



## Iranian EFL Teachers' Attitudes Toward Semantic Mapping Strategy

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### Abstract

This study was an effort to shed more enlightening light on the current wave of teachers' attitudes toward using semantic mapping strategies for vocabulary teaching. To achieve the objective, this study examined Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes toward the semantic mapping strategy. What makes the current study noticeably different from the other studies is in the context of research, namely Iran. The participants were 66 school teachers in Shiraz. To collect the data, a questionnaire and interview were employed. The results indicated that the participants maintained corroboratory attitudes toward the semantic mapping strategy. The results of the study may have beneficial implications for both EFL teachers and researchers.

**Keywords:** "EFL Teachers", "Attitudes", "Semantic Mapping Strategy".



## Introduction

According to Gadallah [1], as a valuable gift given to people, language is their media to express ideas, thoughts, and cultures. Besides, within it, we can think deeply about the past and know the present and future. According to Hambali, "Talking about language means talking about vocabulary. It means that a language cannot be separated from vocabulary, since vocabulary is the basic component of language" [2, p. 5]. For both teachers and learners, to be aware of the importance of vocabulary, many attempts are required to teach and learn the language. In the early days of teaching and learning vocabulary enhancement, Candlin [3] stated that the central attention in language teaching is in relation to the organization of the curriculum, and assessment of educational resources. In addition, As O'rourke [4] pointed out vocabulary mastery is one of the factors to be master in English as a foreign language.

Valida [5] claimed that teaching vocabulary as the most important part of any language classroom enables language learners to understand and express themselves. Thus, English teachers should find a solution for teaching vocabulary by developing several effective methods and techniques. One of the most successful ways to increase students' vocabulary competency is through the identification of efficient language learning strategies (LLSs), followed by instruction on how to use them effectively [6]. As a result, vocabulary learning techniques, as a sub-category of learning strategies in general [7], are significant since acquiring vocabulary can be challenging for language learners. According to Gu [8], vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) are particular strategies employed by non-native learners to learn new vocabulary in the target language.

A semantic map or web is a visual depiction of information categories and their relationships to one another, helps learners to look at all the complicated and inter-related information which learners need to evaluate in order to recognize and organize their objectives for a meeting, presentation, or project; so, it stimulates creative thinking, which aids in problem-solving by encouraging students to consider all conceivable elements of an issue and numerous potential solutions [9]. Moreover, according to Hedgcock and Ferris, "a semantic map, a form of graphic organizer, leads learners to design a visual representation of relationships among words, meanings, images, and propositional content (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2008; Nation, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2005)" [10, p. 310].

This research aims to identify the teachers' attitudes toward semantic mapping strategy. In other words, this study mainly aims at answering the following research question:

- 1- What are the Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes toward semantic mapping strategy?

## Literature Review

Vocabulary learning is considered as the heart of language learning and use [11]. Other researchers also believed that students should be given more responsibility for vocabulary learning and teachers should help them develop special effective techniques [1]. Moreover, he argued that most vocabulary is learned through context, but that learning from context method works best for teaching strategies, not for teaching specific vocabulary [1]. Furthermore, vocabulary is not just a random collection of items, but it consists of a series of interrelating systems as well.

According to Zimmerman [12], changes have taken place in the approaches and methods of teaching and learning that had an effect on vocabulary teaching and learning strategies during the history of second language acquisition. For O'rourke [4], vocabulary teaching and learning provide a better understanding of what students hear and read in school as well as successful communication with others. In addition, teachers rely on some factors to utilize techniques for the students, and these factors are: the content, time availability and the value [13]. No doubt, students have more difficulty learning new words presented to them in semantic clusters than they do learning unrelated words [14]. Barnett states that "foreign and second language student's repeatedly claim that lack of vocabulary knowledge is major problem when reading" [15, p. 60]. Vocabulary learning



techniques for enhancing vocabulary learning are constantly being researched. Regarding vocabulary learning strategy, Gu and Johnson added that “although the use of a wide variety of strategies has been found to be characteristic of successful learners, the great majority of learners seem to favor some form of mechanical strategies such as repetition over deeper, more complex ones, such as semantic mapping, contextual guessing, and metacognitive strategies” [16, p. 643].

First, a formal definition can be given for the concept of semantic mapping which is defined as “a visual representation of knowledge or a picture of conceptual relationship” [17, p. 25]. Moreover, Sinatra et al. asserted that semantic mapping is “a graphic arrangement showing the major ideas and relationships in text or among word meaning” [18, p. 76]. Furthermore, Dilek and Yürük also stated that “semantic mapping requires the teacher and the learners to cooperate to build up a diagrammatic map which indicates the associations between vocabulary suggested by the teacher, vocabulary by the students, and vocabulary found in reading text” [19, p. 4].

### **Methodology**

In the present study, Iranian EFL teachers’ attitudes toward using semantic mapping were investigated. The mixed research method was applied in the research. The data were gathered through a questionnaire and interview to discover the aim. Through purposive sampling, the participants were selected from school teachers in Shiraz. To collect the quantitative data of the current research, a questionnaire was planned after the one used by Omer’s questionnaire on teachers’ perspectives on the use of semantic map strategies for enhancing vocabulary learning that was conducted in 2017. The validity of the questionnaire was checked through an expert check and its reliability was reported 0.908 [14]. This questionnaire consisted of 15 items about how the semantic grouping helps learners for better and easily remembering of the words; enabling students to retain the words for a long time while also pique their interest in learning the words on the list. . Statements in the questionnaire were graded on a five-point Likert scale including strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5). Besides, it was distributed to teachers both using the Google Form application and in paper form. To ensure that it is a validated instrument for the present study, it was checked through an expert check and some small modifications were applied to localize its aspects, then the reliability was checked through Cronbach’s alpha which was 0.837. Moreover, the qualitative data of the current research for the purpose of data saturation were gathered through an interview designed by the researcher with the consideration of the research’s aim and questionnaire. Moreover, regarding the validity of this instrument, it was checked through expert check by three university professors to be clear enough to measure what were supposed to measure. Besides, using intra-rater reliability, its reliability was checked. The participants were 12 males and females who were English language teachers, who nevertheless had no limitation to their age or years of work experience in this study. The interviews were managed using voice chats via social networking sites and each teacher was interviewed individually. Before the beginning of each interview session, a brief short explanation of semantic mapping was mentioned and each session approximately lasted about 20 minutes. Then, for the transcribing phase, in the first step, the recorded interviews were written. In the second step, to improve the credibility of the coding process, the responses were read and reviewed many times for finding and naming the recurring theme extracted through the interviews. In the next step, by using thematic analysis, the extracted themes were presented through a table, chart, and describing the attitudes of male and female teachers toward semantic mapping.

### **Results Discussion**

Regarding the quantitative phase of the study, the overall teachers’ responses to each statement of the questionnaire are presented in the following table:



**Table 1-The Overall Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire**

| No. | Statement                                                                                                                   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1   | Semantic Maps are a good teaching technique for reviewing vocabulary lessons.                                               | 18.2%          | 51.5% | 27.3%   | 3.0%     | 0%                |
| 2   | Semantic Maps are more systematic and well-organized.                                                                       | 6.1%           | 66.7% | 27.3%   | 0%       | 0%                |
| 3   | Semantic Maps are clear as words with the same parts of speech are grouped together.                                        | 18.2%          | 42.4% | 4.8%    | 4.5%     | 0%                |
| 4   | It is easier to remember words if they are grouped than learning unrelated words.                                           | 43.9%          | 27.3% | 28.8%   | 0%       | 0%                |
| 5   | Semantic Maps can help students remember the words grouped in semantic sets for a longer time.                              | 22.7%          | 47.0% | 9.1%    | 1.5%     | 19.7%             |
| 6   | The grouping helps students remember the related things.                                                                    | 31.8%          | 39.4% | 18.2%   | 10.6%    | 0%                |
| 7   | Semantic Maps assume that learners have a large vocabulary size, so it's more appropriate to use for higher level learners. | 18.2%          | 47%   | 28.8%   | 4.5%     | 1.5%              |
| 8   | Teachers should guide students to retrieve prior knowledge to understand new words if possible.                             | 33.4%          | 53%   | 3.0%    | 10.6%    | 0%                |
| 9   | Teachers should integrate Semantic Maps with listening, speaking, reading and writing activities.                           | 53%            | 47%   | 0%      | 0%       | 0%                |
| 10  | Semantic maps assume that learners can easily acquire a large vocabulary size.                                              | 9.1%           | 56.1% | 31.8%   | 3.0%     | 0%                |



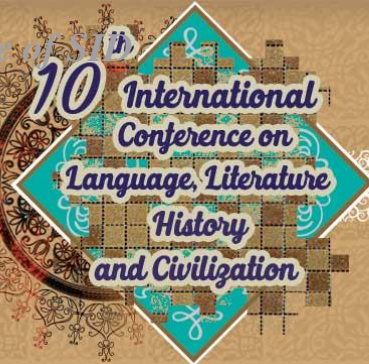
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|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 11 | Teachers should integrate Semantic Maps with other techniques. (i.e., thematic or rote related).                | 1.5%  | 39.4% | 45.5% | 0%    | 10.6% |
| 12 | As the words are not related to each other, it is difficult for students to remember the words for a long time. | 0%    | 33.4% | 40.9% | 21.2% | 4.5%  |
| 13 | Semantic Maps help the students retain the words better.                                                        | 22.7% | 45.5% | 30.3% | 1.5%  | 0%    |
| 14 | Semantic Maps help the students recall the words more easily.                                                   | 27.3% | 72.7% | 0%    | 0%    | 0%    |
| 15 | Semantic Maps improve the students' logic.                                                                      | 12.1% | 59.1% | 25.8% | 3.0%  | 0%    |

All in all, according to Table 2, the vast majority of teachers agreed that a semantic map is a good teaching technique for reviewing vocabulary lessons. This hypothesis is supported by 69.7% of the teachers. The result approved that semantic maps are an interesting technique that teachers can use in teaching vocabulary. These techniques incorporate a variety of other memory strategies such as grouping, imagery, and elaborating (associating). This technique is valuable for improving both memory and comprehension of a new word. The result in items 2, item 4, item 6 shows that almost 72.8% of the teachers think that semantic maps are more systematic and well organized, and regarding item 12, 33.4% of the teachers it easier to remember words if they are grouped than learning unrelated words. In addition to that they think that the grouping helps students remember the related things, so as the words are not related to each other, it is difficult for students to remember them for a long time. The analysis also shows some significant results regarding grouping and remembering words organized through semantic maps. Almost 60.6% of the teachers support item 3, 68.7% item 5, 65.2% item 10, 68.2% item 13, and 100% item 14. It is found that teachers believe that the same parts of speech are grouped together, and organized in semantic sets for a longer time it will be clear to students so that they are able to remember, retain, recall, and learn a large vocabulary size easily. When they were asked to show their response about the appropriateness of using semantic maps with other techniques, four skills, and higher students' levels, as shown in items 7, 8, 11, and 15, the vast majority of teachers think that it is appropriate to use semantic mapping with higher level learners who have a large vocabulary size so that teachers are able to retrieve their prior knowledge to understand new words. In addition to that 100% of teachers should integrate semantic maps with language skills and other vocabulary techniques.

Regarding the qualitative phase, deliberating the participants' answers to the interview questions and analyzing the collected data revealed some repeated themes. The most frequently recurring themes are considered based on the questions they report and represent in the following table:

**Table 2-Teachers' Attitude Toward Semantic Mapping Strategy**

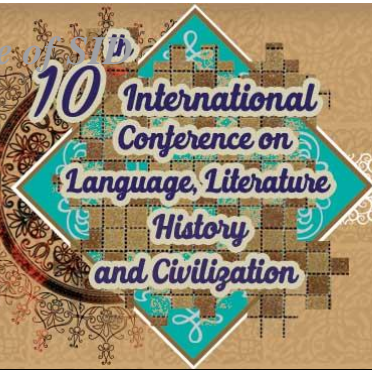
| Questions | Themes |
|-----------|--------|
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| <p>1-Have you ever encountered the term semantic mapping strategy?</p>                                                                             | <p><b>Theme 1:</b> The vast majority of teachers had a history of encountering this term.</p> <p><b>Theme 2:</b> A small percentage of teachers had never encountered the term semantic mapping.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p>2-Have you ever been trained on how to apply semantic mapping during the academic years?</p>                                                    | <p><b>Theme 1:</b> Most of the teachers claimed that they had been trained on how to apply semantic mapping during their academic years.</p> <p><b>Theme 2:</b> Some of the teachers announced that they had not trained academically to use semantic maps, but they had searched, read, and reviewed some websites and articles about it.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p>3-Do you consider this strategy a systematic and well-organized one? Why?</p>                                                                   | <p><b>Theme 1:</b> Most of the teachers approved that this strategy can be considered a systematic and well-organized one, as through using this strategy the data are divided into related objects for students.</p> <p><b>Theme 2:</b> Some of the respondents disapproved that this strategy can be considered a systematic and well-organized one. Although through using this strategy the data are divided into related objects for students, it can cause confusion to understand each vocabulary's meaning deeply.</p>                                                                                                        |
| <p>4-Do you think semantic maps should integrate into all four skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing as a good strategy? (Clarify)</p> | <p><b>Theme 1:</b> Most of teachers believed that the semantic mapping strategy is an appropriate one for integrating into all four skills and this helps them to have better teaching procedures. It makes the students more active as they use their prior knowledge to think and guess related things about a topic or concept and put them in shape.</p> <p><b>Theme 2:</b> Some of the respondents believed that it is appropriate for all four skills except listening. They claimed that it cannot be a good way to use it for listening to think and guess related things about a topic or concept and put them in shape.</p> |
| <p>5-Can you consider the semantic mapping strategy as a good one for learning and reviewing vocabulary and any information? (Clarify)</p>         | <p>The vast majority of the teachers proposed that semantic mapping strategy can help students to learn related words, phrases, and even sentences. Besides, they claimed that this strategy as a visual aid smooths the way for the students' vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy, and using this strategy, they get good feedback. Moreover, they mentioned that remembering the meaning of words, concepts, and phrases can be an easier process for the students due to the use of this strategy.</p>                                                                                                                          |



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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>6-In what way, do you think semantic mapping can be helpful and effective in vocabulary teaching and learning? (Clarify)</p>                                                             | <p>Most of the respondents claimed that this strategy as a visual aid, illustrates words, phrases, or sentences in a shape that makes remembering them easier. For instance, this strategy can be used to show a concept and its subcategories or its compare and contrast. if a text is about “technology”, using semantic mapping can be done in a way that the students brainstorm the words related to it, such as mobile, TV, computer, and some of their uses. Besides, they added that this strategy leads the students to the words more quickly and transfers them into long-term memory.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p>7-Can semantic mapping be useful in retrieving the prior knowledge of students to understand new words and related information better to acquire a larger vocabulary size? (Clarify)</p> | <p>Most of teachers proposed that semantic mapping can be useful in retrieving the prior knowledge of students to understand new words and related information better and acquire a larger vocabulary size. To exemplify, when we have the word “transportation” whether in a reading context or not, by asking the students and helping them to brainstorm (guess) what other words they remember about it, their vocabulary size will expand. As transportation is divided into land, water, and air. Also, each of them is divided into other levels; land into bus, bicycle, train, and cab; water into ship, boat, and cruise; air into airplane, helicopter, and jet. Thus, using semantic mapping, the students can learn the subcategories and related information about the word at a time, and it leads them to a better and easier retrieving their prior knowledge and joined them to the current knowledge and leads them to a larger vocabulary size.</p> |
| <p>8-Do you think the semantic mapping strategy is appropriate for all students’ levels? Why?</p>                                                                                           | <p>All the respondents agree with the opinion about the appropriateness of this strategy for all students’ levels. But they announced that it is better to present the words with their shape. Also, they claimed that this strategy makes vocabulary learning more fun and enjoyable and also increases the level of students’ self-confidence. The respondents also added that they think it is more used at language institutes to teach and categorize concepts, words, phrases, and even sentences in related groups in different shapes. They also pointed out that by using this strategy, the students learn many inputs at a time, retrieve what they already know, and lead them to better satisfaction with vocabulary learning.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

As the research questions were about the identification of the teachers’ attitudes toward semantic mapping strategy, this study compromised with some other studies. The results of the present study were compromised with what Gadallah [1] carried out with 35 Sudanese male and 35 Sudanese female teachers. The results demonstrated that most teachers agreed with the opinion of the effectiveness of semantic mapping and had a positive perception of the effect of semantic mapping on vocabulary learning. Also, the results of the present study are in line with what Bouafia [20] carried out with eight Algerian teachers. The results provided that teachers consider semantic mapping as an effective and successful technique for learners to retain vocabulary because it has certain benefits in which they declared that “it is a useful technique that can bring colors and valuable explanations and associations to finally be able to understand words”. So, it seems that teachers sustained the utility of semantic mapping in retaining vocabulary. Therefore, it is obvious that teachers have



positive attitudes toward the effectiveness of semantic mapping techniques in the learning and retention of vocabulary. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Omer [14], 100 Sudanese teachers, 40 males, and 60 females participated. The results indicated that the vast majority of both males and females have a positive perspective on the use of semantic maps strategies for developing vocabulary learning.

## Conclusion

This study sought to identify the teachers' attitudes toward semantic mapping strategy. The participants were 33 males and 33 females, aged 24-53, with a degree of qualification from B.A. to PhD., and years of experience from 1-27. Also, to be in detail, they were 33 male and 33 female school teachers. Regarding teachers' attitudes, the results indicated that both males and females have positive attitudes toward semantic mapping strategy for enhancing vocabulary learning. Here, teachers are recommended to continuously upgrade their knowledge of vocabulary learning and its strategies so that teaching problems can be solved more effortlessly. The findings of this study also showed that the semantic mapping strategy helped students to develop self-efficacy and motivation and gain new vocabulary introduced through this strategy more effectively.

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