

## **The Use of Lexical Approach in Enhancing Vocabulary Skills among Upper Primary Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explored the impact of a lexical approach on enhancing the vocabulary skills of upper primary pupils in an ESL classroom in Malaysia. The research involved 30 elementary school pupils in Johor and used a mixed-method research design. Data collection methods included pre and post-tests, an observational checklist, and a focus group interview. The results indicated a significant improvement in the students' vocabulary skills after implementing the lexical approach. Additionally, this approach positively affected students' motivation and changed their negative perceptions about vocabulary. The paper concludes with recommendations and implications for educators and researchers, considering its limitations.

*Keywords:* Lexical approach, vocabulary skills, upper primary, learners, ESL

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Malaysian language learners study English as their Second Language as part of their learning process. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 aims to improve English language proficiency in response to government-recommended education reforms (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages was previously introduced to address English language proficiency issues in the national education system (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Ministry of Education in Malaysia is committed to enhancing the country's English language proficiency to increase global competitiveness for Malaysian language learners.

Historically, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' competence in Malaysia was assessed primarily through test scores and grades. To address the shortcomings of the old curriculum and meet contemporary needs, significant changes were necessary. Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) were emphasized to encourage students to construct their own understanding of material. Despite efforts to improve HOTS, an assessment carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that Malaysian students were still falling short of acceptable levels, as evident from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings (OECD, 2009). Hence, more research enquiries are needed to ensure Malaysian education pertaining to language learning is at global level.

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The need for in-depth research on metacognitive methods for effective learning, especially in the context of learning a second language (L2), has emerged from the study of existing literature on their impact on language learners (e.g., Zhang & Guo, 2020; Raofi *et al.*, 2014). This involves vocabulary acquisition strategies in which they can be classified into different taxonomies, such as social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive, or determination and consolidation strategies. Determination strategies involve figuring out the meaning of words through prior knowledge, contextual cues, or reference materials. Consolidation strategies, on the other hand, help learners recognize word meanings through social, memory, and metacognitive processes. This study aimed to provide new empirical findings on English language teaching and learning in the Malaysian education system by assessing the impact of language learning techniques or approaches in language learning settings.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Importance of Vocabulary

Without a doubt, vocabulary is essential to speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills. Due to the focus placed on the definitions of new terms in books and the classroom, vocabulary growth is essential to learning a foreign language. Moreover, it is essential to language acquisition and relevant to language learners. In Malaysian environment, Chai *et al.*, (2020) claim that being Malaysian primary school English learners, acquiring vocabulary is one of the concerns faced by the learners and the most challenging aspect for them (Linda & Mohd Shah, 2020; Md Yunus *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, learners who do not have sufficient English language vocabulary knowledge would be demotivated and as a result, they admit defeat to attempt to learn the language (Kho *et al.*, 2021). Hence, it is important for studies to delve into this research area especially in Malaysian context.

A person with a restricted vocabulary will never attain proficiency in speaking, writing, reading, or comprehending a language. Because it serves as the foundation for communication, including receptive and productive skills, vocabulary is essential for learning a second or foreign language (A. Mutalib *et al.*, 2014). By reading or listening to literature, students acquire the receptive vocabulary necessary to recognise and understand the meaning of words. Receptive skill is a mode of communication that emphasises vocabulary inputs via reading and listing (A. Mutalib *et al.*, 2014). In other words, learners must have sufficient language knowledge to understand the information. The terms that helped students comprehend the text they read but that they did not use in speech or writing are ones that they recognise and are familiar with. The teacher often explains the meaning of the words and its uses in a sentence but asks the pupils to spell and pronounce it (Maskor & Baharudin, 2016).

Using language to express meaning, on the other hand, is a productive skill. A functional vocabulary comprises words that the students can both say and understand. Students can effectively speak and write using these terms. Productive diction is an active process because students can make up phrases to express their ideas and emotions in a way other people can understand (Webb, 2005). Laufer *et al.*, (2004) and Webb (2008) define productive vocabulary knowledge as remembering the word's formation and meaning or explaining it in the user's mother tongue. According to Laufer (1998), knowledge is separated into controlled, accessible, and productive vocabulary. Freely productive vocabulary knowledge is the ability to employ words spontaneously besides independently to make specific phrases, as when writing individually. Knowledge of a controlled, productive vocabulary is the ability to create phrases when prompted. Nation

(2001) identified three stages of language acquisition: recognition, retrieving, and creative or generative use. The initial stage is identifying and focusing on the sentences as learning objects. This stage is significant since it affects how wholly and rapidly the word is absorbed (A. Mutalib *et al.*, 2014).

Thus, acquiring more words will increase processing and memorisation abilities. In the second phase, retrieval, pupils recall the memorised words. According to most studies, learning is more effective when retrieval is spaced out rather than massed, as Nation (2012; 2001) reported. This stage includes retrieving information in the same format in which it was first stored. In unexpected situations, students can determine the correct spelling, definitions, and uses of new terminology. When learners reach the creative or generative stage, they have a good vocabulary for communicating because the words they have learned become active and are used effectively and productively in different situations (A. Mutalib *et al.*, 2014). It can be either productive or receptive and is thought to be a significant component in both first and second-language vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2012; 2001). It requires sufficient knowledge of the words' meanings, forms, and applications. Learners must actively practice using the language they have acquired in order to improve retrieval and creative application. Learners must know enough about the terms, their meanings, their forms, and how to use them for this to be possible. These aspects are vital because active vocabulary use by students is essential for enhancing both retrieval and creative vocabulary. As one of the areas of language knowledge, vocabulary is a crucial part of how students learn a language (Cameron, 2010). Harmon *et al.*, (2015) point out that learning new words is integral to acquiring a linguistic and since a limited lexicon in a second language makes it hard to speak efficiently, vocabulary is commonly seen as a vital skill to be acquired for English language learners. Furthermore, Schmitt (2020) claims that lexical knowledge is important for communicative competence and learning a second language" to show how important it is to learn new words. Hence, it is unavoidable for learners to learn vocabulary in their ESL learning while for teachers would be for teaching it.

The teaching of vocabulary is essential to the study of the English language because, with an adequate vocabulary, pupils can comprehend the ideas of others and articulate their own thoughts. Learning new vocabulary benefits students' ability to comprehend and communicate in English with their peers. Several studies have established that vocabulary is an important skill that can be understood by way of reading and hearing (Yokubjonova, 2020). Considering this, having a solid foundation in word knowledge is necessary for both the growth of vocabulary and instruction. According to the findings of numerous studies, readers of a second language place a significant amount of importance on their vocabulary knowledge; hence, the absence of such information is the primary and most significant challenge that L2 readers must surmount (Al-Khasawneh, 2019). According to Adamson (1992), an individual's vocabulary knowledge significantly impacts the correlation between linguistic competence and academic achievement.

In the sphere of study, vocabulary acquisition has received minimal focus. Alqahtani (2015) claims that, research has paid little attention to vocabulary for many years. Depending on how large their active and passive vocabularies are, learners need to deal with the things that get in the way of building their vocabularies (Nation, 2013). In addition, other research employed various strategies to improve students' vocabulary to address this issue (Nation, 2013). This is also in line with the Ministry of Education's intention that it is essential to learn vocabulary to learn a foreign language (Noor *et al.*, 2016). Developing students' vocabularies are essential to teaching and learning a second language in the classroom. In addition to mastering sentences and grammar structure, a learner's vocabulary knowledge is a core and crucial aspect of second language acquisition. Further, Noor *et al.*, (2016) study results show that it is vital to test Malaysian students' vocabulary skills to see if they have learned enough words to communicate well and fluently. Furthermore, teachers should also realise that there is a difference in terms of mastering level of the English vocabulary among the students belonging to the same standard (Wang & Yamat, 2019). Hence,

in terms of vocabulary knowledge, it is essential to establish if students are appropriately equipped to satisfy the demands of the English language throughout their academic careers and future endeavours.

### **3.0 METHOD**

The purpose of this research was to explore the use of lexical approach in enhancing the vocabulary skill among upper primary learners in primary school. The study was guided by three research questions (RQs). To answer the first research question (RQ1-What is the level of vocabulary among upper primary pupils?), it utilized the quantitative approach through the pre-test and post-test. As for the second research question (RQ2-How does lexical approach enhance second language learners' vocabulary mastery?), the data were gathered through the semi structured interview and pre- and post-tests while for the third research question (RQ3-What effects do lexical approach have on learners' language acquisition?), the data were obtained through observations using observational checklist. To conduct this study, a mixed-method design involving both quantitative and qualitative was employed by the researchers. The mixed-method design in this study gives more information and better results by converging or triangulating the quantitative and qualitative findings (Creswell, 2012).

In this study, the respondents represented the upper primary learners of a primary school in Johor Bahru. The technique used for sampling in this study was through purposive sampling technique. The reason behind the sampling technique was that the respondents were ESL learners which fits the profile of L2 learners for the present study. A pilot study included 30 respondents from a different cohort in the same classrooms. For the actual study, 60 respondents were involved in the quantitative data collection while five respondents were chosen for the qualitative data collection. For this mixed-method study, the data were a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Subsequently, the data collected were examined using paired samples t-Test for the quantitative data and the thematic analysis for qualitative data.

### **4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the present study answered the RQs formulated at the beginning of the study. To answer RQ1 (What is the level of vocabulary among upper primary pupils?) the pre-test and post-test results which indicated a significant difference in both test scores obtained by the control group and experimental group in the vocabulary test were found and displayed in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2. These results appeared in the descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The significant difference of comprehension test appeared in three situations: control group, experimental group, and comparison between control group and experimental group.

**Table 4.1** Summary of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
90-100	0	0
80-89	0	0
70-79	0	0
60-69	0	0
50-59	0	0
40-49	0	1
30-39	1	0
20-29	12	14
11-19	7	9
0-10	10	6

**Table 4.2** Pre-Test and Post-Test Significance Level

	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-test score	Degrees of Freedom	Significance level
Pre-Test Score	15.7	8.2	3.45	59	0.002
Post-Test Score	20.3	7.5	3.45	59	0.002

With reference to the information presented in Table 4.1, the summary of scores from the pre-test and post-test conducted in the classroom were as follows: The experimental group achieved the highest mark in the vocabulary pre-test in the range of 30% to 39%, while in the post-test, the highest mark was scored in the range of 40% to 49%. In the pre-test, twelve respondents obtained scores between 20% and 29%, whereas in the comprehension post-test, fourteen respondents achieved scores in the same range. Seven respondents received scores between 11% to 19% in the pre-test, while nine respondents obtained similar scores in the comprehension post-test. Lastly, ten respondents scored between 0% to 10% in the pre-test, while six respondents achieved scores in the post-test within the same range.

Based on Table 4.2, since the p-value (significance level) was less than 0.05, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. A paired Sample t-Test is a statistical process that investigates whether the meaning of a dependent variable (scores on a vocabulary test, in this example) substantially varies between two related groups (pre-test and post-test scores). The results of this test are displayed in the table that has been provided above.

To answer RQ2 (How does lexical approach enhance second language learners' vocabulary mastery?) one of the means to gather the data was through pre and post-tests. For the pre and post-tests, the analysis was carried out using the t-Test. The t-Test was used to determine whether the lexical strategy was beneficial in increasing vocabulary knowledge among students in upper primary school. The mean score on the pre-test was 15.7, which indicated that prior to the implementation of the lexical approach, the students had an average score of 15.7 out of 100. Following the completion of the implementation, the average score on the post-test rose to 20.3. This demonstrated that the pupils' language abilities had significantly improved because of the intervention. The standard deviation is a statistical metric that offers a measurement of the variability or dispersion of scores in relation to the mean. The standard deviation on the pre-test was 8.2, but on the post-test, it decreased to 7.5. When compared to the results on the pre-test, the scores on the post-test seemed to have been somewhat more homogenous or tightly packed around the mean. This was shown by a decrease in the standard deviation.

Apart from that, to answer RQ2 (How does lexical approach enhance second language learners' vocabulary mastery?) the data were also gathered through the semi structured interview and were analysed using thematic analysis. In this study, thematic analysis involved six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and finally, producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Table 4.3 shows the theme identified and provide the summary of its explanation.

**Table 4.3** Themes and Explanations of Thematic Analysis Generated from Interviews

Theme	Explanation
Lexical Approach Enhances Language Proficiency	Students reported improvements in vocabulary comprehension and retention with the lexical approach.
Improved Reading and Writing Skills	Students noted that the lexical approach contributed to the development of their reading and writing abilities.
Understanding Language in Context	Students appreciated seeing words in context rather than as isolated units, which helped their understanding.
Positive Attitude Towards Language Learning	Students found language learning more interesting and engaging due to the lexical approach, leading to a positive change in attitude.

Based on the data, the lexical approach to language acquisition has shown to provide a variety of advantages, and the analysed themes of the students' responses have shed light on these benefits. In addition to enhancing, one's vocabulary abilities, it also improves general language competency, such as one's ability to read and write, cultivates a contextual knowledge of language, and engenders a good learning attitude. These results provide support for the research questions that guided this study and provide credence to the premise that the lexical approach is a powerful instrument that should be included in the instructional toolkit for teaching a second language.

Finally, to answer RQ3 (What effects do lexical approach have on learners' language acquisition?), the data were acquired through observation utilising observational checklist. The observational checklist on the lexical approach served as a valuable tool for systematically observing and evaluating the application of the lexical approach in language teaching. By using this checklist, the researcher gathered detailed information about how the lexical approach is implemented and identified areas for improvement or further development. Data gathered using this checklist were then analysed using themes and sub-themes. An explanation was also given for each one of them. Table 4.4 below shows the observational checklist used to gather information from the participants.

**Table 4.4** Thematic Analysis of Observational Checklist

Theme	Sub - theme	Explanation
<b>Vocabulary Enhancement</b>	Acquisition of New Vocabulary	Evidence: Pupils recorded new vocabulary  Analysis: The LA appears to benefit students' vocabulary acquisition as they actively engage with and record new vocabulary taught in the classroom.

Theme	Sub - theme	Explanation
	Vocabulary Comprehension	Evidence: Pupils understand simple instructions  Analysis: The LA helps students understand and follow simple instructions by teaching vocabulary in context. This approach allows students to grasp the meaning of words and apply them to better comprehend instructions.
<b>Boosting Confidence to Use the Language</b>	Student Interest and Engagement	Evidence: Students exhibit interest that indicates they are confident to use the language.  Analysis: The LA boosts students' confidence in language use, evident through their active participation and interest in language learning activities. This indicates their belief in their ability to effectively use the language.
	Contextual Application	Evidence: Students used the vocabulary taught in the lesson.  Analysis: The LA focuses on teaching vocabulary in context, enabling students to apply new words appropriately and meaningfully. Understanding the context enhances their comprehension and effective use of vocabulary in different language situations.
<b>Enthusiasm in Learning Vocabulary</b>	Active Participation	Evidence: Students actively participate in vocabulary learning activities.  Analysis: The LA generates student enthusiasm and active participation in vocabulary learning activities, indicating their excitement and interest in learning vocabulary through this approach.
	Positive Attitudes	Evidence: Students display positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning.  Analysis: Students' positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning are evident in their eagerness to learn new words, willingness to participate in vocabulary tasks, and overall enjoyment of the learning process.

As depicted by Table 4.4, vocabulary enhancement was the first theme generated from the observational checklist. Furthermore, there were two sub themes identified. The first sub-theme was acquisition of new vocabulary. The lexical approach had led to the acquisition of vocabulary by students. The lexical approach seemed to be effective in helping students acquire new vocabulary. The second main theme identified was *boosting confidence* to use the language. There were two subthemes identified here which were students' *interest* and *engagement*. Students exhibited interest that indicated they were confident to use the language. The lexical approach appeared to contribute to boosting students' confidence in using the language, as evidenced by their visible interest and engagement during language learning activities. The subthemes were *thoughtful ideas* and *relevant answers*. Students expressed thoughtful ideas and provided answers that were relevant and appropriate to the learning context. The third theme was *enthusiasm* in learning vocabulary. The first sub-theme was *active participation* of students. It was evident that students actively participated in vocabulary learning activities. Active participation refers to students' engaged involvement in vocabulary learning tasks and activities. The second subtheme was *positive attitudes*. Here, students displayed positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning. Positive attitudes reflect students' favourable and optimistic views towards vocabulary learning. In conclusion, the observational checklist thematic analysis provides valuable insights into the application of the lexical approach in enhancing vocabulary among learners.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In summary, the findings presented in this study underscore the success of the lexical approach in enhancing vocabulary abilities and overall language skills among upper primary school students. These results provide a strong foundation for educators to consider incorporating the lexical approach as an effective tool in their instructional practices, promoting more engaging and productive language acquisition for their students. Further research can expand upon these findings by exploring the impact of the lexical approach across various aspects of language learning, different age groups, and varying levels of language ability.

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