
Lexical Issues in English Language Learning and Teaching at The University Level in Lahore

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Abstract

This research examines the intricate and multifaceted lexical challenges faced by students and teachers in the ESL classroom at a university in Lahore, Pakistan. The research examines the impact of obstacles arising from the interference of their mother tongue (Urdu), restricted early exposure to English, and the lack of systematic vocabulary instruction on academic communication and learning. A qualitative research methodology was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with nine participants, comprising both students and teachers, to capture both broad and nuanced opinions of language learning and teaching experiences. The thematic analysis of the data reveals that the principal concerns voiced by students pertain to long-term retention, contextual application, and the conversion of passive language into active vocabulary; these issues adversely impact class engagement and comprehension. Teachers identify prevalent errors in collocation, register, and contextual word usage, along with the shortcomings of traditional rote learning methods. The results underscore the imperative for pedagogical transformation towards interactive, context-driven methodologies, including extensive reading, digital resources, and communicative practices. This study suggests that overcoming these lexical challenges necessitates the use of integrated systemic solutions in curriculum design and targeted professional development, aimed at enhancing vocabulary acquisition and teaching efficacy in Pakistani higher education.

Introduction

Lexicology is the study of words which is the aspect of linguistics. It pays attention to their structure, meaning, origin, composition and application in a language (Jackson and Amvela, 2000). In simple terms, lexicology is the study of words. Principal factors of lexicology consist of. Word meaning (semantics) - formation of meaning through words (denotations (direct meaning), connotations (emotional/associative meaning)). Word formation - the process of creating new words (prefixes, suffixes, compounding, blending, borrowing, etc.). Etymology - semantic history and origin of words. Vocabulary system - pattern of organization and association of words (synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, polysemy). Stylistic use - how words are used differently in various context (formal, informal, literary, scientific). Lexical relations - pattern of existence of words, meaning networks, hyponymy (rose flower), collocation (Jackson and Amvela, 2007).

Lexicology can feel both easy and difficult, depending on how you approach it. Even when learning the lexicology of one's first language (L1), it can be challenging to understand the lexical aspects of vocabulary and meaning. Therefore, it becomes even more difficult to study the lexicology of a second language (L2), where learners often face numerous lexical issues—especially students whose major is not literature or linguistics. Lexical issues have existed throughout history and across languages, and they generally refer to challenges related to words, vocabulary, and meaning in communication. The most common ones include polysemy, homonymy, synonymy and near-synonymy, borrowings and loanwords, slang, jargon, register

problems, semantic change over time, neologisms, and cross-linguistic lexical gaps (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). Since communication is central to human interaction, learning lexicology is crucial. From the very beginning of language use, people have been facing such lexical issues; however, as societies progress and languages evolve, these issues also change over time. In the modern era, current lexical challenges include neologisms, slang, borrowing, semantic shifts, translation gaps, inclusive language, and AI-related vocabulary. While these issues make communication dynamic and adaptive, they also create confusion and complexity for learners and speakers alike (Cruse, 2011).

Normal human beings face many lexical issues, but when it comes to students, the challenges are often more pronounced. If these issues occur in their first language (L1), they are easier to handle since learners use the same language at home and in their social surroundings. However, when dealing with a second language (L2), which they may only use in universities or educational institutions, the problems become more difficult to overcome. University students face lexical issues such as difficult academic vocabulary, subject-specific jargon, borrowings and global English, rapid neologisms (especially technological terms), idioms and slang in informal settings, polysemy in academic terms, and inclusive language change (Nation, 2013).

Not only do students face these lexical issues, but teachers also encounter challenges in their teaching methodology. If the teacher's L1 is the language of instruction, it is easier for them to teach effectively. However, if the language is the teacher's L2, the task becomes more complex, as sometimes the teacher's own understanding of lexical concepts may not be clear. In such cases, teachers must first clarify their own knowledge and then find appropriate methods to make learning easier for students (Schmitt, 2010).

In Lahore's universities, students and teachers face lexical challenges mainly due to mother tongue interference, limited exposure to English, and difficulties with academic vocabulary. Because the majority of students in Pakistan attend Urdu-medium schools, their early years of study are in Urdu and, therefore, they usually enter university without having a good foundation on English language, leading to the constant lexical issues in the university (Mahboob, 2003).

Collocations, spelling and form of words are areas that learners mostly have problems with and the teachers have difficulty in choosing and describing appropriate vocabulary. The unsystematic use of vocabulary in curriculum and the speed at which new vocabulary develops is also part of the issue as it retards effective mastery and teaching of English in the universities of Lahore (Rahman, 2002).

Literature Review

The vocabulary knowledge is the basic principle of communication and Comprehension in English as Second Language (ESL) learners, and therefore, Lexical competence is crucial to their success. In the Pakistani university setting, where English Language is used as an L2, and the medium of instruction, lexical problems have a critical impact on the academic and communicative achievements of the students (Rahman, 2018). The problems students usually encounter comprise the lack of a sufficient vocabulary, the misuse of the words, And the inability to get the contextual meaning (Nation, 2013).

These restrictions in lexicon do not allow them to convey ideas, understand Academic literature, and engage in dialogues. Khan and Mansoor (2020) state that The effects of lexical problems go beyond the linguistic performance, and influence Confidence, motivation and overall academic performance of learners attending ESL classes. Also, as noted by Laufer (1997), when it comes to the learning of a second language one of the key Causes of communication breakdowns is the lack of vocabulary knowledge, which is why the issue of lexical difficulty belongs not only to students but also to Teachers and their pedagogical practices. The Vocabulary teaching in most of the Pakistani universities is still taught using traditional Grammar-translation and rote memorization (Mahmood and Qureshi, 2019).

These techniques lay more emphasis on word lists and the literal meanings and not on the Active and meaningful Usage of Vocabulary. Educators also face huge classes, the lack of teaching resources, and the lack of training in communicative teaching Methods (Ali, 2021). The teaching of the lexicons therefore tends

to be more mechanical than interactive; The result is the end of surface learning of vocabulary without in-depth lexical knowledge. All these Challenges have complicated the process of the teacher assisting the students to develop long-term lexical Competence. There are several strategies that have been proposed and implemented to help overcome these lexical Challenges in ESL classrooms. It has been reported that communicative And task-based learning methods play a significant role in providing students with the opportunity to apply new words to meaningful contexts (Hussain and Alam, 2022).

Contextual guessing, dictionary, extensive reading and Vocabulary notebooks are some of the strategies that have been found to be effective in enhancing lexical acquisition by learners (Schmitt, 2010). The multimedia tools, peer work and real-life communication Tasks are also used by teachers to ensure that the lexical retention is robust. However, the success of these strategies largely Depends on factors such as learner motivation, language exposure, and teacher Guidance. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that integrates both explicit and Implicit vocabulary instruction is necessary to address lexical issues effectively in Pakistani ESL classrooms.

There is a critical need to investigate effective, context-specific pedagogical strategies to address the persistent lexical issues faced by both students and teachers in the universities of Lahore, problems that are rooted in mother-tongue interference and limited early exposure to English, and which ultimately hinder academic success. A significant gap remains in understanding the pervasive nature and efficacy of coping strategies from combined perspective of teachers and students..

Objectives

- To investigate the impact of lexical issues in ESL class.
- To investigate the lexical issues in L2 while teaching and learning at university level In Pakistani Class
- To find the strategies to overcome the issues.

Research Questions

- What are the lexical issues in L2 while teaching and at university level in Pakistani class.
- How do lexical issues affect L2 teaching and learning among university students in Pakistan?
- How can teachers and learner cope up with these lexical issues ad L2 learners .

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data from a randomly selected sample of 9 participants. Participants were both students and teacher s who deal with vocabulary related work on daily basis, were contacted via professional networks. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained, ensuring participants were aware of their rights and the study's ethical protocols. The interviews, which were audio-recorded for accuracy but alter were manually transcribed as well, were also guided by a set of open-ended questions using probe and prompt.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred after approximately at fourth interview of each students and teachers, as subsequent interviews no longer yielded new thematic information. At this point, recruitment and interviewing ceased. The recorded data was then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and report prominent patterns in the participants' experiences. The interviews which I asked are below:

For Students:

1. What's the most common method for learning new English vocabulary for your courses?(e. G, making lists, using flashcards, reading or watching while using social media, trying to use it in a sentence).
2. Think about a time you learned a new word and used it successfully. What helped you remember and feel confident enough to use?

3. What do you do outside the classroom to improve your vocabulary? (e. G, use any app like Duolingo or any app to learn vocabulary).
4. What skill is mostly affected by your vocabulary difficulties; understanding lectures, participating in lectures, understanding textbooks and writing assignments?
5. What's the biggest challenge you face when trying to learn new vocabulary ? (Remembering it , understanding context , having enough opportunities) .

For Teachers:

1. Beyond simple word definitions, what are the most frequent types of vocabulary errors your students make? (e.g, Wrong preposition, Incorrect
2. How do you perceive the impact on Limited vocabulary on their ability to participate in class discussions and present complex ideas.
3. Many studies criticise rote memorization in your context what role if any, does memorization play and what are its limitations.
4. What strategies you explicitly recommend to your students for improving their vocabulary outside the class? (For example , multiple apps like duolingo or other vocabulary apps.
5. Have you incorporated any digital tool in your class while teaching vocabulary. If yes then which one and how successfully?
6. If you could change anything about how vocabulary is taught at university level here , what would it be?

Findings

Interview for Students:

Theme	Codes	Insight for Interviews
Vocabulary Learning Methods	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading (Books, Newspapers) 2. Traditional Methods (Lists, Dictionary, Flashcards) 3. Use in Sentences 4. Digital & Social Media Tools 	Participants employ a diverse range of methods. Reading authentic materials like literature and newspapers is highly valued for learning in context. Traditional methods (dictionary, flashcards) are still common, often supplemented by using new words in sentences. Social media and specific apps are frequently used for informal, daily learning.
Strategies for Retention & Confidence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contextual Use (in sentences/presentation) 2. Repetition and Practice Visualization & Association 3. Seeking Synonyms/Antonyms 	Successfully remembering and using a new word is linked to active application. Students feel confident after using a word correctly in a real-world context like a presentation or writing. Techniques like visualization, finding synonyms, and repeated use help move words from short-term to long-term memory.
External Resources for Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social Media (Instagram, Facebook pages) 2. Language Learning Apps (Duolingo) 3. Online Dictionaries 	Learning occurs extensively outside the classroom. Students actively curate their learning by following educational pages on social media. While apps like Duolingo are used, dedicated online dictionaries with examples and exercises are considered particularly valuable for deeper understanding.
Impact of Vocabulary Deficits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hindered Class Participation Speaking & Fluency Issues 	A lack of vocabulary most directly impacts speaking skills and class participation, leading to a loss of confidence. Students report difficulty forming long,

	2. Difficulty Understanding Lectures/Texts	complex sentences and tend to repeat simpler words. Understanding lectures and textbooks is also affected when unfamiliar terminology is used without explanation.
Challenges in Vocabulary Acquisition	1. Long-Term Memorization 2. Lack of Daily Use Opportunities 3. Contextual Understanding	The primary challenge is not initial learning but long-term retention, especially for complex words not used in daily conversation. Students struggle to keep words active in their memory without regular, meaningful practice. Understanding the nuanced context for certain words is also a noted difficulty.
Role of Native Language	1. Translation as a Learning Aid 2. Interference in Memorization	The native language (Urdu) plays a dual role. It is used as a scaffold to grasp meanings through translation. However, it is also perceived as a source of interference, making it harder to memorize English vocabulary directly.

Interview for Teachers:

Themes	Codes	Insights for Interviews
Common Vocabulary Errors	1. Lack of Collocation 2. Incorrect Word Choice for Context 3. Use of Informal Language in Formal Work 4. Punctuation & Grammatical Errors	The most frequent errors are not simple definition mistakes but more complex issues of usage. Students struggle with word collocations, selecting the right synonym for a specific context, and distinguishing between formal and informal registers, often due to the influence of social media.
Impact of Limited Vocabulary	1. Hinders Articulation of Complex Ideas 2. Reduces Class Participation & Confidence 3. Creates a Barrier to Academic Expression 4. Leads to Over-reliance on Simple Words	Teachers unanimously agree that a limited vocabulary is a major barrier. It directly prevents students from articulating complex thoughts, stifles participation in discussions due to shyness and lack of confidence, and results in writing that is simplistic and lacks academic rigor.
Role of Memorization	1. Useful for Foundational Vocabulary 2. Insufficient without Contextual Practice 3. Criticized for Cramming, Not for	Teachers have a nuanced view. Rote memorization is seen as a necessary starting point for learning individual words but is heavily criticized as a primary strategy. Its key limitation is that it doesn't teach contextual use. Effective learning requires moving beyond memorization to frequent, practical application.

	Learning Words 4. Should Evolve into Practical Application	
Recommended Learning Strategies	1. Extensive Reading 2. Using Digital Tools & Apps 3. Active Communication in English 4. Contextual Learning (e.g., through passages)	The most frequently recommended strategy is extensive reading to see words in context. Teachers also encourage using digital tools (apps, online dictionaries) and, crucially, practicing spoken English outside the classroom to transition vocabulary from passive to active knowledge.
Use of Digital Tools	1. YouTube/Vlogs from Native Speakers 2. Specialized Websites (e.g., British Council) 3. Online Dictionaries with Exercises 4. Corpus-Assisted Language Teaching	Teachers use a variety of digital tools, from recommending native speaker vlogs on YouTube to using specialized academic websites and dictionaries that offer games and exercises. Some are experimenting with advanced methods like corpus-based learning to expose students to real-world language use.
Desired Changes in Pedagogy	1. Dedicated Vocabulary-Building Lessons 2. Project-Based and Interactive Learning 3. A Shift from Passive to Active Learning 4. Increased Communicative Activities	Teachers feel vocabulary is currently not taught explicitly enough at the university level. They advocate for a systemic shift towards interactive methods, including dedicated lessons, project-based work, and role-playing activities that force students to actively use new words in meaningful contexts.

Conclusion:

Concisely, the lexical issues are bi-dimensional, which are grave to the English language learning process by university students of Lahore. Students particularly those whose mother language is Urdu struggle to cope with challenges due to lack of sound foundational skills, academic terminology, terminology in subject areas and the rapid change in terminologies. They are also increased by lack of immersive exposure and interference of mother tongues.

The other major challenges to teachers especially those who are not native speakers of English are conceptual clarity and proper pedagogies of teaching vocabulary. The first of these systemic issues is the fact that most curricula do not have a systematic approach on teaching vocabulary.

All this eventually hinders good learning and communication. All these problems can be successfully overcome with the help of intentional strategies that reinforce the background of the knowledge of English among students, introduce systematic and contextual vocabulary training into the programs, and support teachers in their activities. Under these precautions, the universities would be placed in a better position to

equip the students as well as the teachers with the dynamism that exists in the lexical world and hence create more successes in the acquisition of English language and academic performance.

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