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Vietnamese EFL Teachers' Evaluation of Dictionary-Selected Contemporary Vocabulary for Vocabulary Teaching and Critical Digital Literacy

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Abstract

Dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary expressions increasingly reflect public concerns about digital culture, artificial intelligence, misinformation, online manipulation, and changing patterns of English use. However, limited empirical attention has examined how EFL teachers evaluate such items as classroom resources. This qualitative exploratory study investigated Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of their value for vocabulary teaching and critical digital literacy. From March to June 2026, asynchronous email-based semi-structured interviews were completed by 18 teachers with 2–21 years of experience across university, secondary-school, private-center, IELTS/EAP, adult, vocational, and online teaching settings. The 22-question interview form included a 12-item stimulus list combining dictionary Words of the Year with a related shortlisted contemporary expression. The approximately 12,200-word dataset was coded by the researcher in QualCoder 3.8.2 and analyzed through theoretically informed reflexive thematic analysis, combining predominantly inductive semantic coding with later interpretation through concepts from teacher cognition, vocabulary pedagogy, lexical change, and critical digital literacy. Teachers viewed the items as potentially valuable but conditional resources. Their reported judgments emphasized learner proficiency and age, register, instructional objectives, cultural sensitivity, curricular relevance, and risk of misuse. They also differentiated possible roles for productive use, guided discussion, receptive or cultural awareness, and caution-only treatment. These categories represent teachers' professional judgments rather than tested classifications or observed learning outcomes. The study therefore proposes a preliminary tiered selection framework for materials development and future classroom validation, rather than evidence of successful classroom integration.

Keywords: Words of the year; Vietnamese EFL teachers; Contemporary vocabulary; Teacher cognition; Critical digital literacy

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INTRODUCTION

Dictionary Words of the Year have increasingly become more than annual lexical curiosities. They now function as cultural indicators of how English responds to digital life, social change, artificial intelligence, public debate, and online communication. Recent selections illustrate this shift clearly. Oxford selected *brain rot* as its 2024 Word of the Year to represent concerns about excessive consumption of low-quality online content and its perceived effects on mental or intellectual life (Oxford University Press, 2024a). In 2025, Oxford selected *rage bait*, a term referring to online content deliberately designed to provoke anger or outrage in order to increase traffic or engagement (Oxford University Press, 2025b). In the same year, Merriam-Webster selected *slop*, referring to low-quality digital content usually produced in quantity by means of artificial

intelligence (Merriam-Webster, 2025). These examples show that contemporary English vocabulary increasingly encodes public concerns about attention, misinformation, emotional manipulation, AI-generated content, authenticity, polarization, and digital wellbeing.

For English as a foreign language (EFL) education, such words are pedagogically important because learners now encounter English not only in textbooks, graded readers, or examinations, but also through social media, memes, AI-generated texts, short videos, news headlines, online comments, and platform-mediated public discourse. Recent research has also shown that digital technologies, mobile tools, digital reading, and AI-supported environments are reshaping how learners encounter, process, and expand second-language vocabulary (Alhatmi, 2023; Godwin-Jones, 2021, 2023; Teymouri, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Therefore, contemporary vocabulary teaching needs to consider not only lexical form and meaning, but also register, cultural salience, pragmatic use, and critical interpretation.

Terminological distinctions are necessary because dictionary status, lexical novelty, linguistic form, and register are not equivalent categories. In this study, a dictionary Word of the Year refers to a word or multiword expression officially designated as the annual winner by Oxford University Press or Merriam-Webster. A shortlist item refers to a formally nominated candidate that was not ultimately selected as the winner. The broader term dictionary-selected item encompasses both winners and shortlisted candidates. Not every selected item is a neologism: some are relatively new formations or meanings, whereas others are established words that acquired renewed public salience during a particular year. In the present study, renewed-salience item is therefore used operationally for an established lexical form whose cultural prominence increased markedly in the selection period. Compound describes lexical structure rather than recency or dictionary status, while youth slang describes register and social distribution rather than selection status. Culturally salient contemporary vocabulary is used as the broadest category for lexical items that have become prominent in current public or digital discourse. Ordinary trending vocabulary, by contrast, may circulate widely online without documented dictionary selection, a stable definition, or an identifiable selection history (Merriam-Webster, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025; Oxford University Press, 2016, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b, n.d.; Rets, 2016).

Words of the Year are useful for the present investigation not because dictionary recognition guarantees instructional value, but because these selections provide a bounded and traceable set of culturally prominent lexical items. Unlike an open-ended collection of vocabulary that happens to be trending on a particular platform, dictionary-selected items have an identifiable publisher, selection year, documented definition, and publicly stated cultural rationale. Oxford's process draws on language data, emerging usage trends, expert analysis, public suggestions, and wider cultural developments, while Merriam-Webster's selections have been informed by dictionary lookup patterns and editorial evaluation. These features make Words of the Year a more transparent starting point for examining teachers' judgments about currency, register, teachability, and cultural relevance. However, dictionary authority is treated here only as a sampling criterion and source of cultural visibility, not as evidence that an item is frequent, age-appropriate, transferable, suitable for productive learning, or pedagogically effective (Merriam-Webster, 2020, 2025).

The problem is that culturally salient vocabulary is not automatically suitable for classroom instruction. Vocabulary teaching has traditionally emphasized frequency, usefulness, word knowledge, collocation, and communicative value, and these principles remain essential because learners need a stable lexical foundation before they can participate effectively in academic, professional, and everyday communication (Nation,

2022). At the same time, recent studies on vocabulary learning in digital environments suggest that vocabulary knowledge is increasingly shaped by multimodal input, digital reading, mobile learning, online exposure, and technology-enhanced practice rather than by textbook-based learning alone (Alhatmi, 2023; Teymouri, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). However, a vocabulary syllabus that focuses only on stable, high-frequency, or textbook-based items may not fully prepare learners to understand the kinds of English they encounter in contemporary digital environments. Words such as *post-truth*, *polarization*, *gaslighting*, *rage bait*, and *slop* do not simply add new meanings to learners' vocabulary lists; they also require learners to interpret intention, tone, evidence, manipulation, social evaluation, and context. At the same time, some Word-of-the-Year items are informal, youth-oriented, unstable, sensitive, or difficult to use appropriately. For example, *rizz* may be useful for receptive cultural awareness but unsuitable as productive academic vocabulary, while *gaslighting* may require careful handling because of its interpersonal and emotional meanings. This creates a pedagogical tension for EFL teachers: these words may help learners access contemporary English and digital culture, but they may also create risks of misuse, overgeneralization, inappropriate register, or cultural misunderstanding if they are taught without clear selection criteria and classroom guidance.

Vietnam is a particularly relevant context because vocabulary teaching operates alongside high-stakes assessment, curriculum requirements, and expanding digital engagement. Vu and Peters (2021) reviewed vocabulary learning, teaching, and testing in Vietnam and reported limited vocabulary knowledge among many Vietnamese EFL learners, while calling for closer attention to the lexical profiles and coverage of high-stakes tests. At the upper-secondary level, Nguyen and Le (2024) found that teachers' beliefs influenced their vocabulary-teaching practices, while time, facilities, class size, and differences in learner proficiency constrained implementation. Ha et al. (2021) similarly showed that high-stakes examinations strongly shaped Vietnamese high-school EFL teachers' assessment beliefs and practices, particularly their attention to discrete linguistic items. At the university level, Nguyen et al. (2026) found generally good digital literacy among Vietnamese EFL teachers, although digital self-learning and updating was the lowest-rated component and technology integration varied according to curriculum, working environment, and facilities. Comparable evidence from China indicates that EFL teachers may recognize the educational benefits of high-stakes tests while also reporting curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test (Xin et al., 2025). Together, these studies suggest that Vietnamese teachers' judgments about contemporary vocabulary may be influenced not only by lexical currency but also by assessment relevance, institutional conditions, learner readiness, and digital competence.

Existing studies provide relevant but separate foundations for the present inquiry. Rets (2016) examined learners' familiarity with neologisms and proposed four classroom strategies, but the study did not investigate a provenance-defined set of dictionary Words of the Year or teachers' item-by-item selection judgments. In Vietnam, Vu and Peters (2021) reviewed vocabulary learning, teaching, and testing, whereas Nguyen and Le (2024) examined teachers' general vocabulary beliefs and observed practices at one upper-secondary school. Critical digital literacy research has investigated EFL learners' ability to evaluate online sources (Silvhiany et al., 2021) and teachers' views and practices concerning critical digital literacy in an Indonesian university context (Rini & Nabhan, 2023). More recent Vietnamese research has assessed university EFL teachers' broader digital competence rather than their pedagogical evaluation of contemporary lexical items (Nguyen et al., 2026). These studies establish the importance of neologism teaching, vocabulary pedagogy, teacher cognition, and critical engagement with digital information, but they address different empirical questions.

The present study therefore examines how Vietnamese EFL teachers judge the teachability, instructional role, register, sensitivity, and risk of misuse associated with a traceable set of dictionary-selected contemporary expressions. Its contribution lies in documenting how teachers accept, restrict, reclassify, or reject possible pedagogical uses rather than assuming that dictionary recognition itself establishes teachability. The present study is therefore positioned at the intersection of teacher cognition, contemporary vocabulary and lexical change, and critical digital literacy. Teacher cognition explains how teachers make professional judgments about the teachability and appropriateness of new or culturally salient vocabulary. Contemporary vocabulary and lexical change explain why Words of the Year may have pedagogical value beyond simple word meanings, while critical digital literacy explains how such vocabulary can support learners' interpretation of online manipulation, AI-generated content, misinformation, and digital communication.

Therefore, this study aims to explore Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary vocabulary as possible resources for vocabulary teaching and critical digital literacy. Specifically, it investigates how teachers perceive the pedagogical value of these items, what criteria they use when deciding whether particular items are teachable or appropriate, and what opportunities, challenges, and proposed classroom practices they identify for their possible use in EFL instruction. The study focuses on Vietnamese EFL teachers because Vietnamese learners increasingly encounter English through both formal education and global digital media, while teachers are expected to support examination-oriented vocabulary, academic vocabulary, communicative competence, and digital awareness.

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the pedagogical value of dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary vocabulary for EFL vocabulary teaching? (2) What criteria do Vietnamese EFL teachers use when deciding whether these items are teachable, appropriate, and useful for their learners? (3) What opportunities, challenges, and proposed classroom practices do Vietnamese EFL teachers identify for the possible use of these items in vocabulary teaching and critical digital literacy activities? The scope of the study is limited to teachers' reported perceptions collected through asynchronous email-based semi-structured interviews with 18 Vietnamese EFL teachers. It does not measure learners' vocabulary gains or classroom outcomes, but it provides insight into teacher cognition and selection criteria concerning the possible classroom use of dictionary-selected and related contemporary vocabulary.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design using asynchronous email-based semi-structured interviews. This design was selected because the study aimed to examine Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions, professional judgments, and pedagogical reasoning rather than to test predetermined variables statistically. The main phenomenon investigated was how teachers evaluated dictionary Words of the Year as possible resources for contemporary vocabulary teaching and critical digital literacy. A qualitative design was therefore suitable because it allowed the researcher to collect detailed written accounts of teachers' beliefs, selection criteria, classroom concerns, and suggested practices. The study used written email interviews instead of face-to-face or synchronous interviews because the participants were practicing teachers working in different instructional contexts and with different schedules. Asynchronous email interviews can give participants more time to reflect on their answers and can support access to participants across locations, although this format also has limitations,

including the absence of non-verbal cues and the possibility of less spontaneous responses (Amri et al., 2021; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). In this study, the written format was considered appropriate because the research questions required reflective professional opinions rather than interactional or observational data.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were 18 Vietnamese EFL teachers recruited through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because the study required information-rich participants who had experience teaching English to Vietnamese learners and could comment meaningfully on vocabulary selection, classroom suitability, contemporary English use, and digital-culture-related language. Purposeful sampling is appropriate in qualitative inquiry when participants are selected because they can provide relevant and detailed perspectives on the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be Vietnamese EFL teachers, have experience teaching English vocabulary or integrated English skills, have taught Vietnamese learners of English, and be willing to complete a written email-based interview in English or Vietnamese. Recruitment was conducted individually by email. Of the 25 eligible teachers invited, five did not respond, two declined, and 18 provided consent and returned completed interview forms. Sample adequacy was considered through information power rather than a fixed numerical threshold or an undocumented claim of saturation (Malterud et al., 2016).

The focused research aim, purposive criteria, detailed 22-question interview form, varied instructional contexts, and approximately 12,200-word dataset provided sufficient information for the study's exploratory and interpretive purposes. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of all Vietnamese EFL teachers. The participants represented a range of instructional contexts, including universities, public high schools, private English centers, IELTS and academic English programs, adult or workplace English classes, online or freelance teaching, and vocational or mixed-level teaching. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years. This variation was important because the study aimed to explore how teachers' perceptions of Words of the Year differed across learner age groups, proficiency levels, course goals, and institutional expectations. All participants were anonymized and coded as P1 to P18. The participants' teaching experience, primary instructional contexts, main learner groups, course types, and participant codes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of the 18 Participants

Profile dimension	Category	n	Participant codes
Teaching experience	2–5 years	4	P4, P6, P10, P16
	6–10 years	5	P1, P3, P8, P11, P12
	11–15 years	5	P2, P7, P9, P17, P18
	16–21 years	4	P5, P13, P14, P15
Primary teaching context	University or university English department	5	P1, P5, P9, P12, P16
	Public high school	3	P2, P6, P14
	Private, bilingual, or international secondary school	2	P13, P17
	Private language, IELTS, or adult English center	5	P3, P7, P8, P10, P18
	Vocational college	1	P11
	Online or freelance teaching	1	P4
	Teacher training and private EFL classes	1	P15
Main learner	Secondary-school or teenage learners	9	P2, P3, P4, P6, P10, P13, P14, P17, P18

Profile dimension	Category	n	Participant codes
group	University students or pre-service teachers	10	P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P12, P15, P16, P18
	Adult or working learners	7	P3, P4, P7, P8, P11, P15, P18
	In-service EFL teachers	1	P15
Course type	General English or communication	9	P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, P10, P11, P16, P18
	IELTS, Cambridge, school, or national-examination preparation	6	P2, P3, P7, P10, P14, P18
	Academic English, reading, writing, literature, or debate	7	P1, P5, P7, P9, P12, P13, P17
	Vocabulary, lexicology, or vocabulary development	8	P1, P3, P5, P7, P11, P12, P15, P18
	Business, workplace, media, or other ESP courses	3	P8, P9, P11
	Teacher education, methodology, or professional development	2	P5, P15
	Digital-literacy projects	1	P17

Learner-group and course-type categories are non-mutually exclusive. Primary teaching context reflects each participant's principal context reported in Question 1. Gender, qualifications, geographic region, and vocabulary-teaching frequency were not collected and are therefore not reported. Overall, the sample captured variation in teaching experience, institutional setting, learner group, and instructional purpose.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through an email-based semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. The form consisted of six sections: teacher background, general views on contemporary vocabulary teaching, perceptions of dictionary Words of the Year, criteria for teachability and appropriateness, critical digital literacy, and classroom practices and challenges. It included 22 open-ended questions. The interview domains were aligned with the three research questions and the study's theoretical framework. Questions about teachers' beliefs and pedagogical judgments were linked to teacher cognition, questions about word selection and teachability were linked to contemporary vocabulary teaching and lexical change, and questions about online culture, AI-generated content, misinformation, and manipulation were linked to critical digital literacy. A stimulus word list was included before the interview questions so that participants could respond to concrete examples rather than discuss contemporary vocabulary only in general terms. The list included *brain rot*, *rage bait*, *slop*, *rizz*, *goblin mode*, *gaslighting*, *post-truth*, *climate emergency*, *vax*, *authentic*, *polarization*, and *aura farming*. The provenance and intended analytical coverage of the 12 stimulus items are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Provenance and analytical profile of the stimulus items

Stimulus item	Dictionary and year	Selection status	Concise meaning	Lexical/register profile	Reason for inclusion in this study
post-truth	Oxford, 2016	Official Word of the Year	Circumstances in which objective facts influence public opinion less than emotional or personal appeals	Established political and media term; adjective; renewed public salience	To examine vocabulary connected with evidence, misinformation, emotional persuasion, and public discourse

Stimulus item	Dictionary and year	Selection status	Concise meaning	Lexical/register profile	Reason for inclusion in this study
climate emergency	Oxford, 2019	Official Word of the Year	A situation requiring urgent action to address climate change and its consequences	Formal public-policy and environmental compound	To represent civic, environmental, and issue-based vocabulary with potential academic-discussion value
vax	Oxford, 2021	Official Word of the Year	An informal shortening relating to vaccine or vaccination	Informal shortening; productive in forms such as *vaxxed* and *anti -vax*	To examine temporally salient public-health vocabulary and possible decline in relevance after a major event
goblin mode	Oxford, 2022	Official Word of the Year	Unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, or socially nonconforming behaviour	Informal slang expression; multiword unit	To represent culturally specific informal language whose receptive value may exceed its productive classroom value
gaslighting	Merriam-Webster, 2022	Official Word of the Year	Psychological manipulation or the practice of seriously misleading someone for personal advantage	Established interpersonal and public-discourse term; potentially sensitive	To investigate sensitivity, semantic overextension, misuse, and the need for contextual guidance
rizz	Oxford, 2023	Official Word of the Year	Style, charm, or attractiveness, particularly the ability to attract a romantic partner	Youth slang; informal noun and verb	To represent rapidly circulating youth vocabulary and the distinction between cultural recognition and productive use
authentic	Merriam-Webster, 2023	Official Word of the Year	Genuine rather than false or imitative; also true to one's character or identity	Established general and academic adjective; renewed salience	To connect vocabulary with identity, AI-generated content, and credibility
brain rot	Oxford, 2024	Official Word of the Year	Perceived mental or intellectual deterioration associated with excessive consumption of trivial or low-quality online content.	Informal digital-culture compound	To represent digital wellbeing, online consumption, register awareness, and critical reflection on platform use
polarization	Merriam-Webster, 2024	Official Word of the Year	Division into sharply opposed positions or groups	Established formal, academic, civic, and political noun; renewed salience	To examine vocabulary suitable for academic or civic discussion but requiring contextual and cultural sensitivity

Stimulus item	Dictionary and year	Selection status	Concise meaning	Lexical/register profile	Reason for inclusion in this study
rage bait	Oxford, 2025	Official Word of the Year	Online content deliberately designed to provoke anger or outrage in order to increase traffic or engagement	Digital-media compound; informal but increasingly mainstream	To represent emotional manipulation, algorithmic engagement, misinformation, and critical digital literacy
slop	Merriam-Webster, 2025	Official Word of the Year	Low-quality digital content usually produced in quantity through artificial intelligence	Informal and pejorative digital-content term; renewed or extended sense	To represent AI-generated content, quality evaluation, authenticity, and responsible digital consumption
aura farming	Oxford, 2025	Shortlisted candidate; not the winner	Deliberate cultivation of a charismatic, attractive, confident, or mysterious public image	Youth and social-media compound; informal	To provide a contrasting shortlisted item associated with online identity, platform culture, and potentially unstable slang

Note: "Official Word of the Year" refers to the annual winner announced by the named dictionary. *Aura farming* was shortlisted by Oxford in 2025, while *rage bait* was the winner. Meanings are paraphrased from official dictionary materials, and the lexical/register profiles are study-specific rather than fixed classifications.

The interview form was developed by mapping the three research questions onto six domains: teacher background, contemporary vocabulary teaching, perceptions of dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary vocabulary, teachability and appropriateness, critical digital literacy, and proposed classroom practices and challenges. This process produced 22 open-ended questions and a 12-item stimulus list. The researcher checked the form for conceptual alignment, terminological consistency, sequencing, and unnecessary overlap. No external expert validation or separate pilot interview was conducted; therefore, the study does not claim formal instrument validation. Because the questions were open-ended rather than components of a psychometric scale, internal-consistency reliability was not calculated. Procedural consistency was supported by providing all participants with the same form, stimulus list, instructions, and consent information. Data were collected by email from March to June 2026. Participants received the study information, consent form, and interview form before returning their written responses. Email clarification was available for incomplete or ambiguous answers, but no separate second interview round was conducted. All 18 responses were written in English, producing approximately 12,203 words, with individual responses ranging from 562 to 1,053 words.

Ethical safeguards were implemented before data collection. Each participant received a participant information and consent form explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, the right to skip any question, the intended academic use of the responses, confidentiality procedures, and the possible use of anonymized excerpts. Consent was recorded electronically before the corresponding response was included in the dataset. Participants were assigned the codes P1–P18, and names, workplaces, and other directly identifying details were removed or generalized before analysis. The interview questions focused on professional judgments and proposed teaching practices

rather than requiring disclosure of sensitive personal experiences. This was an independent study conducted outside an institutionally sponsored research project. It was not submitted to an institutional ethics committee; therefore, no formal ethics approval number applies.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using theoretically informed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The approach was predominantly inductive and semantic during initial coding: codes were generated from the explicit meanings expressed in participants' responses rather than from a predetermined coding frame. Concepts from teacher cognition, vocabulary pedagogy, lexical change, and critical digital literacy were subsequently used as sensitizing concepts to examine relationships among the data-grounded codes and support higher-level interpretation. These concepts guided the analytical questions asked of the data but did not function as fixed categories into which every response had to be placed.

The procedure was therefore theoretically informed while retaining the flexible and interpretive character of reflexive thematic analysis. It was not a codebook or coding-reliability approach: no fixed codebook, independent double coding, consensus coding, or intercoder-reliability calculation was used. Codes and candidate themes were revised through repeated engagement with the complete dataset, analytic memo writing, and active interpretation by the researcher. After data collection, all written responses were anonymized before analysis. Identifying information such as real names, workplaces, and personally identifiable details was removed or generalized. Each response was saved as a separate text file and labeled from P1 to P18. Only the 18 participant response files were treated as interview data; research planning notes, interview prompts, and analytic tables were not included as data for thematic analysis.

The files were then imported into QualCoder 3.8.2 for data management and coding (Curtain et al., 2026). QualCoder was used to organize the dataset, code text segments, write analytic memos, group codes into categories, and generate coding reports. However, the software did not replace the researcher's interpretive role. All coding decisions, theme development, and final interpretations were made by the researcher. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout coding and theme development. The researcher is an EFL educator and language researcher with prior interest in contemporary vocabulary, digital communication, and critical digital literacy. This background supported contextual understanding but could also make the pedagogical relevance of digitally salient vocabulary more noticeable during analysis. Reflexive memos were therefore used to record initial assumptions, coding decisions, changes to candidate categories, and cases that challenged emerging interpretations. The researcher repeatedly distinguished participants' explicit statements from subsequent analytical interpretations and revisited divergent accounts before finalizing the themes. Reflexivity was used to examine the researcher's influence on the analysis rather than to claim complete neutrality.

The analysis followed several stages. First, all written responses were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the dataset. Second, meaningful units of text were coded in QualCoder. These units included phrases, sentences, or short paragraphs that expressed relevant perceptions, judgments, examples, or concerns. Third, initial semantic codes were generated, including *real-life relevance*, *dictionary credibility*, *temporary slang*, *risk of misuse*, *register concern*, *age appropriateness*, *exam relevance*, *AI slop*, *online anger*, *teacher confidence*, *safe examples*, and *discussion-based activity*. Fourth, related codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes such as *real-life relevance*, *cultural meaning*, *dictionary credibility*, and *vocabulary enrichment* were grouped under teachers'

perceived value of Words of the Year. Codes such as *register concern*, *level appropriateness*, *age sensitivity*, *exam relevance*, and *risk of misuse* were grouped under selection and appropriateness.

Fifth, the categories were reviewed across the complete dataset and refined into four final themes: (1) conditional pedagogical value, referring to teachers' acceptance of the items primarily as optional and context-sensitive resources; (2) principled selection based on teachability and appropriateness, covering proficiency, learner age, register, sensitivity, curriculum fit, assessment relevance, and risk of misuse; (3) differentiated instructional roles and word-specific pedagogical tiering, capturing distinctions among productive vocabulary, guided-discussion vocabulary, receptive or cultural-awareness vocabulary, and items requiring caution; and (4) proposed integration through critical digital literacy tasks, including activities concerning AI-generated content, online manipulation, misinformation, emotional framing, and responsible digital participation.

Analytic memos were used to document the development of codes and categories, decisions to merge, separate, rename, or discard candidate categories, relationships between the emerging patterns and the research questions, and the researcher's reflections on possible alternative interpretations. Responses that did not fit an emerging pattern were not deleted or forced into the dominant category. They were retained under provisional or divergent-case codes and revisited during theme review. Final themes were accepted only after they had been checked against both the coded extracts and the complete set of 18 response documents. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the themes were actively developed by the researcher rather than treated as categories that simply existed in or emerged automatically from the data. Theme development involved repeated reading, evolving semantic coding, analytic memo writing, examination of relationships among codes, review of divergent cases, and interpretation across the complete dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

The analysis generated four interrelated themes addressing the three research questions. Research Question 1 was addressed by conditional pedagogical value: teachers treated the items as optional and context-sensitive resources rather than core vocabulary. Research Question 2 was addressed by principled selection and differentiated instructional roles based on learner proficiency, age, register, sensitivity, curricular relevance, transferability, and risk of misuse. Research Question 3 was addressed by proposed critical digital literacy tasks concerning AI-generated content, misinformation, source evaluation, emotional manipulation, and responsible digital participation. Across the themes, dictionary recognition provided a reason to examine an item but did not automatically establish pedagogical priority. Table 3 summarizes the themes and illustrative participant references.

Table 3. Relationship Between the Research Questions and Final Themes

Research question	Final theme	Principal qualitative pattern	Illustrative participants
RQ1	Conditional pedagogical value	Teachers regarded the items as contemporary and culturally meaningful resources, but mainly as optional enrichment rather than compulsory core vocabulary.	P1, P3, P5, P7, P9, P15, P18
RQ2	Principled selection based on teachability and appropriateness	Teachers evaluated the items according to proficiency, learner age, register, sensitivity, instructional purpose, curriculum or assessment fit,	P2, P3, P6, P8, P10, P12, P14, P18

Research question	Final theme	Principal qualitative pattern	Illustrative participants
		transferability, and risk of misuse.	
RQ2	Differentiated instructional roles and word-specific pedagogical tiering	Teachers distinguished possible roles for productive teaching, guided discussion, receptive or cultural awareness, and caution-only treatment.	P3, P5, P8, P11, P14, P16
RQ3	Proposed integration through critical digital literacy tasks	Teachers proposed activities involving AI-generated content, online anger, misinformation, emotional manipulation, source evaluation, and responsible digital participation.	P1, P4, P5, P7, P9, P12, P15, P17

Note: Participant references illustrate the qualitative patterns rather than statistical prevalence. The themes represent the researcher's interpretation of teachers' reported perceptions and proposals, not validated classifications or observed classroom outcomes.

The interpretation of these findings is connected to the study's theoretical framework. Teachers' cautious but open attitudes are interpreted through teacher cognition because their decisions reflected professional beliefs about learners, materials, assessment demands, classroom objectives, and institutional expectations (Borg, 2003). Their distinction between productive use, receptive awareness, and cultural analysis is also consistent with vocabulary pedagogy, which emphasizes not only word meaning but also use, register, constraints, and appropriateness (Nation, 2022). In addition, the use of Words of the Year for media analysis, AI-output evaluation, and discussion of online manipulation extends previous arguments that neologisms and culturally salient vocabulary can support learners' understanding of language and culture (Rets, 2016) and can be linked to critical digital literacy in digitally mediated EFL learning.

Finding 1. Words of the Year as Conditional Pedagogical Resources

The first theme captured a recurring view across the participant accounts: dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary vocabulary could serve as useful but conditional pedagogical resources. Participants valued these words because they made English feel current, authentic, and socially connected. P1 stated that such words "can make vocabulary lessons more connected to real life," while P16 argued that they can make students feel that "English is current, not only textbook language." P18 similarly described Words of the Year as "a good bridge between vocabulary and culture." These comments indicate that teachers saw contemporary vocabulary as a way to connect classroom English with students' exposure to digital culture, social media, online news, AI-generated texts, and public discourse. However, participants did not treat dictionary recognition as sufficient justification for classroom inclusion. P7 described these words as "optional enrichment, not core syllabus vocabulary," and P3 noted that they were "useful as discussion prompts, but not all of them are useful as active vocabulary." This finding occurred because Words of the Year occupy an intermediate position between recognized lexical items and unstable cultural expressions.

This finding supports and extends previous work on culturally salient vocabulary and vocabulary pedagogy. Rets (2016) argues that neologisms can help learners understand the culture of a language, and the present study confirms that teachers recognized the cultural value of contemporary lexical items. However, the findings also show that Words of the Year are not limited to neologisms. Some items, such as *brain rot*, *rage bait*, and *slop*, are strongly associated with contemporary digital culture, while others, such as *authentic*, *post-truth*, and *polarization*, are established words that have gained renewed public salience. At the same time, the teachers' caution is consistent

with Nation's (2022) view that vocabulary learning involves more than knowing a word's translation. Learners also need to understand form, meaning, use, collocation, constraints, and appropriateness. Recent research on digital vocabulary learning further supports the need to consider how vocabulary is encountered through mobile, online, and technology-enhanced environments rather than through textbooks alone (Alhatmi, 2023; Teymouri, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). The findings therefore suggest that Words of the Year should not be treated as simple additions to vocabulary lists.

Finding 2. Principled Selection Based on Teachability and Appropriateness

The second theme concerned the practical and professional criteria teachers used when considering whether to teach, restrict, or avoid particular items. Recurring criteria across the accounts included learner proficiency, age and maturity, register, cultural and emotional sensitivity, classroom objectives, curricular or examination relevance, transferability, and risk of misuse. Across multiple accounts, teachers accepted contemporary vocabulary more readily when it supported learners' understanding of real-world English, while remaining cautious about whether particular items should be taught for productive use. For example, P2 noted that dictionary selection gives a word "some credibility," but "does not mean every word should be taught in school." P6 emphasized that teachers must first ask whether learners can use a word "appropriately in the right context." P10 was particularly cautious about words involving interpersonal harm or emotional manipulation, such as *gaslighting*, because learners might use them carelessly. P14 also warned that informal words could become problematic if students used them in academic writing, IELTS responses, or professional communication. These responses show that teachers did not evaluate Words of the Year only by meaning. They evaluated them through classroom consequences: whether a word could be explained safely, whether it matched students' age and proficiency, whether it supported the lesson goal, and whether it could be misused.

This finding is strongly connected to teacher cognition. Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition as what teachers think, know, and believe, and how these mental constructs relate to classroom practice. The participants' responses show teacher cognition in action because teachers filtered contemporary vocabulary through their knowledge of learners, institutions, assessment demands, classroom behavior, and cultural expectations. This interpretation is also supported by recent EFL vocabulary-belief research, which shows that vocabulary teaching is shaped by teachers' beliefs, histories, classroom priorities, and perceptions of learners' needs (Alshumrani, 2024; Ardell, 2022). A word such as *rage bait* may be useful in a media literacy lesson with university students, but too abstract for lower-level learners. Similarly, *slop* may support AI literacy, but it may become inappropriate if students use it as an insult for weak writing. These differences do not indicate inconsistency; they show that teachers make context-sensitive professional judgments. In this study, appropriateness was not only a linguistic issue but also a pedagogical, social, and ethical issue. Therefore, dictionary recognition provides only partial legitimacy. The final classroom decision still depends on teacher judgment.

Finding 3. Differentiated Instructional Roles and Word-Specific Pedagogical Tiering

The third finding shows that teachers did not evaluate all Words of the Year in the same way. Instead, their responses suggested a tiered model of pedagogical suitability. Across multiple accounts, more formal or broadly transferable items, such as *authentic*, *climate emergency*, *polarization*, and *post-truth*, were associated with older or higher-level learners, especially in academic, civic, IELTS, EAP, or media-related lessons. Digital-culture items such as *brain rot*, *rage bait*, and *slop* were also viewed as

useful because they connected directly to students' online lives, AI use, and everyday digital experience. Participants nevertheless emphasized that these words required careful explanation and contextual examples. Across multiple accounts, items such as *rizz*, *goblin mode*, and *aura farming* were associated mainly with informal, youth-oriented, unstable, or context-dependent use.

Teachers did not necessarily reject them, but they preferred to use them as cultural notes, register-awareness examples, or sociolinguistic discussion prompts rather than as active target vocabulary. This pattern suggests that teachers made a distinction between teachable vocabulary, discussable vocabulary, and vocabulary that should remain mainly receptive or analytical. The item-level judgments were not uniform, and several accounts complicated the broader tiering pattern. Digital-culture items also generated both support and caution. P1 regarded *slop* as useful because learners increasingly used AI tools without always evaluating output quality, while P17 warned that students might use the word to insult a classmate's writing. P4 described *rage bait* as useful because online arguments were common, whereas P7 cautioned that learners might label "everything they dislike" as *rage bait* or *slop*. These contrasting accounts indicate that the proposed instructional roles were context-dependent judgments rather than unanimous or fixed classifications. To make the item-level basis of this interpretation more transparent, Table 4 reports the participants who explicitly identified each item as useful in Q10 and those who identified it for avoidance, caution, or a restricted role in Q11. These responses informed the researcher's provisional interpretation of possible instructional roles; participants were not asked to assign every item to a fixed tier.

Table 4. Item-Level Evidence Underlying the Provisional Instructional Roles

Item	Explicitly identified as useful in Q10	Explicitly identified for avoidance, caution, or a limited role in Q11	Provisional interpretation of reported judgments
authentic	17: P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18	0	Broadly transferable vocabulary with possible general, academic, professional, and identity-related uses
brain rot	16: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18	0	Potentially useful for discussion of digital habits and online-content consumption, with contextual and register guidance
rage bait	14: P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18	0	Potential critical digital literacy and media-discussion vocabulary; careful evaluation is needed to prevent overgeneralization
slop	14: P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18	0	Potentially useful for discussing AI-generated and low-quality content, but register and interpersonal misuse require attention
climate emergency	14: P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18	1: P4	Formal or curriculum-linked vocabulary, particularly for environmental and academic discussion; its relevance may depend on lesson topic
post-truth	13: P1, P2, P3,	5: P6, P10, P11, P14,	Potential higher-level media or academic

Item	Explicitly identified as useful in Q10	Explicitly identified for avoidance, caution, or a limited role in Q11	Provisional interpretation of reported judgments
	P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P12, P13, P15, P17, P18	P16	vocabulary, but regarded as too abstract or insufficiently relevant in some lower-level and vocational contexts
gaslighting	12: P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P12, P13, P15, P17, P18	4: P2, P10, P13, P14	Potentially useful for interpersonal and media discussion, but emotional sensitivity, semantic overextension, and personal disclosure require caution
polarization	11: P1, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9, P12, P13, P15, P17, P18	5: P6, P10, P11, P14, P16	Potential higher-level academic, civic, or media vocabulary; considered abstract or low-priority in some contexts
rizz	3: P4, P5, P13	16: P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18	Primarily useful for youth-language, cultural, or register analysis; a minority of accounts also supported controlled instructional use
goblin mode	1: P5	13: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P14, P15	Primarily a cultural or sociolinguistic example rather than required productive vocabulary
aura farming	0	16: P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18	Mainly treated as optional, unstable, youth-oriented, or suitable only for discussion of online identity and register
vax	0	0	The item received no direct selection or rejection in Q10–Q11. However, P1 described *vax* in Q13 as a comparatively accessible item for B1 learners. Its limited discussion therefore indicates low salience in these particular responses, not demonstrated low pedagogical value

Note: Counts reflect direct item mentions in Q10 and Q11. The second evidence column includes avoidance, caution, and restricted-use judgments. Participants may appear in both columns when an item was considered useful for one purpose but unsuitable for another. Counts are provided for transparency, not as statistical prevalence estimates, and the instructional roles were developed interpretively rather than assigned through formal participant ranking. All items except *aura farming* were official Words of the Year; its shortlisted status and full item provenance are reported in Table 2.

The overlapping evidence for *gaslighting*, *post-truth*, and *polarization* demonstrates that pedagogical suitability depended strongly on learner age, proficiency, course purpose, and sensitivity. The limited discussion of *vax* should not be interpreted as evidence of low pedagogical value. Although no participant selected or rejected it directly in Q10 or Q11, P1 identified it in Q13 as a comparatively accessible item for B1 learners. One possible interpretation is that its salience had declined by the 2026 data-collection period because the item was strongly associated with the pandemic and Oxford's 2021 selection. Another possibility is that the interview responses were drawn more strongly toward the newer AI- and platform-related items in the stimulus list. However, the present data cannot establish why most participants did not discuss *vax* individually. The study therefore treats it as an under-discussed item rather than assigning it a low-value pedagogical category.

Taken together, the evidence supports a provisional and context-dependent framework rather than a fixed classification. The distinction among productive, guided-discussion, receptive-cultural, and caution-only roles reflects not only lexical meaning

but also register, appropriateness, instructional purpose, and risk of misuse (Nation, 2022; Rets, 2016).

Finding 4. Proposed Integration Through Critical Digital Literacy Tasks

The fourth finding shows that teachers saw strong potential for using Words of the Year in critical digital literacy activities. Recurring proposals included discussion-based, reading-based, project-based, and analysis-based tasks rather than traditional vocabulary drills. This pattern was especially clear for words connected to online manipulation, AI-generated content, misinformation, and emotional reaction. P1 stated that *rage bait* could help students notice that some posts are "designed to make people angry," while *slop* could help them evaluate "AI-generated articles, images, or videos." P5 argued that *slop* captures "the problem of low-quality AI-generated content," while *rage bait* captures "emotional manipulation in online engagement economies." P12 similarly noted that these words could help students ask critical literacy questions such as "Who created this content?", "What is its purpose?", and "What evidence supports it?" Teachers suggested activities such as Word-of-the-Year debates, digital detective tasks, critical reading of headlines, media audits, AI-output evaluation, micro-lesson design, and digital literacy guides. These activities show that contemporary vocabulary can become a tool for analysis, not merely a set of definitions.

This finding is consistent with recent critical digital literacy research. Recent studies emphasize that critical digital literacy involves the ability to evaluate online sources, interpret digital texts, recognize credibility problems, and participate responsibly in digital communication (Fadilah, 2023; Razak et al., 2022; Rini & Nabhan, 2023; Silvhiany et al., 2021). The teachers' responses closely match this orientation because they used vocabulary to help learners evaluate digital texts, platform behavior, emotional framing, credibility, and AI-generated content. In many EFL contexts, vocabulary teaching is still associated with memorization, translation, and exam preparation. However, the growing use of generative AI in language education has created new reasons for connecting vocabulary teaching with AI literacy, source evaluation, text-quality judgment, and responsible digital communication (Barrot, 2023; Godwin-Jones, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2026; Li et al., 2025; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). The present study suggests a broader pedagogical direction: contemporary vocabulary can support critical reading, media analysis.

Cross-Theme Synthesis: Lexical Currency Does Not Equal Pedagogical Priority

Across the four themes, the broader contribution is the distinction between lexical currency and pedagogical priority. Dictionary recognition gave the items visibility and documented meaning, but did not automatically justify classroom inclusion. P2 noted that dictionary selection gave a word "some credibility" but did not mean that every word should be taught, while P18 emphasized that "teachers need criteria, not just word lists." The accounts therefore suggest a two-stage process: dictionary selection provides a reason to notice an item, whereas teachers determine whether and how it should be used by considering recurrence, transferability, learner proficiency and maturity, register, cultural and emotional sensitivity, curricular or assessment relevance, instructional purpose, and risk of misuse. Current visibility may therefore justify receptive attention or guided discussion without requiring productive mastery.

The four instructional roles extend the receptive–productive distinction by incorporating lexical appropriateness, register awareness, lexical syllabus design, and instructional risk. Productive vocabulary involves controlled use; guided-discussion vocabulary permits scaffolded, topic-specific use; receptive cultural vocabulary emphasizes recognition and sociocultural interpretation; and caution-only vocabulary covers sensitive, unstable, or potentially pejorative items. These roles also support critical

language awareness and reflect teacher cognition because their application depends on learners, course objectives, institutional expectations, and probable classroom consequences rather than on permanent properties of individual words (Borg, 2003; Fairclough, 1992; Nation, 2022). They should therefore be understood as provisional and permeable.

Instructional context further shaped these judgments. IELTS and EAP accounts emphasized examination relevance, academic register, and reading value; secondary-school accounts placed greater weight on learner age, curriculum coverage, and sensitivity; adult and vocational contexts prioritized practical or workplace relevance; and bilingual or project-based settings allowed stronger links with digital-literacy inquiry. Participants also suggested that familiarity with online discourse varied across younger learners, adults, and teachers, while dictionary recognition increased perceived legitimacy without guaranteeing teachability. Because institutional groups were not systematically compared and teacher digital literacy was not objectively measured, these patterns are presented as contextual illustrations of reported familiarity and confidence rather than established between-group differences.

Alternative Interpretations and Methodological Caution

Several alternative interpretations should be considered. Presenting the items as dictionary Words of the Year may have positively framed participants' evaluations by conferring lexical legitimacy and cultural importance. The prominence of critical digital literacy may also partly reflect the stimulus list, which included several expressions related to AI-generated content, misinformation, emotional manipulation, and online identity. In addition, asynchronous written interviews allowed reflection but may have encouraged carefully edited or professionally desirable responses. Because the study did not include classroom observations, learner data, or a separate follow-up interview round, it cannot determine whether reported judgments correspond to enacted classroom practice. These possibilities do not invalidate the findings, but they limit claims based on self-reported written accounts (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This study examined Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of dictionary Words of the Year and related contemporary vocabulary as possible resources for vocabulary teaching and critical digital literacy. Regarding Research Question 1, the participant accounts characterized these items as potentially valuable but optional and context-sensitive resources. Their value lay primarily in connecting vocabulary learning with current cultural, social, and digital discourse. However, dictionary recognition was treated as a reason to notice and evaluate an item rather than sufficient evidence that it should receive classroom priority.

Regarding Research Question 2, teachers' reported judgments drew on learner proficiency, age and maturity, register, cultural and emotional sensitivity, instructional purpose, curricular or assessment relevance, transferability, and risk of misuse. The accounts also supported a provisional distinction among productive vocabulary, guided-discussion vocabulary, receptive or cultural-awareness vocabulary, and vocabulary requiring caution. These roles should not be interpreted as fixed classifications or universally shared judgments. They represent an analytical synthesis of 18 heterogeneous teacher accounts, and the same item may serve different instructional roles across learner groups, courses, and institutional settings.

Regarding Research Question 3, teachers proposed activities involving AI-generated content, online manipulation, misinformation, emotional framing, source evaluation, register analysis, and responsible digital participation. They also identified challenges involving limited instructional time, learner readiness, teacher familiarity,

sensitive meanings, unstable usage, and possible interpersonal misuse. The study therefore contributes a preliminary framework for evaluating contemporary vocabulary rather than evidence that the proposed practices or instructional roles are pedagogically effective. Actual classroom implementation, learner uptake, productive use, retention, engagement, and misuse were not observed or measured. Future classroom-based research is needed to test the framework with learners and determine how particular items function across proficiency levels and teaching contexts.

RECOMMENDATION

Several recommendations can be drawn from the findings. First, EFL teachers may consider integrating Words of the Year selectively rather than adding them to vocabulary lessons simply because they are current or dictionary-endorsed. The preliminary tiered framework may guide selection**.** Words with broad academic, civic, or social relevance may be introduced as productive or discussion vocabulary for intermediate and advanced learners. Digital-culture words may be used for media literacy, AI literacy, and online discourse analysis. Informal, unstable, or youth-slang items should normally be introduced only as cultural notes or register-awareness examples. This approach can help learners understand contemporary English without encouraging inappropriate or superficial use.

Second, teaching materials should provide explicit register and usage guidance. Each selected item should be accompanied by information such as formal, informal, slang, academic, online discourse, media discourse, receptive only, or suitable for productive use. Materials should also include safe examples, context-rich sentences, short authentic texts, and warnings about possible misuse. This is especially important for words related to sensitive topics, such as *gaslighting*, *post-truth*, and *polarization*, because these items may involve emotional, political, or interpersonal meanings. Third, Words of the Year may be addressed through guided tasks rather than isolated definitions. Recommended activities include headline comparison, media audit, AI-output evaluation, vocabulary debate, digital detective tasks, project-based presentations, reflective writing, and register-classification tasks. These activities can help students move from meaning recognition to critical interpretation and responsible language use.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Thinking, accessed July–August 2026) to support language editing, organization, and alignment with the journal template. All outputs were reviewed, revised, and verified by the author. ChatGPT was not used to generate participant responses, fabricate quotations, conduct independent coding, determine themes, create unverified references, or make final interpretive decisions. No confidential interview texts, participant names, workplaces, or other direct identifying information were submitted to the AI system. All interview evidence reported in the manuscript is anonymized and identified only by participant codes P1–P18.

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