

DEVELOPING LEXICAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A REVIEW WITH REFERENCE TO UZBEKISTAN'S UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Lexical competence — a learner's capacity to recognise, understand, and deploy words appropriately in authentic communication — has moved from the margins of language pedagogy to a recognised core component of linguistic competence. This review synthesises the theoretical foundations and empirical literature on lexical competence in English language teaching, examining its principal dimensions of breadth and depth (Nation; Schmitt; Read) and the pedagogical and teacher-related factors that shape its development. It then focuses on the comparatively under-explored Uzbek context, comparing approaches across Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent State Medical University, Tashkent State University of Economics, and Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. The review identifies academically oriented, English-for-Specific-Purposes, and cross-linguistic models, alongside persistent challenges including textbook reliance and limited classroom-based research, before proposing directions for further inquiry.

Keywords: *lexical competence, vocabulary acquisition, English language teaching, breadth and depth, second language learning, lexical approach, Uzbekistan, higher education, communicative competence, vocabulary instruction*

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, vocabulary occupied a peripheral position in language pedagogy, frequently subordinated to grammar and treated as a by-product of structural mastery rather than a competence in its own right. This neglect has since been decisively reversed. Vocabulary is now widely regarded as a core component of a language user's overall linguistic competence, having attracted serious scholarly attention only from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, when researchers began to focus on it with considerable interest (Vasu & Dhanavel, 2015). The term commonly used to capture this dimension of language ability is *lexical competence* — a learner's capacity not merely to recognise words but to deploy them appropriately, fluently, and meaningfully in authentic communication. This review surveys the theoretical foundations and empirical literature on lexical competence in English language teaching, and then narrows its focus to how this competence is conceptualised, taught, and researched within the higher-education institutions of Uzbekistan, comparing several of the country's leading universities.

The aim of the review is threefold: first, to clarify what lexical competence entails and how scholars have framed its principal dimensions; second, to synthesise findings on how lexical competence is developed and assessed in the second-language classroom; and third, to bring this body of work into dialogue with the comparatively under-explored Uzbek context, where English has become a compulsory and increasingly prioritised subject. Although the literature draws principally on research into English as a foreign language, many of the issues identified apply to language learners across a range of institutional and national settings.

Defining Lexical Competence

Lexical competence has been defined in a variety of overlapping ways. At its simplest, it concerns a learner's knowledge of grammar and vocabulary items and the ability to use reference



resources such as dictionaries effectively (Olajide, 2021). More expansively, Onishchuk (2020) describes lexical competence as a complex of lexical and semantic groups and terminology, together with the capacity to use these resources in discourse so as to communicate successfully in any social environment and achieve a communicative goal. Burgos (2020) adds a developmental and social dimension, arguing that lexical competence is formed through the regular use of particular lexical constructions, which arise from an individual's personal knowledge and are shaped by their social environment.

A recurring theme in the literature is the historical subordination of lexis to grammar. Within the influential communicative competence frameworks of Canale and Swain (1980) and the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), grammar has conventionally been listed first and lexis second, a sequencing that Caro and Rosado (2017) suggest has given grammar undue prominence in the English classroom. This hierarchy was challenged most forcefully by the lexical approach. Lewis (1993) famously argued that language consists of grammaticalised lexis rather than lexicalised grammar, repositioning multi-word chunks and collocations at the centre of language learning. The lexical approach emphasises words and word combinations as the core elements of language and values the systematic recycling of lexical items, with Nation noting that vocabulary may need to be encountered ten to twelve times before it is securely learned (EBSCO, n.d.). Conceptual clarity is also a matter of terminology. As Caro and Rosado (2017) observe, the terms *vocabulary*, *lexis*, and *lexicon* are frequently conflated. Traditionally, vocabulary referred simply to the list of words in a language or in an individual's repertoire, whereas lexis encompassed all the layers of lexical knowledge required to understand and produce language, and the mental lexicon denoted the cognitive store of words and the information associated with them. Lexical competence, in this richer sense, is therefore not an all-or-nothing attribute but a graded, multidimensional construct.

Dimensions and Assessment of Lexical Competence

The most widely accepted framework for understanding vocabulary knowledge divides it into two principal dimensions: breadth and depth (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Schmitt, 2014). Breadth, or vocabulary size, refers to the quantity of words a learner knows; depth refers to the quality of that knowledge — the learner's grasp of a word's paradigmatic and syntactic relationships, its collocations, and its contextual usage (Frontiers, 2023; Read, 2000). Nation (1990, 2001) provided the foundational framework in this area, classifying word knowledge into the categories of form, meaning, and use, each subdivided into receptive and productive aspects.

The relationship between breadth and depth has generated extensive debate. Schmitt (2014) reviewed the research and concluded that, although some scholars argue there is little real difference between the two constructs, regression analyses typically show that depth adds unique explanatory power over and above size alone. Empirical studies have repeatedly linked both dimensions to performance across the four skills: vocabulary size and depth have each been shown to predict reading comprehension, listening, and speaking ability (Milton, 2010; the ScienceDirect study of L2 speaking, 2021). González-Fernández and Schmitt (2020) have further explored the order in which different components of word knowledge are acquired, refining Nation's framework and underscoring that lexical competence develops incrementally and unevenly.

Measurement remains methodologically challenging. Vasu and Dhanavel (2015), drawing on a cross-sectional study at Assam University, discuss how the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge can be operationalised through instruments such as the Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001) and word-association tasks. Schmitt, Nation, and Kremmel (2020) have called for more rigorous test development and validation, noting that the field's instruments have not always kept pace with its theoretical sophistication. The broad consensus is



that any adequate assessment of lexical competence must capture more than raw word counts; it must also probe how well, and how flexibly, words are known.

Developing Lexical Competence: Pedagogy and the Teacher

If lexical competence is multidimensional, its development requires correspondingly varied pedagogy. Research grounded in depth-of-processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) suggests that techniques such as semantic mapping, categorisation, and synonym–antonym contrast promote richer encoding than rote memorisation. A recent classroom study in Uzbekistan reported that cognitive and communicative task-based activities — grouping words by theme or function, highlighting subtle meaning differences, and combining semantic mapping with contextual usage tasks — enhanced learners’ retention, lexical accuracy, and fluency, helping students remember not only meanings but also collocations and appropriate usage (Mukhammedjanova et al., 2026).

The teacher is a decisive variable in this process. Echoing the broader argument that “it is teachers that make the difference” (Hattie, 1999), studies of lexical development have found that teacher behaviour is closely associated with learners’ lexical outcomes. Olajide (2021), in a correlational study of secondary-level language teachers, found a significant positive relationship between teacher behaviour and learners’ lexical competence, with teacher behaviour significantly predicting lexical attainment. Supportive teacher–student relationships, the study argued, offer learners the motivation and engagement on which vocabulary growth depends. This finding resonates with Griffiths’ (2023) reminder that the teacher — too often the neglected stakeholder — is, after the learners themselves, the single largest contributor to variance in achievement.

Lexical Competence in Uzbekistan’s Universities

English occupies a prominent place in Uzbekistan’s education system: it is a compulsory school subject, and university students are typically required to attend two to four hours of foreign-language classes each week (Hasanova & Shadieva, 2008). Following a series of national reforms intended to internationalise higher education, the development of learners’ lexical and communicative competence has become a stated priority across Uzbek institutions. The literature emerging from this context, while still comparatively thin, increasingly addresses how lexical competence is formed at the tertiary level.

5.1 Institutional approaches and a cross-university comparison

Uzbek scholars have argued that the development of lexical skill is staged, with its more advanced phases located in higher-education institutions, where, under a competence-based approach, the English teacher is expected to prepare students to absorb large quantities of information, master key concepts and terms, and analyse, compare, and generalise (Otaboeva & colleagues, in the Zien Journals study, 2021). The institutional picture, however, varies considerably across the country’s universities, and a small but growing comparative literature allows several contrasts to be drawn.

At **Uzbekistan State World Languages University**, the country’s flagship institution for language teacher education, lexical competence is cultivated within dedicated philology and foreign-language faculties whose programmes integrate the study of English grammar, literature, and theoretical linguistic subjects (Uzbekistan State World Languages University, n.d.). The breadth of specialised departments here supports an academically oriented, depth-focused model of lexical development in which words are studied in their literary and theoretical contexts.

By contrast, **Tashkent State Medical University** exemplifies an English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) orientation. A recent study based there examined how the systematic integration of professional texts, genre-based pedagogy, and targeted digital support fostered lexical depth and transfer within terminologically dense professional discourse (Frontiers, 2026). With a



sample of 84 learners, the study found that vocabulary development was most successful when instruction aligned lexical learning with disciplinary discourse, although the authors cautioned that the specific institutional context limited generalisability. This represents a markedly more specialised, profession-driven conception of lexical competence than that pursued at the World Languages University.

A third model emerges from broader multilingual research conducted across **Tashkent State University of Economics**, **Uzbekistan State World Languages University**, and **Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages**. A 2023–2024 study involving 180 students and 45 instructors at these three institutions reported that lexical interference accounted for roughly 31% of total errors, manifesting primarily through literal translation in 92% of lexical-error cases (worldlyjournals.com, 2025). The study's comparison of a control group taught through traditional methodology with an experimental group taught through a developed multilingual methodology suggested that lexical accuracy improved when instruction explicitly addressed cross-linguistic transfer — a finding with direct implications for the Uzbek, where, as the study of cross-linguistic influence notes, features such as English prepositions are frequently transferred onto the Uzbek case system, or *kelishik* (Zien Journals, 2022).

5.2 Persistent challenges

Across these institutions, several common obstacles recur. Researchers report a heavy reliance on textbooks, with many educators rarely venturing beyond them, which constrains the authentic, context-rich input on which depth of lexical knowledge depends (Rashidova, in the Neliti study on pragmatics, n.d.). There is also a documented shortage of classroom-based observational research within Uzbekistan, with one author lamenting that universities devote comparatively little attention and funding to such inquiry, leaving students and teachers short of locally relevant evidence on effective English teaching (Zien Journals, 2022). These conditions echo the international concern that the teacher's own needs and the practical realities of the classroom remain under-researched (Griffiths, 2023).

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

This review has traced lexical competence from its historical marginalisation to its current status as a central, multidimensional construct in second-language education. The literature converges on several points: that lexical competence comprises both breadth and depth; that its development is incremental and best supported by varied, processing-rich pedagogy; and that the teacher is among the most influential factors in learners' lexical outcomes. The Uzbek evidence, though still emerging, reveals a productive diversity of institutional approaches — the academically oriented model of Uzbekistan State World Languages University, the ESP-driven model of Tashkent State Medical University, and the cross-linguistic, multilingual emphasis evident at Tashkent State University of Economics and Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. Several directions for further research follow. First, comparative, classroom-based studies across Uzbek universities would help establish which lexical pedagogies transfer best across disciplines and proficiency levels. Second, the under-researched influence of Uzbek–English cross-linguistic transfer on lexical accuracy merits systematic investigation. Third, given the documented reliance on textbooks, research into the integration of authentic and digital materials could clarify how depth of lexical knowledge might be more effectively developed. Addressing these gaps would not only strengthen lexical competence among Uzbek learners but also enrich the wider international literature with evidence from a context that has, until recently, remained on its margins.



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