#)). Among these, anxiety has received the most attention, particularly its impact on speaking, listening, reading, and writing ([Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011](#); [Cheng et al., 2014](#); [Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012](#); [Huang & Hung, 2013](#); [Pae, 2013](#); [Rai et al., 2011](#); [Sparks & Patton, 2013](#); [Zhang, 2013](#); [Zheng & Cheng, 2018](#)). Beyond anxiety, L2 emotions research has expanded to investigate the role of enjoyment, pride, love, guilt, frustration, and boredom in language learning ([Dewaele & Li, 2020](#); [Dewaele & MacIntyre 2014](#); [Palvelescu & Petrić 2018](#); [Ross & Stracke 2016](#)). Additionally, the fluctuating nature of emotions during the process of language learning ([Boudreau et al., 2018](#); [Gregersen et al., 2014](#)) and how different contexts, such as classroom environments or study abroad experiences, influence emotional experiences ([Dewey et al., 2018](#); [Khajavy et al., 2018](#); [Thompson & Lee, 2014](#)) form central themes in research on L2 emotions.

While the emotional landscape of L2 learning has received significant attention, the emotional experiences of learners during EFL vocabulary acquisition have been researched in a more fragmented manner. "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" ([Wilkins, 1972, p. 111](#)). Vocabulary learning has a significant impact on students' success in acquiring the target language ([Hairrell et al., 2011](#); [Moody et al., 2018](#); [Pishghadam & Shayesteh, 2016](#)). Research has consistently shown that vocabulary breadth and depth are key predictors of language proficiency ([Nation, 2001](#); [Schmitt, 2010](#)). Furthermore, emotions have been shown to influence cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and problem-solving, which are central to vocabulary learning ([Tyng et al., 2017](#)). Learners who can regulate emotional responses would be able to achieve the optimal implementation of vocabulary learning strategies ([Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2016](#)). In addition, when learners experience positive emotions, they are active and motivated to meet their vocabulary goals ([Alamer, 2022](#); [MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012](#)). Besides, learners who associate positive emotions with learning new words are more likely to retain them in their long-term memory ([Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000](#)). On the other hand, exposure to

negative emotions during vocabulary learning can impair the ability to retrieve and correctly associate new words ([Miller et al., 2018](#)).

Acknowledging that "language learners experience a wide range of interacting positive and negative emotions in an infinite amount of colors and shades." ([Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021, p. 68](#)) and that emotions need to be considered holistically, as dynamic "brain-body phenomena in context" ([Barrett, 2017a, p. 16](#)), this research aims to capture the emotional experiences of 10 female English-majored students during a vocabulary-building course at a major university in Saudi Arabia, a context notably underrepresented in existing literature ([Alqurashi, 2019](#)).

The emotional experiences of participants will be analyzed through Barrett's theory of constructed emotion (TCE), which challenges conventional notions of universal emotions and places them within a network of experiences and socialization ([Barrett, 2017a](#); [White, 2018](#)). To the author's knowledge, the work of [Dewaele and Pavelescu \(2021\)](#) is the sole study that employs TCE to frame emotions in the EFL classroom; however, their study investigated the relationship between foreign language enjoyment, foreign language anxiety, and willingness to communicate in two Romanian high school students learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, this research not only addresses a contextual gap but also introduces a theoretical contribution by applying TCE to the new context of EFL vocabulary learning. The findings are expected to offer profound implications for teaching practices, advocating for empathetic and emotionally supportive strategies that enhance vocabulary learning by creating an environment where positive emotions are nurtured, thereby facilitating a more effective and engaging learning experience.

Review of the Literature

Barrett's TCE: A Conceptual Model of Learner Emotions

Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) proposes that emotions are not innate or universally experienced but are dynamically constructed by the brain. Central to TCE is the principle of psychological constructionism, which challenges the traditional notion that emotions are innate and universal. Instead, [Barrett \(2017a\)](#) contends that emotions are the result of the brain's process of appraisal and categorization, integrating sensory inputs with past experiences, goals, needs, and contextual factors to construct emotional experiences. This perspective diverges significantly from essentialist views, showing that emotions are subjective. [Barrett's \(2017a\)](#) concept of goal-based appraisal suggests that the brain's

evaluation of events in relation to one's goals, needs, and well-being is crucial in the construction of emotions. This appraisal process influences how events are categorized as emotional experiences and shapes the physiological and behavioral responses that follow. Furthermore, TCE posits that individuals are active constructors of their emotional experiences, engaging dynamically with their environment and interpreting experiences in a way that shapes their emotional states ([Barrett, 2017b](#)). This principle emphasizes the proactive role individuals play in forming their emotional experiences.

Moreover, TCE emphasizes the importance of social and cultural embedding in understanding emotional experiences. [Barrett \(2017a\)](#) argues that emotions are deeply influenced by cultural norms and social contexts, which shape how emotions are experienced, expressed, and understood across different cultures. This principle contests the idea of universal emotional expressions, highlighting the role of cultural variability in emotional experiences. Additionally, the theory acknowledges the significance of individual variability, recognizing that personal history, personality traits, and individual differences play a critical role in the construction of emotions ([Barrett, 2017b](#)). This acknowledges the diversity in emotional experiences among individuals within the same cultural setting.

By emphasizing the constructed nature of emotions, influenced by cultural, social, and individual factors, TCE offers a comprehensive framework for exploring the complexity of emotional experiences. This perspective not only challenges the traditional views of emotions as universally recognizable and genetically determined but also illuminates the dynamic and context-dependent nature of emotional experiences. [Barrett \(2017a, 2017b\)](#) advocates for a shift away from essentialist views, encouraging researchers to explore the diverse spectrum of emotions (p. 6). The current study, utilizing TCE, aims to delve into the complex interplay of factors contributing to the emotional experiences of EFL learners in vocabulary learning, acknowledging their active role in shaping their experiences ([Barrett, 2017a; 2017b](#)).

Emotions in L2 Learning Contexts

The impact of emotions on learning L2 is a well-established topic, with negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, and embarrassment often hindering the process of L2 development ([Dewaele et al., 2018](#)). While acknowledging the existence of negative emotions, theorists from the Positive Psychology School in L2 research pay significant attention to the positive aspect of learners' emotional experiences ([Dewaele et al., 2019](#)). Having different functions, negative and positive emotions "are not opposite ends of the same spectrum" ([MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 193](#)). Positive emotions can not only relieve the

impact of distress ([MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012](#)) but can also aid learners absorb language material and improve their achievements ([Li et al., 2021](#)). For example, [Hsu et al. \(2017\)](#) investigated the experiences of 36 EFL high school learners with a game-based mobile application. Participants reported that the game design prevented anxiety and enhanced enjoyment. Similarly, [Bashori et al. \(2021\)](#) found that using Automatic Speech Recognition websites reduced speaking anxiety among EFL students and improved their language enjoyment. [Jin et al. \(2020\)](#) also took a positive psychology approach to nurture positive mindsets and behaviors in the EFL classroom. They asked 20 Chinese-as-the-first-language students to sign a contract that would oblige them to speak in the English classroom for one week. Results were then contrasted with a comparison group of 22 EFL learners who were not contracted. Not only did participants in the experimental group report decreased levels of anxiety but nervousness, worry, and fear were also diminished. Meanwhile, the contracting experiment showed the potential to cultivate positive emotions of hope, courage, happiness, and enthusiasm among learners.

Among the few studies that address the interplay between emotions and vocabulary learning, [Subaşı \(2010\)](#) investigated the sources of anxiety among 55 first-year university students in Turkey and found that learners' anxiety increases when they lack confidence and perceive themselves as less worthy or able to speak English than native speakers or their classmates. Highly anxious Turkish EFL learners reported they were eager to speak fluent English but when unable to meet this goal, they froze up and forgot vocabulary, damaging their confidence, and leading to more anxiety. Thus, an insufficient vocabulary was identified as a leading cause of anxiety, alongside low proficiency in English.

Other studies investigated how vocabulary learning strategies assist learners in coping with anxiety. Examining vocabulary learning strategies at an Afghani university, [Hadi and Guo \(2020\)](#) identified that along with cognitive strategies, affective strategies are also frequently used by students. These tactics involve taking a break, self-rewards, sharing experiences, and controlling anxiety and stress. In a similar vein, [Lucas et al. \(2011\)](#) recruited a sample of 250 tertiary-level learners in the Philippines who were enrolled in an English course. Results suggest that employing a vocabulary learning strategy enables learners to become accountable for their learning, cope with anxiety, and efficiently master the English language. [Behjat and Ghasemi \(2015\)](#) discovered that students who can control their emotions benefit from improved vocabulary learning. Iranian EFL learners who scored higher in emotional intelligence, described as the capability to understand emotions and manage them, were also more likely to improve their scores on vocabulary tests.

When learners feel motivated, they are more active in meeting their vocabulary needs. [Alamer \(2022\)](#) conducted a study with a sample of 366 Saudi EFL undergraduate students to examine a unified procedure model of L2 motivation. The findings indicate that learners who feel more autonomous, competent, and supported benefit from higher vocabulary knowledge. By meeting these basic psychological needs, they show greater autonomous motivation and are more inclined to invest effort in greater attainment in vocabulary learning.

[Pishghadam et al. \(2013\)](#) suggested that students' lexical emotions are linked to substantial vocabulary learning effects. They coined the term "emotioncy", which is an amalgamation of "emotions" and "frequency", defined as sense-induced emotions that relativize cognition. It goes beyond linguistic relativism, suggesting that "sensory experience is the cornerstone of emotional and cognitive abilities" ([Pishghadam et al., 2016](#)). To examine the effects of emotioncy-based instruction on vocabulary learning, [Jajarmi and Pishghadam \(2019\)](#) taught their sample of 32 Iranian EFL learners nine new words, utilizing different senses. Those who received auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic instruction, for example, touching and tasting a vegetable, were better able to retain new words. According to the researchers, a likely reason for the success of multisensory learning is the dopamine release related to emotionalization, which in turn increases motivation and interest.

Culturally relevant texts can evoke emotions that are relevant to improving vocabulary learning. [Driver \(2022\)](#) recruited 121 Spanish heritage and foreign language students to investigate how positive, negative, and neutral words and texts in the target language influence vocabulary learning. Driver hypothesized that acquiring new words in the context of socially relevant texts is different from learning an irrelevant list of vocabulary. Interestingly, neutral and negative socially relevant readings were found to be the most effective contexts for vocabulary learning, compared to positive readings. A possible explanation is that a neutral text requires deeper personal investment and evokes a mixture of relevant emotions that are more powerful than simply explicitly wording positive emotions.

Several studies have confirmed that positive emotions are linked to L2 vocabulary memory (e.g., [Li et al., 2020](#); [Kralova et al., 2022](#)). [Li et al. \(2020\)](#) conducted two experiments among Chinese EFL learners and revealed that positive emotions not only enhance item memory but also associative memory, which is responsible for making relationships between items. They used a control group and a positive group to show comic and neutral video material right after new vocabulary was encoded by participants. Results confirmed the hypothesis that enhanced associate memory is a result of post-encoding positive emotion.

Overall, this literature review reveals a rich body of work exploring the interplay between emotions and various aspects of second language (L2) learning, including vocabulary acquisition. However, the depiction of the specific emotional experiences associated with vocabulary learning in an EFL vocabulary course setting has not been explored. This study, guided by Barrett's TCE, aims to address this gap by capturing the emotional experiences of ten EFL Saudi female learners when learning EFL vocabulary, their contributing factors, and the strategies used for managing them. This study intends to be a trigger for other EFL teachers in different academic settings to examine their learners' emotional experiences when learning vocabulary, thus potentially influencing teaching methodologies and approaches. The three research questions researched in this study were:

RQ1: How do the emotional experiences of Saudi female EFL learners in vocabulary learning within a course setting manifest?

RQ2: What are the contributing factors to the emotional experiences of Saudi female EFL learners when learning foreign vocabulary?

RQ3: What are the predominant strategies adopted by students for emotional regulation in the context of an EFL vocabulary-building course, and how effective are these strategies?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to delve into the emotional experiences of ten female Saudi EFL learners during a vocabulary-building course, grounded in the understanding that emotions are profoundly intertwined with learners' experiences and are most effectively examined through qualitative techniques, as highlighted by Rawal and De Costa (2019). This approach is characterized by its focus on a bounded system – in this instance, ten female Saudi EFL learners within a vocabulary-building course. The case study design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the participants' emotional experiences, aiming to understand the nuances and complexities of these emotions within the specific learning context.

Participants

Invitations to take part in the study were extended via email, in Arabic, to 49 EFL Saudi female students enrolled in a 15-week vocabulary-building course within a four-year bachelor

of English program in a large public university in Saudi Arabia. This invitation described the study's objectives and ethical considerations (including confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation). This targeted selection guaranteed that all participants had firsthand experience in foreign language vocabulary learning, facilitating the collection of detailed insights into their emotional experiences. The Vocabulary-Building course is designed to enhance students' English vocabulary, focusing on pronunciation, usage, and grammar, while systematically increasing vocabulary size for effective communication. This course aims to develop confidence in word choice and precision in expression, integrating new words into students' speech and writing through practical exercises and thematic essays. Ten students expressed their interest in taking part in the study. To compile participant profiles, the ten participants answered four demographic questions about the participants' age, GPA, favourite way of learning English vocabulary, and their preferred learning style. Participant profiles are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Participants Profiles

Participants	Age	GPA	Preferred way of learning	Learning style
S1	21	A	group work	visual
S2	21	A+	individual	visual
S3	25	A	individual	read/write
S4	19	B+	group work	visual
S5	20	B	pair work	auditory
S6	22	A+	individual	visual
S7	21	B+	individual	visual
S8	20	C	pair work	auditory
S9	22	A+	individual	visual
S10	20	A+	pair work	read-write

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from ten EFL participants, employing a solid approach to capture the depth and breadth of their emotional experiences in learning vocabulary. Initially, participants were tasked with composing reflection paragraphs (RPs) at three critical junctures—weeks 2, 8, and 13—of their vocabulary course. These RPs, written in Arabic, the participants' native language, were structured to elicit detailed accounts of their emotional experiences in vocabulary learning. To ensure uniformity and depth in the reflections, explicit guidelines detailing the length, content, and format were provided.

In week 13, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant, designed to probe deeper into the nuanced emotional dimensions of their learning experiences, as illuminated by their reflections. For example, participant S5 was prompted to detail a moment of significant emotional challenge, such as frustration or overwhelm, in learning new vocabulary, and to articulate the impact of such emotions on her learning and retention processes. Interviews are effective data collection methods as they enable the gathering of rich, detailed information about participants' emotions, experiences, and perspectives (Cohen et al., 2007), providing researchers access to their subjective experiences and internal thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The validity of the semi-structured interview guide was ensured through a rigorous development and review process involving the researcher and two experienced EFL researchers and pilot testing with three participants not included in the main study. The interview guide, consisting of 12 targeted questions, was crafted to explore a spectrum of emotional experiences and learning contexts identified in the initial RPs. The questions were carefully designed to encourage participants to express their emotional states, their triggers, and their emotion management strategies. To accommodate the linguistic preferences of participants and preserve the authenticity of their emotional expressions, interviews were conducted in either Arabic or English, based on participant comfort. All Arabic responses were translated into English by certified translators to ensure fidelity and accuracy in capturing the participants' emotional narratives.

Data Analysis

This study employed a primarily qualitative approach to data analysis, with thematic analysis as the central method. Inductive thematic analysis was specifically chosen to allow for the exploration of patterns and themes emerging directly from the data. This approach is well-suited for the study as the goal is to gain in-depth insights into the emotional experiences of language learners during vocabulary acquisition, a relatively under-researched area. Frequency analysis was used to support the qualitative findings by quantifying and highlighting the prominence of identified emotions within participant responses.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, encompassing familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting, was utilized for in-depth qualitative exploration. Given that emotions are often elicited and constructed by specific situations, the initial coding phase treated emotions and their triggering factors and contexts as singular coding units. This approach acknowledged

the interconnected nature of emotions and the factors contributing to their construction. Subsequent analysis focused on identifying patterns within the data, revealing how specific situations, thoughts, or experiences shaped the participants' emotional responses. For instance, expressions of emotion tied to particular scenarios (e.g., "My vocabulary has grown a lot, and I'm feeling more confident expressing complex ideas in English...") were coded as individual units. This approach prevented the overlapping coding of emotions, especially when participants described multiple emotions without their triggers and contextual factors. Subsequent specific situations mentioned by participants that evoked particular emotions were then coded as separate units.

During the theme identification phase, a bottom-up coding strategy was employed, allowing for the emergence of subthemes and themes related to emotions and their triggering contexts from the data. This iterative process involved coding similar expressions of emotion, triggering factors and contexts, and regulation strategies. An analytical framework, adapted from Barrette's TCE (2017), facilitated the discussion and examination of the participants' emotional experiences, highlighting the constructed nature of emotions.

Data reliability was ensured through intra-coder reliability checks, involving a re-coding of the data after a three-week interval ($K = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$). Any discrepancies in coding were thoroughly examined and resolved. For the coding and quantitative content analysis of the data—derived from semi-structured interviews and reflection paragraphs—Dedoose was utilized, ensuring a systematic and organized analysis process. This comprehensive analytical strategy facilitates the identification of both overarching emotional patterns and the contextual nuances that construct them. Moreover, the integration of Barrett's theoretical framework provided a solid foundation for understanding the factors influencing emotional experiences during vocabulary acquisition.

Results

Positive Emotions Experienced and Factors Creating Them

Through the analysis of the ten participants' reflection paragraphs and interview transcripts regarding their emotional experiences when learning vocabulary, four positive emotions emerged repeatedly, indicating their frequency of occurrence in the data. As summarised in Table 2, *confidence* (26 times), *enjoyment* (25 times), *happiness* (19 times), and *pride* (10 times) stood out as the most frequently experienced positive emotions.

Table 2. Frequency of the Emotions Mentioned in the Qualitative Data

Emotions	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total
Confidence	6	2	3	3	0	2	2	0	3	5	26
Enjoyment	4	3	3	3	1	3	2	0	2	4	25
Happiness	2	3	1	1	1	4	1	1	2	3	19
Pride	2	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	10
Boredom	2	4	3	5	4	2	3	5	2	2	32
Anxiety	1	2	2	3	4	2	1	6	2	1	24
Embarrassment	0	1	2	0	3	2	2	3	4	0	17
Shame	0	3	0	1	4	2	2	3	1	0	16
Stress	2	1	1	2	4	2	2	3	2	0	19
Frustration	1	4	2	1	5	5	1	4	1	0	24
Blame	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	4

Eight participants mentioned confidence as a common experienced emotion that is constructed by the successful acquisition of vocabulary. For example, S1 wrote “*For me, mastering new vocabulary is a challenging but rewarding journey. It requires patience and practice. With every new word I learn in each class, my confidence and ability grow, enhancing my language skills significantly*”. The feelings of accomplishment and confidence that come with using new vocabulary correctly can be a major source of motivation to continue learning and improving their language abilities. S10 reflected,

My vocabulary has grown a lot, and I'm feeling more confident expressing complex ideas in English. Yesterday, I used the word 'melancholic' to describe a character in a book we were reading. My teacher praised me, and I felt so proud. I'm more confident now and will keep working hard (S10's RP).

The pleasure of reaping the fruits of their efforts and celebrating their success acts as a major incentive to keep learning and pushing themselves to achieve even more, as they know that doing so will bring them even happiness and a greater sense of accomplishment.

The feeling of accomplishment, confidence, and satisfaction is not just a one-time thing, it is something that stays with me every time I use new words. I feel like I am always making progress and moving forward, and this inspires me to keep pushing myself to achieve more (S3's interview).

Additionally, participants expressed enjoyment and happiness in learning vocabulary, particularly when the topics are relevant and of interest to them, like photography, travel, or fashion. S3 wrote,

My interest in the lesson increases whenever any of the new vocabulary relates to my passions and pastimes. For instance, this week we learned about the words 'panorama and aperture, which excited me since they connected closely to my passion for photography. This connection not only spiked my enthusiasm but also made the learning process more meaningful and enjoyable (S3's RP).

Their motivation to learn new words also increases when the learning method and learning context are appealing. S4 shared a similar reflection,

I find that when vocabulary learning is taught with fun activities, it becomes significantly more engaging and less stressful. This week we learned words through word puzzles and storytelling, it felt less like studying and more like playing. This approach made it easier to understand and retain new words compared to the usual method of memorization for exam preparation (S4's RP).

Additionally, five participants experienced a sense of pride in their success in acquiring new vocabulary and their ability to communicate effectively with others in English. They felt that their vocabulary learning was leading to personal growth and goal achievement. Participants may have initially seen learning the new vocabulary as a difficult task, but with effort, dedication, and determination, they were able to overcome the challenges and feel a sense of pride. S9 shared,

I'm really proud of my achievements in this course, particularly in reaching my goal of improving my communication for better job prospects. Two weeks ago, I applied new vocabulary in a job interview for a part-time marketing position. I confidently used 'consumer insights,' which I believe played a huge role in receiving the job offer. This success has reignited my commitment to continuous learning to expand my vocabulary (S9's interview).

These findings highlight the participants' journey of vocabulary learning and showcase the positive emotions, personal growth, and determination that come with the experience.

Negative Emotions Experienced and Factors Creating Them

On the other hand, participants reported experiencing *boredom* (32 times), *anxiety* (24 times), *frustration* (24 times), *stress* (19 times), *embarrassment* (17), *shame* (16 times), and *blame* (4 times) during the process of learning EFL vocabulary. Boredom was the most frequently

mentioned emotion to be experienced by the ten participants. When learning is forced, such as homework or exam preparation, participants get bored easily and study is like a burden, resulting in a lack of enthusiasm. S7 stated, “Honestly, it's quite boring at times. Like when I had to memorize so many phrasal verbs for the midterm exam. This kind of forced studying takes away the real joy of learning vocabulary”. Similarly, S8 reflected,

Towards the end of the semester, I started to find my interest decreasing because I had to memorize a lot of proverbs, personality idioms, and lists of phrasal verbs and unfortunately, I quickly forgot them. I don't think I will ever use them in communication. It feels so mechanical. (S8's RP)

Participants revealed that anxiety and stress were experienced mostly during vocabulary exam times due to pressure to perform well and fear of forgetting newly learned vocabulary when taking the exam. For example, S6 highlighted that her stress levels are impacted by her goals for learning vocabulary, with more pressure felt when studying for a test. S4 noted,

I feel stress and anxiety before a test because of the large amount of vocabulary. When I review them, I forget their meanings quickly. Also, when a word has a similar meaning to another word, I worry that I won't be able to differentiate between them. On one occasion, we had to study almost 200 words. I used flashcards, but some words were similar. I'd constantly mix 'elusive' with 'illusive' effect and affect. The night before the test, I couldn't sleep, because I was constantly worrying about the exam the following day (S4's interview).

Participants described a constant fluctuation between their excitement to use new vocabulary and the anxiety of slipping up. S7 puts it succinctly, “I often feel unsure. I want to use the new words I learn, but I worry about saying them wrong and it makes me anxious. I want to speak more, but I'm afraid of making mistakes” (S7's interview).

The majority of the participants expressed frustration and disappointment, with some feeling a loss of confidence in their memory when they encountered a word, they studied but struggled to remember: S2 spoke of a moment during a classroom group activity, “We were discussing global problems, and I wanted to describe the earthquake that took place in Turkey and Syria a few months ago. But as the discussion deepened, I stumbled. My mind was trying to find the right vocabulary, but the words never came to me, and I was frustrated”.

The participants also felt frustrated when they had to learn a large amount of vocabulary in a short period of time. S5 wrote that,

Sometimes, it's overwhelming, especially with the tight deadlines. Last month, I had to learn around a hundred new terms for a test, and it was a lot to take in. I studied every night, but it felt like for every word I learned, I forgot two others. It's frustrating because you want to understand everything, but it feels impossible (S5's RP).

A few participants also reported feelings of embarrassment and shame in social situations, particularly in front of people who are more proficient in the language, when they make mistakes in speaking, or when they are not familiar with certain vocabulary that can help them express themselves effectively and accurately. S8 expressed,

Every time I struggle to find the right word in class, especially around people who speak more fluently, I feel this wave of embarrassment. It's like my mind goes blank. Just last session, I couldn't remember the word 'persistent,' a word we had just learned. It's moments like these, which deflate my confidence (S8's RP).

S4 gave an example of the challenges that she faced, not just in terms of acquiring new vocabulary, but also in coping with the emotional and psychological aspects of learning in a social setting.

In one class we were discussing environmental terms, and I blanked on 'sustainability.' Everyone else was able to pitch into the discussion, while I was scrambling through my notes. It's not just because I forgot the words, it's also because it felt as if everyone's eyes were on me struggling, which left me embarrassed (S4's interview).

These negative feelings of shame and embarrassment can impact learners' confidence and self-esteem and can also stem from the fear of being judged by others. S7 shared, "During our vocabulary lessons, I've faced moments of embarrassment and shame. The most shameful one was on one occasion, where I wanted to describe something as 'intricate' but used 'intimate' by mistake. The whole class burst out laughing". This embarrassment manifests both physically and psychologically, leading to social anxiety and a deep-seated fear of judgment from peers. Such experiences not only impact the learner's confidence at the moment but also foster a lasting sense of doubt about their abilities, creating a hesitancy to participate further. The participant's anticipation of future errors perpetuates this cycle of anxiety, significantly hindering their willingness to engage and practice, which is crucial for language development. S5 expressed,

Every time I mess up a word in class, I can feel my face getting hot with shame. It's like, in that moment, all I can think about is how others must be seeing me. This constant fear of judgment really lowers my self-esteem. I start to wonder if maybe I chose the wrong path, and it's hard to shake off that feeling. It's made me a lot more hesitant to speak up in class. I keep thinking, what if I mess up again
(S5's interview).

In conclusion, the vocabulary learning process, while crucial, can be riddled with negative emotions. These feelings often stem from internal pressures to perform, remember, and apply, as well as external factors like academic demands. Addressing these emotions can play a pivotal role in improving vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Implementing Strategies to Mitigate Negative Emotions

In addressing the challenges and negative emotions associated with the acquisition of new vocabulary, participants in this study adopted a variety of personalized strategies that were both innovative and reflective of their individual learning styles and needs. One prominent strategy involves the repetition and daily application of new vocabulary. For instance, S5 described her routine: *"I make it a point to use each new word in different sentences throughout the day, integrating these words into my daily conversations, emails, or journal entries"*. This method of consistent practice is crucial for embedding new vocabulary in memory, demonstrating its effectiveness in enhancing retention and confidence in using these words across different contexts.

Similarly, the strategy of contextual learning, where words are learned in relation to personal experiences, proved highly beneficial. S9's method of learning the word "enhance" by creating sentences like *"I try to enhance my mood by listening to music"* illustrates how linking new vocabulary to familiar situations can make the learning process more engaging and meaningful. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding and retention of new vocabulary by making it relevant to the learner's life.

Moreover, incorporating memory-stimulating exercises such as flashcards and word games emerged as a valuable strategy. S10 shared her experience of creating a matching game where *"one card has a new vocabulary word and the other its definition or a related image"*, turning the revision process into an enjoyable and interactive activity. The effectiveness of such exercises in enhancing vocabulary acquisition through active

engagement and recall highlights the potential of gamified learning strategies in improving vocabulary retention.

Creative learning methods, including writing humorous sentences and adding drawings, also played a significant role in vocabulary learning. For example, S6 learned the word 'obstinate' by "drawing a stubborn donkey and writing a sentence like *'The obstinate donkey refused to move, just like my little brother on cleaning day'*". This creative approach not only made learning more enjoyable but also facilitated easier recall and application of new words, underscoring the importance of creativity in overcoming the challenges of learning.

The importance of persistence and the influence of a supportive learning environment were also underscored by participants' experiences. S7's reflection, "*I cried a lot at the beginning...but after I worked hard, I memorized most of them and felt better*", alongside S3's account of overcoming embarrassment with the encouragement of teachers and classmates, highlights the critical role of emotional resilience and a nurturing educational context in successful language acquisition. From practical applications and contextual learning to creative methods and engaging exercises, these strategies not only cater to individual preferences but also demonstrate significant efficacy in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and emotional well-being. The emphasis on persistence and the support of an educational community further highlights the complex interplay between emotional resilience, effective learning strategies, and the overarching success in vocabulary learning and offers valuable perspectives for enhancing teaching practices and developing more effective vocabulary learning interventions.

Overall, the findings of this study emphasize that the emotional experiences of EFL learners when learning vocabulary encompass both positive and negative dimensions, highlighting their uniqueness and subjective nature. It's crucial to understand that emotions are not static entities existing in isolation but are dynamically shaped within the ecologies of space and time. These emotional responses are constructed through individuals' personal learning journeys, evaluations of learning events, interactions with contextual factors, and their conceptual understanding of the vocabulary's relevance, importance, and difficulty.

Discussion

The study's findings, in light of Barrett's TCE, illustrate how the emotional experiences of EFL learners are shaped by their personal learning experiences, appraisal of learning events, and contextual factors. Positive emotions like confidence, enjoyment, happiness, and pride were frequently experienced by learners when they successfully acquired new vocabulary,

found relevance in the learning material, or received positive reinforcement. The results are consistent with previous research which reported that learning new vocabulary can lead to feelings of accomplishment, confidence, and a sense of achievement ([Chang, 2007](#); [Masrai et al., 2022](#)). On the contrary, negative emotions like boredom, anxiety, stress, and embarrassment were linked to external pressures, such as exams, and internal factors like fear of judgment or failure. This aligns with Barrett's idea that emotions are not fixed responses but are constructed based on a complex interplay of various factors and exemplifies the fluid and context-dependent nature of emotional experiences.

The positive emotions were also informed by the participants' appraisal and conceptual knowledge of the importance of vocabulary in effective communication and their belief in the long-term value of learning new vocabulary for personal and professional development and this in turn motivated them to continue their vocabulary learning journey. The participants' imagined future states in the job market activated emotions that unlock motivation ([MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012](#)). If the L2 development progress is linked to the learner's ideal and ought-to self, motivation to acquire the target language is triggered to reduce the gap between the current and the future desired state ([Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009](#)).

The findings also resonate with TCE's view that emotions are not just reactions to immediate stimuli but also outcomes of how individuals interpret and predict situations based on past experiences. Short-term negative emotions occur when students fail or struggle to remember a word because they internalize a belief that they should be able to recall the vocabulary they have studied. Similarly, participants felt embarrassed and ashamed when making mistakes because they believed that they should be proficient in the language, or they may have feared being judged by others. The study by [De Saint Léger and Storch \(2009\)](#) showed that learners experience negative emotions such as hesitation, fear, and lack of confidence when they make mistakes while speaking in the target language. The participants' fear of negative evaluation from classmates diminished their confidence and ability to use complex vocabulary ([Dewaele, 2016](#); [Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002](#); [Subaşı, 2010](#)), and ultimately created negative emotional experiences.

The constructed nature of emotions also means that emotions are influenced by the situational context in which they are experienced. In this study, participants reported feeling more confident and comfortable using new vocabulary when they practiced it in supportive social interactions. This situational context allowed them to construct positive emotions of accomplishment and success, which in turn increased their motivation to continue learning new vocabulary. Previous studies have found that learners who engage in social interaction,

such as conversation and collaboration with peers, tend to have a more positive attitude toward vocabulary learning and are more likely to retain the words they have learned (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Having a supportive network plays a crucial role in helping individuals overcome negative emotions and improve their confidence and self-esteem. A study by Joe et al. (2017) showed that a positive classroom climate predicts students' feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn positively influences students' perceptions of the self and their emotional experiences.

TCE also suggests that emotions are not just influenced by the situational context but also shape the situational context in turn (Barrett, 2017a). The participants reported that their increased confidence in using new vocabulary led to better communication and more opportunities for success. This shows how the constructed nature of emotions can shape the social context in which they are experienced and in turn influence learners' behaviours and outcomes. Previous research has found that improvements in new vocabulary use, and the related increased confidence positively contribute to class discussions and participation in this otherwise challenging activity (De Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). On the other hand, anxiety and self-doubt can undermine learners' confidence and hinder their ability to use vocabulary effectively (Subaşı, 2010).

In line with the principles underscored by TCE regarding the pivotal role of students' agency in shaping their emotional landscapes, this study illuminated the participants as the true architects of their emotional experiences. Their reflection paragraphs vividly depicted a tapestry woven with struggles, triumphs, uncertainties, and occasional setbacks, demonstrating an ongoing process of reshaping and reconstructing emotional contours. This dynamic interplay was intricately woven with their evolving goals, the perpetual need for expanding vocabulary, diverse contexts, aspirational pursuits, interactions and relationships with educators and peers, and their subjective evaluations of each situation, as elucidated by Boiger and Mesquita (2012).

The divergence in emotional outlooks among participants became evident when examining their perspectives on mistakes in the learning process. Those who viewed mistakes as invaluable opportunities for learning and growth exhibited a markedly positive disposition toward vocabulary acquisition, in stark contrast to those who harboured feelings of shame or embarrassment in response to errors. This attests to the profound impact of individual perceptions on the emotional underpinnings of EFL vocabulary learning, a tenet in harmony with TCE's emphasis on the active role of individuals in constructing their emotional experiences.

Moreover, the strategies employed by students to mitigate negative emotions align with the TCE's emphasis on the active role of individuals in constructing their emotional experiences. Techniques like repetition, contextualization, memory exercises, and seeking social support demonstrate how learners not only respond to their emotional states but also actively work to modify them to enhance their learning experience. Similar strategies were reported by [Barcroft \(2009\)](#), [Driver \(2022\)](#), and [Fan \(2003\)](#). [Driver \(2022\)](#) points out that vocabulary learning strategies such as contemplating the content, reviewing new words, and comprehending emotional connections, are maximized when students implement them on their own.

A noteworthy dimension of this study is the participants' nuanced placement of emotions within their personal space and time ecologies. The space ecology encapsulates interactions within and beyond the L2 classroom, shaping the nature and intensity of emotions. Simultaneously, the temporal dimension influences vocabulary-related emotions along a positive-negative continuum. While immediate reactions to learning new words may lean toward negativity, the overarching emotional trajectory over time tends to be positive. This temporal aspect enriches our understanding of the intricate interplay between emotions, linguistic endeavours, and the temporal evolution of individuals' emotional landscapes, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on language learning and emotional experiences.

The findings indicated that these emotional experiences are both positive and negative and are also unique and highly subjective. Emotions should not be treated in isolation from space and time ecologies, as emotions are constructed based on personal learning experiences, appraisal of learning events, contextual factors, and conceptual knowledge of the relevance, importance, and difficulty of vocabulary. Emotions should be considered an integral component of the language learning process, reflecting a complex interplay of cognitive, environmental, and individual factors ([Dewaele, 2015](#)).

Conclusions

This study aimed to capture the emotional experiences of ten female EFL learners in a vocabulary-building course in a Saudi tertiary context, through the framework of Barrett's TEC. It's crucial to recognize the emotional dimensions of EFL vocabulary learning and proactively address learners' emotional needs. By recognizing the role of individual learning experiences, goals, expectations, and contextual factors, teachers can design vocabulary learning tasks and environments that promote positive emotional experiences. This may

involve providing opportunities for learners to connect new vocabulary to their own interests and experiences. This approach not only fosters a sense of relevance and significance to the learning tasks but also aids in diminishing factors that might engender negative emotional experiences, such as the pressure of examinations or high-performance expectations. Additionally, establishing a classroom atmosphere that is both safe and nurturing is paramount. In such an environment, learners are encouraged to embrace risk-taking and understand that making mistakes is a natural aspect of learning a foreign language. These strategies collectively contribute to not only improved vocabulary learning outcomes but also to a more engaging and enjoyable experience for learners.

Despite providing insights, the study's scope is limited by its small, gender-specific sample and reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias. These limitations suggest the need for further research to investigate a wider range of participants, including males and learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, incorporating mixed methods

(such as physiological measures or observational data alongside self-reports) could offer an even more robust understanding of emotional states. Future research should explore how different teaching strategies specifically impact both vocabulary acquisition and learner well-being, thereby informing more effective and emotionally attuned teaching practices.

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