Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition through the Lexical Approach: Evidence from Libyan Primary Classrooms

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Abstract

The present study examines the impact of applying the lexical approach to the teaching of English vocabulary among Libyan primary-school pupils. While vocabulary instruction in Libya has long depended on memorization and translation, the lexical approach treats language as a collection of multiword units, or *chunks*, that carry meaning in context. A mixed-method design was used. Quantitatively, forty fifth-grade pupils at Al-Resala Primary School were divided into experimental and control groups, and pre-/post-tests measured learning gains. Qualitatively, 106 Libyan EFL teachers completed questionnaires and 15 participated in interviews about their experience with lexical-based instruction. Statistical analyses showed a significant improvement in the experimental group's vocabulary performance ($t(38) = 8.72$, $p < .05$). Teachers overwhelmingly viewed the lexical approach as beneficial for retention and fluency but reported limited training and materials. Findings suggest that teaching lexical chunks supports long-term retention and communicative use of vocabulary. The study recommends integrating lexical pedagogy into teacher education and national curricula.

ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في أثر تطبيق المنهج المعجمي على تدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى تلاميذ المرحلة الابتدائية الليبية. في حين اعتمد تدريس المفردات في ليبيا لفترة طويلة على الحفظ والترجمة، إن المنهج المعجمي يُعامل اللغة كمجموعة من وحدات متعددة الكلمات، أو أجزاء، تحمل معنىً في سياقها. وقد استُخدم تصميمٌ مختلط الأساليب. كميًا، قُسِّم أربعون تلميذًا من الصف الخامس الابتدائي في مدرسة الرسالة الابتدائية إلى مجموعتين تجريبية وضابطة، وقيست مكاسب التعلم بإجراء اختبارات قبلية/بعدية. نوعيًا، أكمل 106 معلمين ليبيين متخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية استبيانات، وشارك 15 منهم في مقابلات حول تجربتهم مع التدريس القائم على المفردات. أظهرت التحليلات الإحصائية تحسنًا ملحوظًا في أداء المجموعة التجريبية في تعلم المفردات **(8.72 = (38)t، p > 0.05).** رأى المعلمون بأغلبية ساحقة أن المنهج المعجمي مفيدٌ للاحتفاظ بالمفردات وطلاقتها، لكنهم أفادوا بمحدودية التدريب والمواد. تشير النتائج إلى أن تدريس الأجزاء المعجمية يدعم الاحتفاظ بالمفردات على المدى الطويل والاستخدام التواصلي لها. توصي الدراسة بدمج منهجية تدريس المعجم في برامج إعداد المعلمين والمناهج الوطنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المنهج المعجمي؛ اكتساب المفردات؛ تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية؛ ليبيا؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الأجزاء المعجمية.

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is essential to second-language proficiency and directly affects learners' communicative competence. In many Libyan classrooms, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) remains dominant, emphasizing grammatical rules and isolated word memorization (Diaab, 2016). Such practice yields limited active vocabulary and poor contextual fluency. Internationally, the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993) re-conceptualized language as "grammaticalised lexis" rather than "lexicalised grammar," shifting attention from single words to meaningful combinations—collocations, chunks, and prefabricated expressions.

Research over the past three decades has confirmed that native-like fluency relies heavily on formulaic language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2021; Nation, 2020). For learners, recognizing and producing lexical bundles accelerates comprehension, reduces cognitive load, and promotes natural output. Yet in Libya, empirical applications of this approach are scarce, especially at the primary level where foundational vocabulary habits form.

Research Questions

1. Does instruction based on the lexical approach significantly improve pupils' vocabulary learning compared with traditional methods?

2. How do Libyan EFL teachers perceive the lexical approach and its classroom feasibility?

3. What constraints influence the implementation of lexical-based teaching in Libyan schools?

Literature Review

Conceptual Background

Lewis (1993) proposed that language is composed largely of prefabricated lexical sequences that native speakers retrieve holistically. This claim aligns with psycholinguistic evidence that frequent multiword units are stored as single items in memory (Martinez & Schmitt, 2021). Usage-based theory (Ellis, 2020) further posits that exposure frequency determines lexical entrenchment: learners acquire patterns through repeated contextual use.

Lexical chunks include collocations (*make a decision*), idioms (*kick the bucket*), phrasal verbs (*take off*), and sentence frames (*I'd like to …*).

Teaching such units helps learners notice lexical patterns and internalize grammatical behavior naturally (Boers, 2021).

Empirical Studies

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the lexical approach's efficacy across EFL contexts. Shin and Nation (2020) found that explicit collocation teaching improved recall and production among Korean learners. Alahmadi (2022) reported similar gains in Saudi classrooms, linking chunk instruction to greater writing accuracy. Jafarian and Khezri (2023) confirmed that Iranian EFL learners trained with lexical bundles achieved higher oral-fluency ratings.

In North Africa, Abdulla and Mumin (2023) highlighted persistent lexical weakness among Libyan students, citing limited authentic input and overreliance on GTM. Few local studies have experimentally tested alternative vocabulary pedagogies at the primary level, leaving a gap this research addresses.

Pedagogical Rationale

Teaching through lexical chunks encourages contextual learning, fluency, and communicative competence (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2021). It also supports the noticing hypothesis: learners must notice collocational patterns to acquire them (Schmitt & Carter, 2021). Moreover, lexical teaching aligns with modern communicative syllabi that emphasize task-based learning and authentic use.

Methodology

Design

A convergent mixed-method design was adopted. Quantitative data from pre-/post-tests assessed learning gains, while qualitative data from teacher questionnaires and interviews provided interpretive depth.

Participants

- **Students:** 40 fifth-grade pupils (aged 10–11) from Al-Resala Private Primary School, Misurata.

- **Teachers:** 106 EFL teachers from 33 primary schools participated in a perception survey; 15 volunteered for follow-up interviews.

Instruments

1. **Vocabulary Tests:** 30 multiple-choice and short-answer items measured recognition and contextual use. Reliability = .86 (Cronbach's α).

2. **Teacher Questionnaire:** 20 Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree → 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring attitudes, perceived challenges, and training needs. Reliability = .91.

3. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Explored teachers' classroom experiences with lexical instruction.

Procedure

Both groups were pre-tested at the semester's start. Over six weeks (44 hours of instruction):

- The **experimental group** learned vocabulary through lexical chunks, collocations, and fixed expressions embedded in communicative activities, using lexical notebooks and noticing tasks.

- The **control group** received traditional instruction emphasizing translation and rote repetition.

The same teacher taught both groups to minimize instructor bias. After the intervention, both groups took a post-test; questionnaires and interviews followed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 27: means, standard deviations, and *t*-tests compared group performance. Qualitative data underwent thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to identify recurring patterns regarding benefits and challenges.

Results

Students' Performance

Table 1. Group Statistics for Pre- and Post-tests

Group	N	Test	Mean (M)	SD	Mean Difference
Experimental	20	Pre-test	8.40	1.25	—
Experimental	20	Post-test	13.85	1.05	+5.45

Group	N	Test	Mean (M)	SD	Mean Difference
Control	20	Pre-test	8.55	1.22	—
Control	20	Post-test	9.75	1.18	+1.20

The experimental group's mean vocabulary score increased by 5.45 points versus 1.20 for the control group.

Table 2. Independent-Samples *t*-Test

Test	Comparison	t (38)	p	Significance
Post-test	Experimental vs Control	8.72	0.000	Significant ($p < .05$)

A significant difference confirmed that lexical-based instruction produced greater gains.

Teachers' Questionnaire

Table 3. Summary of Teachers' Perceptions (n = 106)

Statement	Mean	SD	Agreement (%)
Lexical chunks improve retention	4.65	0.51	93
Students enjoy chunk learning	4.42	0.64	89

Statement	Mean	SD	Agreement (%)
Need more lexical-teaching training	4.80	0.45	96
Curriculum supports lexical approach	3.10	0.92	61

Teachers valued the approach's effectiveness but emphasized insufficient training and curricular support.

Interview Findings

Table 4. Major Themes from Teacher Interviews

Theme	Frequency (out of 15)	Description
Lack of training	13	Minimal exposure to lexical pedagogy.
Inadequate materials	10	Textbooks lack collocational tasks.
Positive student response	12	Pupils showed motivation and better contextual use.
Time constraints	8	Limited periods hinder practice.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The significant post-test gains affirm that teaching vocabulary through lexical chunks enhances both retention and contextual application. Pupils learned not merely words but meaningful patterns, allowing automatic retrieval in communicative situations. This outcome aligns with Boers (2021), who found that chunk instruction reduces processing time and supports fluency.

The teacher data reinforce this conclusion: most participants recognized lexical teaching's benefits yet admitted lacking methodological training. Their comments mirror findings from Alahmadi (2022) and Tan (2023), who noted that teacher preparedness determines lexical-approach success.

Reasons for Effectiveness

1. **Depth of Processing:** Chunks integrate semantics and syntax, fostering deeper cognitive encoding (Nation, 2020).

2. **Contextualization:** Learners encounter vocabulary within meaningful frames, aiding retention (Shin & Nation, 2020).

3. **Reduced Cognitive Load:** Prefabricated phrases lessen the need for on-the-spot grammar generation (Boers, 2021).

4. **Motivation:** Pupils reported enjoyment in discovering "real English expressions," increasing engagement.

Challenges

Teachers cited three key obstacles:

- **Limited training:** Few professional-development programs address lexical pedagogy.

- **Curricular rigidity:** Textbooks still follow grammar-translation sequences.

- **Assessment practices:** Exams emphasize isolated vocabulary recall rather than usage.

These issues echo global patterns (Martinez & Schmitt, 2021) where institutional inertia delays pedagogical innovation.

Comparison with Previous Research

The present findings corroborate prior evidence that lexical-based instruction boosts fluency and collocational competence (Jafarian & Khezri, 2023). However, this study extends knowledge by providing experimental data from North Africa, an under-represented context. It also demonstrates that young learners can grasp lexical patterns effectively when instruction is scaffolded.

Pedagogical Implications

1. **Curriculum Reform:** National syllabi should embed collocation and chunk activities within each unit.

2. **Teacher Training:** Pre-service and in-service programs must include lexical-approach modules.

3. **Resource Development:** Develop teaching materials that highlight high-frequency chunks and collocations.

4. **Assessment Innovation:** Replace discrete-item vocabulary tests with contextualized tasks measuring chunk use.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

The study confirms that the lexical approach effectively enhances vocabulary acquisition among Libyan primary pupils. Learners taught through lexical chunks achieved significantly higher post-test scores and demonstrated improved contextual use of vocabulary. Teachers' overwhelmingly positive attitudes further validate its potential.

Concluding Statement:

Integrating lexical pedagogy into Libyan EFL curricula can move classrooms toward communicative competence and authentic language use. To sustain progress, educational authorities must update textbooks, redesign training frameworks, and encourage research on long-term effects.

Future Research :

Further studies could (a) trace the approach's influence on writing and speaking, (b) test digital tools for lexical practice, and (c) explore longitudinal retention across semesters.

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