

Article

Vocabulary Teaching in Refugee Children within the Context of the Greek Formal Education

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Abstract: The aim of the present study is to investigate vocabulary teaching in children with refugee backgrounds. The effectiveness of three vocabulary interventions—flashcards, pantomime, and use of contextual cues—is examined within the context of formal primary education in Greece. The improvement of the children’s vocabulary is also assessed in association with factors related to the students’ background as well as factors related to the words taught. Thirty-three pupils from the second to the sixth primary school grade attended the teaching interventions. Their first languages are Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish. According to the results, flashcards and pantomime significantly improve children’s second language vocabulary skills, while this finding does not apply to the intervention involving contextual cues. Age is found to play a role only in the latter intervention, while the effectiveness of no intervention was influenced by word category.

Keywords: refugees; primary school students; L2 vocabulary teaching; flashcards; pantomime; contextual cues



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1. Introduction

The current worldwide flow of refugees is numerically unparalleled and a large proportion of them are underage (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2022b). One of the countries greatly affected by the given situation is Greece (UNHCR 2018, 2022a). The educational needs of children with a refugee background remain a rather underexplored research area (see Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2015). The present study addresses this aspect by primarily investigating the efficiency of three vocabulary teaching techniques in a second language (L2) setting, i.e., flashcards, pantomime, and use of contextual cues, but also by exploring potential aspects that play a role in the given circumstances, namely the target words’ part of speech as well as pupils’ background characteristics. The study focused on refugee primary school children attending reception classes (RCs) in Greek public schools and coming from Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish backgrounds. In the remainder of this section, we discuss relevant literature regarding the education of refugee children (Section 1.1), L2 vocabulary teaching (Section 1.2), and factors influencing L2 vocabulary performance (Section 1.3). The second section covers the methodology of the current study, while in the following sections we provide a presentation (Section 3) and discussion of our findings (Section 4). The article closes with some major conclusions and implications (Section 5).

1.1. The Education of Refugee Children

When accessing education, a number of factors related to the pre- or after-migration stage could potentially interfere with instruction. For instance, refugee children are usually characterised by almost zero or interrupted formal schooling, which may entail illiteracy or low literacy in the first language (L1) and a general lack of understanding of school environments (Brown et al. 2006). Additionally, the refugee experience may lead to trauma, anxiety, and wellbeing issues that could negatively affect children on an academic level and

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particularly on L2 acquisition (Fraine and McDade 2009; Paradis et al. 2022). In the new classroom environment, the children also face certain barriers as the instruction provided to them is usually inappropriate and their engagement in the lesson is limited (Dryden-Peterson 2015). As a result, school achievement can be rather low. However, refugee children are not the only ones who face difficulties. Studies with teachers highlight the challenges they experience given their inadequate preparedness to address their students' needs who have a refugee (e.g., Yaşar and Amac 2018) or generally an L2 background (Bosch et al. 2022). Consequently, teaching may be impeded.

Greece is one of the countries that has seen an incomparable influx of refugees. More than one million migrants and refugees have arrived since 2015, and the proportion of children almost every year exceeds one-third of the total population (UNHCR 2018, 2022a). Evidence regarding refugee children in Greece indicates major challenges on an educational level. More specifically, they show low language skills in Greek (Jalbout 2020; Olioumtsevitse et al. 2022), while their dropout rates are noteworthy and school attendance is not constant (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children 2017). Given the above, research in developing teaching interventions and measuring their effectiveness is deemed valuable, so that ultimately refugee students' language skills are improved and teachers help them feel more anchored to their school environment.

1.2. Vocabulary Teaching in a Second Language

One of the main foci in L2 teaching research addresses the effectiveness of teaching techniques for language learning. Vocabulary is a central component of language learning (Decarrico 2001) and when it comes to vocabulary teaching, there are two main aspects: vocabulary selection and teaching techniques.

With regard to vocabulary selection, some major criteria have been documented in the literature (see Richards 2001; White 1988 for reviews). The ones that have been taken into account in the present study are the following: A first criterion regards the range of use. Based on this, words that are likely to appear in a greater number of contexts should be prioritised in teaching. A second criterion is that of learnability that encompasses, among others, the notions of demonstrability and center of interest. Demonstrability refers to the concreteness or abstractness of a word, with the former facilitating understanding. In turn, the center of interest refers to the thematic area (e.g., animals or colours) in which the words to be taught lie and which should be selected based on the interests of the students.

When it comes to teaching techniques, these can be classified as explicit or implicit (e.g., Khamesipour 2015). In the current study, we employed three explicit interventions: flashcards, pantomime, and the use of contextual cues. Information is provided below regarding each one of the three vocabulary interventions, highlighting the reasons why these three techniques were included in the current study and presenting previous relevant empirical research. However, it is crucial to note that there has not been extensive research attention on elementary education learners of vocabulary (for relevant assertions see Arvizu 2020).

Flashcards consist of a card with a picture and word-related information, providing visual and written aids as well as the possibility for a direct connection between a word and its meaning. The involvement of visual aids is often suitable especially for concrete words (Gairns and Redman 2000), while abstract words may be more challenging to depict. Let us think of examples of the words 'table' or 'run' as opposed to the words 'patience' or 'hope'. Nevertheless, in general, flashcards are rather advantageous, as they greatly facilitate comprehension while maintaining the students' interest in the lesson (Sitompul 2013). Moreover, they are easy to use and games can be designed based on flashcards (Haycraft 1978), they can also be taken by the students outside the classroom and thus be exploited anywhere and anytime (Komachali and Khodareza 2012). Studies have shown that flashcards are appropriate for primary school pupils at an elementary language level and effective in enhancing their vocabulary skills (e.g., Alipour Madarsara et al. 2015).

Pantomime is the process of imitating and acting out and provides the possibility to convey several meanings solely through gestures and corporal movements. Although pantomime comes from the theater (Żywicznyński et al. 2018), it can be exploited during vocabulary teaching as well. Gestures allow learners to comprehend the meaning of words based on an additional type of perception, meaning the body, and in turn learning is achieved (Mayer et al. 2015). Gestures can help learners better remember words, which can apply to both concrete (e.g., cut) and abstract (e.g., enjoy) words, as well as verbs and nouns, even though concrete words may be generally embodied to a greater extent given the sensorial experiences they are associated with (Macedonia and Knösche 2011). Furthermore, using movement seems to be an effective way to draw the attention of students with different characteristics (Skoning 2010). Although the gains through pantomime are rather unmapped, gestures and drama activities that encompass acting out have been found to effectively promote vocabulary learning and retention in primary education learners (Andrä et al. 2020; Demircioğlu 2010).

Regarding the use of contextual cues, it entails the understanding of unknown words in a text based on other adjacent words or phrases. Some of the main arguments in favour of context-based activities are that they contribute to understanding how words are used and enhance reading skills (see Huckin and Coady 1999 for a review). However, for inferencing skills to be efficiently developed, explicit training is needed (Nation 2013). Notably, L2 learners usually need to confront a considerably larger number of unknown words, which amplifies the necessity to receive relevant training (Nagy 1997). However, potential reasons for ineffective vocabulary learning within a context may be driven by the following issues (Nation 2013): there may be crucial literacy and language limitations that could hinder learning, and incremental training and systematic engagement are required for learners to improve their inferring skills. Findings on the effectiveness of contextualised methods for vocabulary learning in young learners are limited. Although there may be some discrepancies, they generally seem to highlight the advantage of providing deliberate support and guidance to young learners with limited proficiency skills for more optimal results (Arvizu 2020; Sun and Dong 2004).

In general, teaching should be adjusted based on “those students in that situation” (Cook 2008, p. 10). However, the effectiveness of the above-presented techniques in refugee populations is still rather understudied. Studies hitherto conducted with migrants and refugees are largely qualitatively-based, and although they provide significant insights into beneficial teaching techniques and tools, they lack a systematic and thorough investigation of L2 vocabulary teaching (e.g., see Davis 2012 for a qualitative study with migrant and refugee young learners, who attend lessons in which, among others, they are engaged in activities aiming to understand words’ meaning from context).

1.3. Factors Affecting L2 Vocabulary Performance

An objective of the present study was also to explore factors that possibly play a role in the effectiveness of the target teaching techniques as well as the vocabulary gains students show after attending those methods. The first factor that we manipulated in this study was the part of speech of the words taught through the interventions, investigating whether a teaching technique boosts the learning of a particular word class. Secondly, we addressed a group of factors related to the background of the refugee children, in terms of whether pupils with specific characteristics show greater vocabulary improvement after attending the interventions.

Concerning the first matter we focused on, an important issue in vocabulary learning is the part of speech of a given word. Certain word classes seem to be more difficult to acquire compared to others, with nouns being the easiest word class, verbs and adjectives being somewhere in the middle of the continuum, and adverbs being the hardest class (as it is summarised by (Laufer 1990)). Concerning nouns and verbs, the word classes we focus on in this paper, empirical evidence from studies employing a picture naming task in bilingual children has shown better performance in object naming compared to action

naming (Kambanaros et al. 2013). According to an additional error analysis reported in the study, the authors suggested “representation differences underlying the two classes” (p. 195). In addition, a question that could be raised is whether the setting nouns and verbs are learned in (i.e., the teaching intervention in this case) can differentially affect their learning.

Regarding the set of variables related to the pupils’ background that were taken into account in the current study—such as general L2 proficiency, age, period of enrolment in the school, literacy background, and L2 use—there are relevant studies in the literature providing important insights. Firstly, proficiency has been documented to play a crucial role in vocabulary gains, as adolescent learners with higher listening proficiency show greater gains through a listening passage-based intervention (Zhang and Graham 2020), and adult learners with higher proficiency skills seem to be more successful in word meaning inferencing (Haynes 1984). In the present study, we thus aimed to explore whether general proficiency would be related to greater vocabulary gains through any of the target interventions. Concerning the factor of age, it has been supported in the literature that the earlier the exposure to an L2 within a school environment the better (Gawi 2012). At the same time, it has been also formerly shown that children who are exposed to the L2 at a later age during childhood have higher vocabulary skills, and a possible explanation for this may be the fact that older children are cognitively more mature compared to younger children (Golberg et al. 2008). Therefore, in our study, the objective was to examine whether age would influence the extent to which children’s L2 vocabulary would be improved through a teaching intervention. Lastly, there are studies showing that, firstly, the L2 input young learners receive at home while reading books can have a significant effect on the development of L2 word knowledge, and secondly, that L2 vocabulary skills are positively associated with the period in school (Cheung et al. 2018). Contrary to those findings, there are also previous results suggesting that L2 use at home does not have a positive impact on L2 vocabulary skills (Golberg et al. 2008). In our study, we explored whether more extensive input in L2 Greek driven by various settings, namely school attendance, engagement in literacy activities, and broad language use, would lead to greater vocabulary enhancement for the students attending the interventions at hand, or not.

1.4. Research Questions

The present study aims to bridge the above-mentioned gaps in the literature and has the following research questions:

- (1) Can flashcards, pantomime, and the use of contextual cues effectively improve the L2 vocabulary skills of primary school students with a refugee background?
- (2) Does the effectiveness of a teaching technique differ based on the class of words taught?
- (3) Is there a relationship between the improvement of the children’s vocabulary and their background characteristics?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Thirty-three pupils (15 females; 18 males) from five school units of primary education in the region of Thessaloniki (Greece) participated in the study. They were between the ages of approximately 7 and 13 years (mean age: 10.01¹, SD: 1.46, range: 7;4–12;6) and attended RCs² for a period of 8.09 months on average (SD: 5.6, range: 1–20). As RCs include students from different grades, the students in the current study were overall in the second (N: 5), third (N: 10), fourth (N: 5), fifth (N: 7), and sixth (N: 6) grades. None of the children had a known history of language delay or impairment. The parents of all children gave informed consent, and all children gave oral assent. The research obtained approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (protocol code: 183526/2019) and the Greek Ministry of Education (protocol code: Φ15/167380/Δ1/177344).

The children completed a language history questionnaire that included information on their language and literacy profile (adapted from Dosi 2016). Kurdish was the most frequent

L1 of the students (N: 20). The Arabic- and Farsi-speaking children were considerably fewer (N: 4 and N: 6, respectively), while three children had two L1s, i.e., Farsi and Kurdish or Arabic and Kurdish. There were questions regarding current language use that were addressing various contexts, such as telling the time, playing games, or speaking with family and friends. Following the children's responses to all questions, they would receive a score up to 37, and the greater the score the greater the language use. Based on the results, the L2 use seemed to be overall relatively restricted (M: 14.64/37, SD: 5.31, range: 4–30.5). There were also questions concerning the pupils' involvement in L2 literacy activities in the past and in the present. As expected, none of the children reported to be involved in L2 literacy activities in the past. When it comes to the present, 6.06% of the children stated that family members and others read Greek books to them only sometimes, and solely 12.12% of the students stated that it occurs often. Concerning stories or fairy tales, only 3.03% of the children stated that their parents currently read texts to them in Greek. Based on the pupils' responses, they could receive a maximum score of 4, with a low score indicating a more restricted engagement and a greater score indicating a more extensive engagement in literacy activities. The score for engagement in the past was always 0, and thus this was not further taken into account. The score for engagement in the present varied among pupils, yet it was overall remarkably limited (M: 0.33/4, SD: 0.78, range: 0–3).

2.2. Material

2.2.1. Background Tests

Before attending the teaching interventions, and except for the aforementioned language history questionnaire, all students completed two background tests. Firstly, the Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices (Raven 2008) was administered, which is the most widely used non-verbal intelligence test of abstract reasoning. Participants are presented with a matrix whose pattern is incomplete and must select from a set of six possible answers the one that successfully complements the pattern.

The Diapolis placement test (Tzevelekou et al. 2013a) was also employed, which is designed for primary and secondary school learners who learn Greek as an L2. There are four versions of the test based on the learners' age and expected L2 proficiency, with each one testing oral comprehension, written comprehension, and written production. The expected L2 proficiency levels are A1, A2, B1, and B2, so, as indicated, the test has been developed following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2018).

Information from the above-presented tasks along with the questionnaire were employed to explore whether factors related to children's background would correlate with the improvement of their vocabulary.



2.2.2. Teaching Interventions

Three vocabulary interventions were designed and employed in the RCs: (i) flashcards, (ii) pantomime, (iii) use of contextual cues. For all interventions, the broad thematic domain was 'environment and nature'; a topic commonly addressed during primary education and usually interesting across all grades. Apart from being part of this thematic domain, the words taught in the interventions were selected based on the word lists for language learning Kelly (Charalabopoulou and Gavrilidou 2012) to make sure that the words would agree with the children's expected L2 proficiency level. Previous research has shown that students attending Greek RCs have a proficiency level between the levels A1 and B2 (Tzevelekou et al. 2013b). Another criterion for word selection was the words' appearance across textbooks of different topics. Based on the word frequency database HelexKids (Terzopoulos et al. 2017), the dispersion index of the forms taught was set to at least 0.4 for verbs and 0.5 for nouns. If a word did not meet the given criteria, its appropriateness was attested based on its existence in a series of books, called Margarita (e.g., Adamidis et al. 2006), which has been specifically created for primary school L2 learners of Greek at the beginner and intermediate levels. Based on the main criteria of language level and range of

use, we selected fifteen nouns and fifteen verbs. Five nouns and five verbs were included in each intervention type (see all target-words per intervention type in Table A1).

The flashcards intervention had the theme ‘weather phenomena’. The pupils were provided with cards with a picture on one side and the written form of the target-word on the other. The images used were retrieved from The Multilingual Picture databank (Duñabeitia et al. 2018) and the stock photo agency iStock/Ideal Image. All nouns on the flashcards were provided in their default form (i.e., nominative singular), while all verbs were provided in present tense and third-person singular. Examples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Example material for the flashcards intervention.

	Picture	Noun	Picture	Verb
Pair 1		to ‘çon-i the-NEUT.NOM.SG. snow-NEUT.NOM.SG. ‘the snow’		ka’lipt-i cover-PRES.3RD.SG. ‘(he/she/it) covers’

The pantomime intervention had the theme ‘human–nature interaction’. During each session, the students were given a list of the target-words. Every time the researcher would make a movement, the students would have to guess which word from the list was presented. The movements employed were predetermined, so that there were no dissimilarities among the teaching sessions that took place across the school units. All words on the list were provided in their default form. Two example words that were taught through pantomime are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Example material for the pantomime intervention.

	Noun	Verb
Pair 1	to vu’n-o the-NEUT.NOM.SG. mountain-NEUT.NOM.SG. ‘the mountain’	ane’ve-n-o go up-PRES.1ST.SG. ‘(I) go up’

The texts employed during the intervention focusing on contextual cues were novel. The theme of the first text was ‘clean beaches’, while that of the second text was ‘forest destruction’. Both topics were approached in a way suitable for primary school students. The unknown–known words ratio was approximately one unknown word within ten words, so that the overall length of each text would also match the pupils’ cognitive and linguistic abilities. Each target-word was marked in a different colour, with its useful contextual information being underlined with the corresponding colour. The target-words in the text appeared in non-default forms in accordance with the morphosyntactic properties of their context. An indicative part of one of the target-texts is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Example material for the contextual cues intervention.

Topic	Text
forest destruction	The elephant is an animal and lives in Sumatra. In Sumatra there are many plants , trees, flowers and more. Every day ...

2.2.3. Intervention-Specific Pre-/Pro-Tests

In order to reveal whether there was a considerable improvement in the students’ vocabulary mastery, short tests were administered before each intervention type and immediately after. The tests across all three interventions were similar in structure. Both the pre-

and the post-tests included two exercises, one matching and one sentence completion. In the matching exercise addressing the flashcards and the contextual cues interventions, each word had to be matched with the phrase that best described it, whereas in the pantomime tests it had to be matched with the picture that best depicted it³. The images used in the pantomime pre- and post-test were again retrieved from The Multilingual Picture databank (Duñabeitia et al. 2018) and the stock photo agency iStock/Ideal Image. Each pair of pre- and post-test included only the words taught through the given intervention type. As every intervention aimed at ten words, each exercise included five target-words plus three distractor-words. Examples of all exercise types are provided below.

(1) Word-phrase matching exercise from a flashcards test:

Match those that go together.
 lightning He/She/It gives a lot of light.
 cloud A line of light in the sky.
 shines It is white.

(2) Word-picture matching exercise from a pantomime test:

Match those that go together.

mountain



swim



jump



(3) Sentence completion exercise from a contextual cues test:

Write the word that best fits.
 lives, are reduced, clean
 In winter the flowers . . .
 Hamed . . . in Greece.
 Every Saturday we all . . . the house together.

2.3. Procedure

Every intervention type was completed within four school hours equally distributed over two weeks (i.e., two consecutive school hours per week). For each intervention type, a protocol was created and followed across all schools. The protocols consisted of phases that were consistent across all intervention types and are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Main phases of the two-hour sessions across all intervention types.

	1st Two-Hour Session	2nd Two-Hour Session
Phase 1	Pre-test: 20 min	Theme introduction: 5 min
Phase 2	Theme introduction: 5 min	Words instruction: 40 min
Phase 3	Words instruction: 40 min	Closing activity: 10–15 min
Phase 4	Closing activity: 10–15 min	Post-test: 20 min

Some additional common characteristics across all three interventions were the following: Each two-hour session aimed to teach five words and the students were introduced to the given theme with the presentation of either an image (retrieved from iStock/Ideal Image) or another object. Additionally, the use of the students’ L1s was encouraged. Trans-

lators provided translations of all target-words into the students' L1s. The L1 involvement could allow the formation of links with the L2 and motivate the students (Dakin 2012; Nation 2013), while the translated material could allow the researcher to confirm the provision of an accurate translation and the effective instruction of the target-words. In the interventions of flashcards and pantomime, certain nouns and verbs could be paired up to form main clauses together with the students (see Zhang 2009 for some evidence on vocabulary gains through the employment of example sentences in adult learners).

During the flashcards intervention, specifically, the pupils were first instructed to look at the picture of a card and motivated towards a discussion regarding what was depicted. Then, they were instructed to read the word aloud to practice the pronunciation, while the researcher enunciated it confirming or correcting the students' pronunciation. After presenting one noun and one verb, the students were asked to think of a sentence including both and were encouraged to write it on their flashcard. The fifth word of each session would form a sentence by itself. The instruction phase was followed by a game in which the students were asked to orally recall each word upon the presentation of its corresponding image. Different versions of the game maintained the objective of providing numerous opportunities to practice the knowledge that was acquired.

In the pantomime intervention, the words listed on the paper were first read aloud by randomly selected students. As in the flashcards intervention, the researcher enunciated the words, confirming or correcting the students' pronunciation, and then exemplified the procedure of the activity. When the pupils provided an erroneous guess, the researcher informed the students and encouraged them to make another guess. When the pupils successfully uncovered a noun and a verb, the researcher used the same movements in a sequential order, prompting the pupils to create a sentence that joins the two words and to write it on the paper. The completion of the instruction was again followed by a game. The researcher would say aloud one of the target-words and the students would need to show this word with a movement. Several repetitions of the game offered consolidation and creativity.

During the contextual cues intervention, every text was first read aloud three times to attain familiarisation. The first two readings were done by the researcher, while an initially concurrent involvement of theatrical movements using physical objects and drawings rendered the text more appealing. There was yet no reference to target-words or useful contextual cues to avoid facilitation in understanding. The final reading was done by the students, each one taking a turn and reading a small fragment, while the researcher corrected reading when necessary. Afterwards, the pupils were asked to find the marked words in the text (i.e., 'plants' in Table 3) and the underlined phrases that matched in color (i.e., 'trees, flowers and more' in Table 3). The researcher wrote the target and the underlined words on the board in two columns and explained that the latter set would help them guess the meanings of the former. They were asked to make guesses, while the researcher would provide predefined examples. The last phase of the teaching session was here a conversation among the students regarding the situation in their countries of origin and in Greece in aspects related to the text's theme. The pupils were hence encouraged to talk about their home countries and exchange information in the class.

2.4. Data Analysis

First, correlation tests were applied in the whole data set to investigate potential effects of the interventions' design on children's performance. On one hand, the target-variables were the words' language level and range of use. On the other hand, post-intervention improvement in a word was defined as the arithmetic difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores that were assigned to it, denoting students' corresponding performance.

Afterwards, the data for every intervention type were analysed separately. As school attendance was not consistent, some students were absent during the first (i.e., pre-test) or the second session (i.e., post-test) of a given intervention type. In such cases, their data

were excluded from the analysis, and the final sample size was 31 children for flashcards, 28 for pantomime, and 27 for the use of contextual cues. The data were analysed on a descriptive and statistical level, addressing individual differences as well as overall effects of intervention and word class respectively. In case of the statistical analyses, in order to explore the effects of intervention, pupils’ pre-tests scores versus post-tests scores were compared, whereas, in order to investigate effects of word class, noun improvement (i.e., calculated by subtracting the children’s pre-test score from their post-test score in nouns) versus verb improvement (i.e., calculated by subtracting the children’s pre-test score from their post-test score in verbs) was compared. Correlation tests were then employed to identify potential relationships between the degree of children’s vocabulary improvement (i.e., calculated by subtracting the children’s pre-test score from their post-test score) and a series of background factors (i.e., performance on the background tests, namely Raven’s test and Diapolis placement test, age, period of enrolment in the school, literacy background, and L2 use).

The statistical analysis (along with the creation of the figures below) was run in R (RStudio Team 2018), and specifically with the RStudio Version 1.2.1335. When applied, parametric or non-parametric tests were employed, meaning *t*-tests or Wilcoxon tests—based on the (non-)normality in the data—and Spearman correlation tests. The significance level for all tests was set to $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

The results from the background tests showed that all children performed within the typical range (American Psychiatric Association 2000) of the Raven’s test (M: 105.52, SD: 16.25, range: 72–141). The results from the Diapolis Placement test revealed low proficiency skills in L2 Greek. Almost half of the children fell into the A1 level (N: 15) and the rest of them into the A0 level (N: 18), while the average score achieved was 7.88/15 (SD: 4.27, range: 1.3–14). As previously mentioned, the placement test taps into the skills of oral comprehension, written comprehension, and written production, with more detailed results indicating a lower performance on the latter two skills (oral comprehension: M: 3.42, SD: 1.62, range: 0–5; written comprehension: M: 2.39, SD: 1.72, range: 0–5; written production: M: 2.06; SD: 1.39, range: 0–4.4).

Correlation tests examined whether words’ language level and range of use were associated with the degree of post-intervention improvement in a word regardless of the intervention type. The absence of significant correlations (all $ps > 0.05$) indicated that the acquisition of a word did not depend on those factors. In the remainder of this section, we present the results for each intervention separately.

3.1. Flashcards

A comparative–descriptive analysis of the pre- and post-tests of the pupils who participated in both flashcards sessions showed that the majority of them scored higher on the post-test compared to the pre-test (N: 17), while considerably fewer pupils scored lower than (N: 7) or the same (N: 7) as on the pre-test. A descriptive analysis of each test separately was also informative in terms of individual differences. Regarding the pre-test, most of the students achieved a score between zero and three, while the number of students scoring above five in the post-test increased (see Table 5).

Table 5. Descriptive analysis for the flashcards intervention.

	Pre-Test: Number of Pupils	Post-Test: Number of Pupils
Score range 0–3	22/31	18/31
Score range 4–7	8/31	12/31
Score range 8–10	1/31	1/31
Score ≥ 5	5/31	9/31

The mean score of the students’ achievement in the pre-test was 2.45 (SD: 2.38, range: 0–10), and that of the post-test was 3.39 (SD: 2.19, range: 0–10) (see Figure 1). The difference between the two tests reached statistical significance based on a paired samples Wilcoxon test ($V = 77, p = 0.04$). Through a paired samples t -test, we further explored whether pupils’ vocabulary skills improved more in nouns (mean improvement: 0.71, SD: 1.57, range: –2–4) compared to verbs (mean improvement: 0.23, SD: 1.43, range: –4–3) after attending the intervention (see also Table 6) and found that although numerically the performance on nouns seemed to be better, this was not confirmed statistically ($p > 0.1$). Lastly, correlation tests between the degree of children’s vocabulary improvement and the above-presented background factors showed no significant correlations (all $ps > 0.05$).

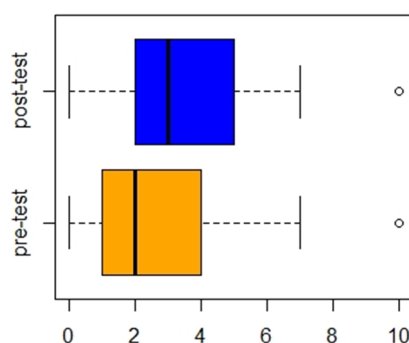


Figure 1. Boxplot graph representing the pupils’ scores in the pre- and post-test of the flashcards intervention. Note: There was one outlier that performed at ceiling in both the pre- and the post-test.

Table 6. Pupils’ performance on nouns and verbs for the pre- and post-test of the flashcards intervention.

	Mean Score in Nouns	Mean Score in Verbs
Pre-test	1.39 (SD: 1.36, range: 0–5)	1.06 (SD: 1.26, range: 0–5)
Post-test	2.10 (SD: 1.47, range: 0–5)	1.29 (SD: 1.19, range: 0–5)

3.2. Pantomime

A comparative–descriptive analysis of the pupils’ pre- and post-tests for the pantomime intervention revealed that the majority performed higher on the post-test than on the pre-test (N: 19), while only a small number of them achieved a lower (N: 4) or an undifferentiated (N: 5) score. A descriptive analysis of only the pre-test showed that roughly an equal number of pupils scored within the ranges of zero–three and four–seven. After the intervention, considerably more students advanced to the higher score ranges attaining at least five (see Table 7).

Table 7. Descriptive analysis for the pantomime intervention.

	Pre-Test: Number of Pupils	Post-Test: Number of Pupils
Score range 0–3	11/28	7/28
Score range 4–7	13/28	16/28
Score range 8–10	4/28	5/28
Score ≥ 5	12/28	19/28

A Wilcoxon signed rank test (i.e., paired samples Wilcoxon test) comparing students’ test scores before (M: 4.32, SD: 2.58, range: 0–10) and after the intervention (M: 5.75, SD: 2.49, range: 2–10) showed a significant post-intervention increase in their vocabulary mastery ($V = 22, p < 0.001$) (see Figure 2). Further analyses employing another paired samples Wilcoxon test revealed no significant effect of word class in the pupils’ performance ($p > 0.1$), with

students showing a similar improvement in nouns (mean improvement: 0.64, SD: 1.10, range: $-2-2$) and verbs (mean improvement: 0.79, SD: 1.42, range: $-3-3$) (see also Table 8). Testing whether the degree of children’s vocabulary improvement was related to the target background variables, multiple correlation tests indicated no significant correlations (all p s > 0.05).

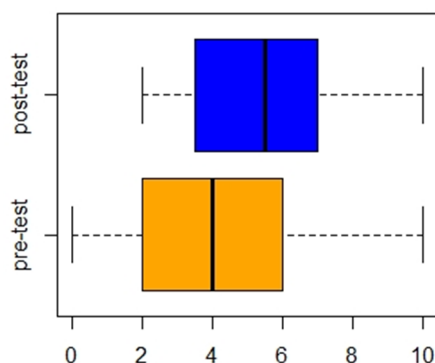


Figure 2. Boxplot graph representing the pupils’ scores in the pre- and post-test of the pantomime intervention.

Table 8. Pupils’ performance on nouns and verbs for the pre- and post-test of the pantomime intervention.

	Mean Score in Nouns	Mean Score in Verbs
Pre-test	2.54 (SD: 1.53, range: 0–5)	1.79 (SD: 1.42, range: 0–5)
Post-test	3.18 (SD: 1.22, range: 1–5)	2.57 (SD: 1.48, range: 0–5)

3.3. Use of Contextual Cues

A comparative–descriptive analysis of the students’ pre- and post-tests for the contextual cues intervention showed that almost half of them scored better on the post-test (N: 13); not an appreciably larger number than those who scored worse (N: 10). The number of students whose score was the same in both tests was limited (N: 4). A descriptive analysis of the pre- and the post-test separately indicated that although some of the pupils improved their post-intervention performance attaining a score above four, most of them fell within the score range of zero-three in both tests (see Table 9).

Table 9. Descriptive analysis for the contextual cues intervention.

	Pre-Test: Number of Pupils	Post-Test: Number of Pupils
Score range 0–3	22/27	17/27
Score range 4–7	3/27	7/27
Score range 8–10	2/27	3/27
Score ≥ 5	3/27	6/27

The results from a Wilcoxon signed rank test between the pupils’ pre-test scores (M: 2.44, SD: 2.56, range: 0–10) and post-test scores (M: 3.11, SD: 2.50, range: 0–9) showed that the attendance of the intervention did not result in a statistically significant enhancement in the vocabulary performance ($p > 0.1$) (see Figure 3). Non-significant results were also found in a subsequent analysis comparing the post-intervention improvement in nouns (mean improvement: 0.33, SD: 1.64, range: $-3-4$) versus verbs (mean improvement: 0.33, SD: 1.18, range: $-2-3$) based on a paired samples t -test ($p > 0.1$) (see also Table 10). Correlation tests between the background factors and the degree of children’s vocabulary improvement revealed a moderate positive correlation with age ($r = 0.39, p = 0.04$), indicating that as the age increased the vocabulary gains also increased.

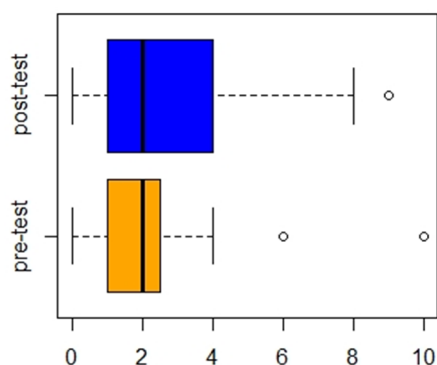


Figure 3. Boxplot graph representing the pupils’ scores in the pre- and post-test of the contextual cues intervention. Note: There was one outlier in the pre-test and two outliers in the post-test.

Table 10. Pupils’ performance on nouns and verbs for the pre- and post-test of the contextual cues intervention.

	Mean Score in Nouns	Mean Score in Verbs
Pre-test	1.19 (SD: 1.39, range: 0–5)	1.26 (SD: 1.29, range: 0–5)
Post-test	1.52 (SD: 1.53, range: 0–5)	1.59 (SD: 1.28, range: 0–5)

4. Discussion

As presented above, there is considerable lack of research, especially quantitatively-based research, focused on the effectiveness of teaching techniques in children with a refugee background. The present study constituted an attempt to bridge this gap in the literature, raising three research questions.

Concerning the first research question, meaning the effectiveness of the three vocabulary teaching techniques, we will discuss each one of the intervention types separately. Firstly, according to the overall significantly better scores achieved in the post-test, flashcards seemed to be an effective vocabulary intervention. The current evidence supports previous findings from young learners (Alipour Madarsara et al. 2015), emphasising the beneficial combination of visual and verbal information that draws students’ attention and greatly facilitates comprehension even in cases where the L2 skills are low. The students remain engaged and motivated throughout the teaching process.

Regarding pantomime, the overall post-intervention performance was found to be significantly enhanced. Such findings extend previous evidence on substantial vocabulary gains through gestures and acting out activities in primary education learners (Andr  et al. 2020; Demircioğlu 2010) and, in turn, confirm the efficiency of the given intervention. It is also crucial that, as many of the refugee children were not fully familiar with the classroom norms, they frequently tried to get up and move in the classroom. Pantomime sessions thus offered the opportunity to combine learning and movement, while maintaining the pupils in the center of the teaching process. Given the above, although pantomime is rather unmapped in the literature, we believe that its employment should be promoted.

Thirdly, with respect to the use of contextual cues, there was an overall improvement in the students’ vocabulary mastery, but it did not reach statistical significance. We believe that the involvement of colour facilitated vocabulary learning to some extent, yet we presume that further adjustments would allow a better performance. Moreover, the pupils’ L2 proficiency skills and particularly their L2 literacy skills were rather low (see results from the placement test), while the pupils attended only two contextual cues sessions. Respectively, those non-advanced language and literacy skills may have led to difficulties in the use of the contextual cues, while two sessions may have not been sufficient for this type of intervention to lead to vocabulary gains (Nation 2013; see also Nassaji 2003 for results showing great difficulties in word inference within a context in adult L2 learners at an intermediate language level). However, as one reviewer suggested, the given teaching

technique may have a delayed learning effect on students' vocabulary gains; an issue that remains open for future investigation.

Regarding the second research question, i.e., potential differences between nouns and verbs, the results manifested a comparable performance of the pupils on the two word classes for all three intervention types. In the case of the flashcards intervention, there was a slightly greater improvement in nouns compared to verbs, but without this difference reaching significance. The reverse pattern was observed for the pantomime intervention, yet again without any statistically significant outcome. As for the contextual cues intervention, the improvement in the two words classes was identical. Regarding the results for the latter, in particular, they could be supported by the fact that, as it has been formerly noted, both target form classes are particularly prominent within a context, creating links with various constituents (Na and Nation 1985). In general, our findings overall do not show any significant differentiation in the effectiveness of an intervention depending on the target words' part of speech. However, we deem that the descriptive differences noted above within the flashcards and pantomime interventions call for further investigation, also given the rather limited number of nouns and verbs taught per intervention type (i.e., five).

With regard to the last research question, i.e., the correlation between vocabulary improvement and background variables, we found that almost none of the variables documented were significantly correlated with the students' performance. This probably indicates restricted diversity within the target population as well as the fact that additional factors need to be considered in order to shed more light onto the issue. For instance, all pupils were on the first or the second year of attending the school, while their involvement in L2 literacy activities was overall limited. At the same time, our results are more parallel with the study by Golberg et al. (2008), which also shows the absence of an effect of L2 use at home on L2 vocabulary skills, with one of the possible reasons for that finding being the lack of L2 fluency in other family members. Lastly, we deem it important to highlight some crucial matters inherent to the target group that may have played a role in our results. As we observed during the study, the L2 use is largely confined within the classroom environment, limiting language practice. We also observed that Greece was not the final destination for some refugee families, and therefore their adherence to the acquisition of the Greek language was sometimes restricted (for more information on this issue see Mogli and Papadopoulou 2018). Only the children's age seemed to correlate with their performance in the intervention that involved contextual cues. That is, older children seemed to be able to benefit to a greater degree compared to younger children. This finding may be due to that several skills are necessary during the process of deducing a word's meaning within a context (Nation 2013), along with the increased cognitive and linguistic maturity in older children (see Golberg et al. 2008 for a vocabulary advantage of children with a later age of L2 exposure and the possibility of cognitive maturity as an important factor; also see Fortenbaugh et al. 2015; Hartshorne and Germine 2015 for studies across the lifespan).

Finally, it is important to note some limitations of our study, along with future directions for subsequent studies. First, we must highlight the limited sample of pupils that participated in the interventions, which may have decreased the power of the data analysis. Future investigations could also include a control group in order to assess the current findings. Additionally, we would like to address the fact that the matching exercise in the pre- and post-tests was not completely comparable across the intervention types, as the pantomime tests involved the matching of words to pictures instead of words to phrases. This discrepancy might have affected the pupils' performance; yet it is deemed crucial that, based on the results, both flashcards and pantomime seemed to be effective techniques besides that discrepancy in the tests. Moreover, the inclusion of exercise types different from the ones we used here may have pointed to differences between nouns and verbs. Taking into account the possibility of a delayed learning effect in the case of the contextual cues intervention, the administration of a delayed post-test for all intervention types could reveal changes or retention in students' vocabulary gains. Last but not least, as it was mentioned above, the researcher noticed that the students were considerably

motivated during the flashcards intervention. Given this singular personal observation by the researcher, a systematic exploration of students' engagement in and motivation during an intervention would complement the findings and enrich them in terms of a technique's effectiveness.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study provides significant insights into the effectiveness of certain L2 vocabulary teaching techniques for primary school students with a refugee background. The results indicate flashcards and pantomime to be effective techniques for the given population. Although a similar conclusion cannot be made for the contextual cues intervention, this technique seems to boost greater vocabulary gains for older children compared to younger ones. An implication of those findings for migrant and refugee education is that techniques that involve images and movement may be more appropriate for children with low proficiency and low literacy skills, while techniques that require higher skills, such as learning words through contextual cues, might not be so suitable—at least not during the first grades of primary education. Additionally, the findings of the current study hint that word category does not influence the effectiveness of any of the target interventions. Nouns and verbs seem to be learned to the same degree through the teaching techniques involving flashcards, pantomime, and contextual cues. Lastly, the results indicate that certain research limitations can be raised when the focus is on refugee populations. These findings call for further empirical and systematic research on the given issues.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (protocol code 183526/2019 and date of approval 12 September 2019) and the Greek Ministry of Education (protocol code Φ15/167380/Δ1/177344 and date of approval 13 November 2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is stored at Aristotle University's data repository and available upon request to the second author.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Words taught through the three intervention types.

Intervention Type	Word Forms Taught
flashcards	ο άνεμος (ο 'anem-os) the-MASC.NOM.SG. wind-MASC.NOM.SG. 'the wind'
	ο κεραυνός (ο cerav'n-os) the-MASC.NOM.SG. lightning-MASC.NOM.SG. 'the lightning'
	το σύννεφο (to 'sinef-o) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. cloud-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the cloud'
	το χιόνι (to 'zon-i) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. snow-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the snow'
	ο ήλιος (ο 'il-os) the-MASC.NOM.SG. sun-MASC.NOM.SG. 'the sun'
	χτυπάει (xti'p-ai) hit-PRES.3RD.SG. '(he/she/it) hits'
	κρύβει ('kriv-i) hide-PRES.3RD.SG. '(he/she/it) hides'
	φυσάει (fi's-ai) is windy-PRES.3RD.SG. '(it) is windy'
	καλύπτει (ka'lipt-i) cover-PRES.3RD.SG. '(he/she/it) covers'
	λάμπει ('lab-i) shine-PRES.3RD.SG. '(he/she/it) shines'
Pantomime	το βουνό (to vu'n-o) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. mountain-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the mountain'
	το κύμα (to 'ki-ma) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. wave-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the wave'
	το λουλούδι (to lu'luð-i) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. flower-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the flower'
	το ζώο (to 'zo-o) the-NEUT.NOM.SG. animal-NEUT.NOM.SG. 'the animal'
	η θάλασσα (i 'thalas-a) the-FEM.NOM.SG. sea-FEM.NOM.SG. 'the sea'
	ανεβαίνω (ane'ven-o) go up-PRES.1ST.SG. '(I) go up'

Table A1. Cont.

Intervention Type	Word Forms Taught
Pantomime	κόβ-ω (‘kov-o) cut-PRES.1ST.SG. ‘(I) cut’
	προστατεύ-ω (prosta’tev-o) protect-PRES.1ST.SG. ‘(I) protect’
	κολυμπ-ώ (koli’b-o) swim-PRES.1ST.SG. ‘(I) swim’
	πηδ-ώ (pi’d-o) jump-PRES.1ST.SG. ‘(I) jump’
Use of contextual cues	φυτ-ά (fi’t-a) plant-NEUT.ACC.PL. ‘plants’
	δάσ-ος (‘das-os) forest-NEUT.ACC.SG. ‘forest’
	μόλυνσ-η (‘molins-i) pollution-FEM.ACC.SG. ‘pollution’
	συνεργασί-α (sinerya’si-a) cooperation-FEM.NOM.SG. ‘cooperation’
	δράσ-η (‘dras-i) action-FEM.NOM.SG. ‘action’
	ζ-ει (z-i) live-PRES.3RD.SG. ‘(he/she/it) lives’
	μειών-ονται (mi’on-ode) reduce-PRES.3RD.PL.NACT. ‘(they) are reduced’
	καταστρέφ-εται (kata’stref-ete) destroy-PRES.3RD.SG.NACT. ‘(he/she/it) is destroyed’
	δεν καθαρίζ-ουμε (den katha’riz-ume) not clean-PRES.2ND.PL. ‘(we) do not clean’
	πετ-άμε (pe’t-ame) throw-PRES.2ND.PL. ‘(we) throw’

Notes

- ¹ It is important to note that for reasons inherent to the nature of forced displacement, some information that has been provided to us, such as the children’s age, might not always be accurate. As such information is sensitive, it was not possible to confirm it.
- ² The educational programme of RCs, launched in 1980, operate in certain public schools within the formal Greek educational system. RCs are exclusively morning classes, aiming mainly at intensive teaching of Greek and targeting students who have restricted Greek abilities. Besides the intensive teaching of the Greek language, the students may also receive support in other courses, such as mathematics. After the end of those classes, the students can move to mainstream classes where they can attend other courses as well. Students can attend RCs for up to three years—if deemed necessary—yet no educational outcomes are

presumably assessed before students completely integrate into a mainstream class (see Tzevelekou et al. 2013b; Ziomas et al. 2017 for relevant information about RCs).

- 3 We deem important to highlight that we decided to include a word-picture matching exercise in the pantomime pre- and post-test given the characteristics of the intervention that included movement. In contrast, the involvement of pictures in the flashcards' tests would be unreasonable, as pictures were also involved during instruction. In turn, regarding the intervention employing contextual cues, some words were not easily depictable, and thus the use of pictures in the tests would be challenging.

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