

Students' Experiences of Using Word Walls to Support Vocabulary Development: A Qualitative Case Study of Fourth Graders in a Monastic School in Mandalay

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Abstract: Word Walls are widely used to support vocabulary development in primary classrooms, but they are rarely used or studied in Myanmar. This qualitative case study explored how Grade 4 students and their teacher in a monastic school in Mandalay, Myanmar, experienced the use of Word Walls for vocabulary learning. Ten students and one teacher were selected purposively and interviewed individually through semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed thematically. The students used the Word Wall to learn new words, recall forgotten words and spellings, and find words for reading, writing, and speaking, often without being prompted by the teacher. They liked its colors, alphabetical arrangement, and relevance to their lessons, but some found it difficult to see because it was placed too low. They suggested adding pictures, meanings, and colors and moving it higher. The teacher perceived the Word Wall as supporting vocabulary acquisition, retention, and use in speaking and writing, but found its preparation time-consuming. The findings suggest that Word Walls can support young learners' vocabulary learning when they are visible to all students, regularly updated, illustrated with pictures, and integrated into classroom activities.

Keywords: Word Walls, vocabulary development, qualitative case study, primary education, Myanmar

INTRODUCTION

Students' language learning happens well only when teachers can guide and facilitate them effectively. As a teacher, it is important to provide an effective learning atmosphere, which gives the required resources, and appropriate teaching methods that match with students' learning styles (Brown, 2007). The ultimate goal of language learning is to communicate successfully in this modern world. To meet this goal, students should master four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Since lexical and grammatical devices are the basic components of language learning, a language learner needs to improve both parts to be mastered at listening, speaking, reading and writing. In these two devices, the former is more important because it is impossible to speak, write or understand a language without knowing the vocabulary (Wilkins, 1972). Therefore, vocabulary plays a core part of a language (Nation, 2001).

For the sake of vocabulary improvement, Word Walls are a widely used teaching aid. A Word Wall is described as an ongoing, organized display of key words that provides visual reference for students throughout a unit of study of a term (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Since it is ongoing, the words can always be updated as the lesson proceeds. It can therefore assist students during reading and writing related to their lessons in the class. Serving as a visual aid, it can also help them to retain the vocabulary in the long run because it offers constant and regular visual exposure (Brabham & Villaume, 2001).

Previous studies of Word Walls have mostly examined their effects on vocabulary improvement and reading fluency, often among students with disabilities or students at different proficiency levels (e.g., Kish, 2018). Although Word Walls are widely used in other countries, they are rarely used in Myanmar schools, and little is known about how Myanmar learners experience them. This study therefore explored the experiences of Grade 4 students and their teacher in using Word Walls for vocabulary learning. Specifically, it examined the students' and the teacher's perceptions of Word Walls, the benefits and challenges of using them, and suggestions for improving their implementation.

The study was conducted in a monastic primary school because monastic schools provide learning opportunities for many children in Myanmar, including children from communities affected by conflict, displacement, poverty, and natural disasters (UNICEF Myanmar, 2025). Mandalay, where the school is located, was also struck by a devastating earthquake in 2025. Examining vocabulary learning in such a school can show how simple and accessible classroom resources may support children with diverse backgrounds and learning needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' experiences of learning vocabulary with Word Walls. A case study involves a detailed examination of a single case, such as an individual, group, organization, or community, in order to understand a phenomenon in its real-life setting (Alex, 2024). The case was one Grade 4 class,

treated as a single bounded case, with the individual students and the classroom teacher as embedded units of analysis.

The study was conducted in a monastic school in Mandalay, Myanmar, which was founded by the Myanmar Hua Yu Foundation shortly after the 2025 earthquake. Monastic schools in Myanmar are usually managed by Buddhist monks, operate under the Ministry of Education, follow the government curriculum, and offer basic education from the primary level upward (Ministries of the President's Office, 2025). The Grade 4 class was chosen because of its diversity: the students differed in age, educational experience, and English proficiency, and many came from remote areas affected by civil war, flooding, and earthquakes.

Ten of the 22 students in the class were selected through purposive sampling. The students had to be taught English with Word Walls and to have used Word Walls for at least one week, and they were chosen to represent different ages, educational backgrounds, places of origin, and levels of vocabulary proficiency. The classroom teacher also took part. Consent was obtained from the participants and the students' guardians before the interviews were recorded.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The questions addressed the participants' perceptions of Word Walls, their experiences of using them, the benefits and challenges of their use, and suggestions for improvement, and follow-up questions were asked when further clarification was needed. The interviews were conducted in the Myanmar language so that the participants could express their ideas freely, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis in six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Stuart, 2024). First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were assigned to meaningful words, phrases, and passages and recorded in Excel with the students' initials. Third, the codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourth, the themes were checked against the original data extracts, and themes with insufficient support or overlap were revised or removed. Fifth, each theme was defined and named. Finally, the findings were written up with interview extracts as supporting evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes identified from the students' and the teacher's interviews. For the student themes, the number in brackets is the number of coded references.

Table 1. Summary of the Findings

Category	Main Themes	Subthemes
Students' Perceptions of Word Walls	1. Use of Word Walls (14)	-Frequency of Use -Mode of Use
	2. Language Learning Support (27)	-Vocabulary Learning -Speaking Support -Literacy Support -Independent Learning
	3. Vocabulary Development (16)	-Vocabulary Growth and Learning Support -Vocabulary Retention Support

		-Daily Communication Support
	4. Positive Attitudes toward Word Walls (15)	-Positive Perceptions -Attractive Design -Accessibility
	5. Challenges and Limitations (4)	-Placement Issues
	6. Suggestions for Improvement (11)	-Content Enhancement -Design Enrichment -Placement Improvement
Teacher's Perceptions of Word Walls	1. Perceived Benefits of Word Walls	-Vocabulary Acquisition Support -Language Development
	2. Recommendations for Effective Word Wall Design and Implementation	-Design Development -Placement Issues -Regular Maintenance of Word Walls

Students' Perceptions of Word Walls

Theme 1: Use of Word Walls

Most students used the Word Wall several times a day (e.g., "I used it about five times a day," Student 3), while others consulted it only when needed: "I sometimes use it when I forget vocabulary" (Student 7). They used it mainly during reading, writing, and speaking activities, for example, when the teacher asked, "What is your favorite animal?" (Student 2), or when they talked with friends (Student 3). One student looked at it only when he happened to see it (Student 10). The frequency of use therefore varied with the students' needs, and the Word Wall served as a resource that they consulted when they needed vocabulary support.

Theme 2: Language Learning Support

The students saw the Word Wall as a resource for learning new words, remembering forgotten words, and applying vocabulary in reading, writing, and speaking. All participants reported that it helped them learn new vocabulary: "Um... it helps by expanding my knowledge... like, helping me learn more English words" (Student 2). They referred to it while writing (Student 5), reading (Student 2), and speaking with the teacher and their classmates: "I use it when I speak with my friends" (Student 3).

The Word Wall also supported independent learning, as the students consulted it without being told to do so by the teacher: "I just looked at it on my own" (Student 4). For some students, it replaced asking the teacher: "The Word Wall helped me get the forgotten vocabulary, especially because I'm afraid to ask the teacher" (Student 8). Others used it to check spelling: "Sometimes, when I suddenly can't remember how to spell a word, I look at it" (Student 6).

Theme 3: Vocabulary Development

Most students felt that the Word Wall helped them expand their vocabulary through continuous exposure to the displayed words: "It helps me get the words that I don't know" (Student 7). Several students used it to recall words they had forgotten, for example, "I come and look at it so that I won't forget them" (Student 8), although only one student explicitly

described it as helping them retain words. Some students also used the displayed words in everyday communication, such as when asking friends about animals (Student 1) or when visitors came and the teacher asked questions about the lesson (Student 9). These responses suggest that the Word Wall supported not only the learning of new words but also their recall and use.

Theme 4: Positive Attitudes toward Word Walls

All students expressed positive attitudes toward the Word Wall. They liked it because it contained words related to their lessons (Student 3) and allowed them to check words when they had forgotten their books (Student 1). Three students liked its colors and arrangement: "I like how they use different colors and put up the words in A-B-C-D order" (Student 8), which made the target words easier to find. One student also valued its accessibility: "It's easy to just look at the words" (Student 6).

Theme 5: Challenges and Limitations

The main challenge reported by the students was the placement of the Word Wall. Some students found it difficult to see the words from their seats because the display was placed too low: "I think it's a bit too low down, teacher" (Student 1). Poor placement may therefore limit the usefulness of the Word Wall for some students, despite their positive attitudes.

Theme 6: Suggestions for Improvement

The students suggested improving the content, design, and placement of the Word Wall. They wanted more words, pictures, and meanings: "I'd like to include words along with pictures and their meanings" (Student 10). They also suggested adding colors and shapes to make the display more attractive (Students 5, 8, and 9) and moving it higher so that all students could see it (Student 2).

Teacher's Perceptions of Word Walls

Theme 1: Perceived Benefits of Word Walls

The teacher used the Word Wall mainly to improve the students' vocabulary and believed that it helped them acquire and retain new words quickly: "This Word Wall really helps them acquire new vocabulary easily and in a short time." The teacher also observed that the students had started to use the displayed words in their speaking and writing: "Previously, when I asked them to do a writing task, I didn't really see them incorporating many new vocabulary words. Lately, though, whether it's during speaking or writing activities, I've noticed them using and integrating the words from this Word Wall."

Theme 2: Recommendations for Effective Word Wall Design and Implementation

The teacher recommended using bright colors to attract the students' interest, pairing words with pictures that illustrate their meanings, and placing the Word Wall where all the students can see it. The only challenge the teacher reported was the preparation time: "To make it clear and visible for the children on the Word Wall, I have to arrange the letters beautifully and use a variety of colors. So, I would say that the only challenge is time-consuming."

Discussion

The findings indicate that both the students and the teacher perceived the Word Wall as a useful aid for vocabulary learning. The students used it to learn new words, recall forgotten words, and find words for reading, writing, and speaking. This finding is consistent with Callella (2001), who noted that Word Walls give students constant exposure to target vocabulary, and with Stahl (2005), who emphasized that repeated encounters with words are needed for learners to remember them. Because the Word Wall was displayed continuously, the students could revisit the target words whenever they needed them, which may have supported retention. The finding also fits the view of Rupley et al. (1998) that vocabulary is acquired when learners discuss, elaborate on, and use words in multiple contexts.

From a sociocultural perspective, the Word Wall can be seen as a scaffold within the learners' zone of proximal development (Moore, 2011), as it offered visible support that helped the students complete language tasks they might not have completed alone. This support was evident in the students' independent use of the Word Wall, especially among those who were reluctant to ask the teacher. Similarly, Yates et al. (2011, as cited in Voigt, n.d.) described Word Walls as a resource that helps students spell and define unfamiliar words without consulting a dictionary or asking the teacher.

The students used the Word Wall for reading, writing, and speaking, and the teacher observed more use of new words in their speaking and writing. Montgomery (2007) distinguishes listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabulary; the students did not mention listening, but the teacher's modelled reading of the displayed words may have supported this type of vocabulary as well. The students' positive attitudes, which were linked to the colors, alphabetical arrangement, and relevance of the words, also matter because students who are interested in words are more likely to keep learning them (Graves, 2000). Kish (2018) likewise found that Word Walls are most effective when they are combined with meaningful activities and clear instructional practices.

The main challenges were the placement of the Word Wall and the time needed to prepare it. Callella (2001) also noted that classroom space can make Word Walls difficult to implement and that preparing and updating them takes teachers' time, and Manyak et al. (2014) stressed that effective vocabulary instruction requires adequate time and efficient, engaging routines. Some students used the Word Wall only when they happened to notice it, which suggests that Word Walls should be built into regular classroom activities rather than treated as decoration.

The participants' suggestions to add new words, pictures, meanings, and colors and to place the Word Wall where all students can see it are consistent with the principle that vocabulary instruction should provide multiple encounters with words in meaningful contexts (Graves, 2000; Manyak et al., 2014) and with the recommendation that Word Walls should be easy for students to interact with (Reading Rockets, 2018). These findings should be interpreted with caution, however, because they are based on interviews with ten students and one teacher in a single classroom and do not measure vocabulary gains directly.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Grade 4 students and their teacher in a monastic school in Mandalay perceived the Word Wall as a useful tool for vocabulary learning. The students used it to learn new words, recall forgotten words and spellings, and find words for reading, writing, and speaking, often on their own initiative. They liked its colors, alphabetical arrangement, and relevance to their lessons, but some found it difficult to see because it was placed too low. The teacher observed that the students used more new words in their speaking and writing, although preparing the display was time-consuming. Teachers who use Word Walls are therefore encouraged to place them where all students can see them, update them regularly, pair words with pictures and meanings, and build them into daily classroom activities. Because this study relied on interviews with ten students and one teacher in one classroom, future research could combine interviews with classroom observation and vocabulary tests and include more schools in Myanmar.

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