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Enhancing Students' Lexical Competence Through Systematic Use of Authentic Texts: a Task-based and Corpus-supported Methodology

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Abstract.
Lexical competence is a central dimension of communicative competence because it enables learners to interpret meanings, select appropriate expressions, and sustain interaction across contexts. However, vocabulary instruction in many EFL settings still depends on decontextualized lists and pedagogically simplified texts, which often restrict learners' exposure to natural collocation patterns, register variation, and pragmatic meanings. This article proposes an improved methodology for developing lexical competence through systematically integrated authentic texts supported by task-based design, lexical recycling, and selective corpus-informed analysis. The paper synthesizes post-2000 research on authenticity, lexical development, and learning from contextual input, and then reports a classroom-based quasi-experimental implementation (12 weeks) with undergraduate EFL learners (B1–B2). The results indicate that students taught with the authentic-text methodology made stronger gains in vocabulary depth and contextual usage than students receiving textbook-centered instruction, with noticeable improvement in collocation accuracy, lexical diversity in writing, and learner motivation. The study concludes with practical guidelines for text selection, scaffolding, corpus-supported noticing, and assessment aligned with international research standards.
Keywords: lexical competence; authentic texts; vocabulary depth; task-based learning; data-driven learning; corpus-assisted vocabulary instruction.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized as a strong predictor of language performance, particularly in reading, listening, and written production. In many EFL contexts, learners demonstrate adequate grammatical control while still struggling to comprehend authentic input or produce fluent discourse due to insufficient lexical resources. This problem is amplified when classroom materials rely heavily on simplified texts and exercises that isolate words from natural discourse.

Authentic texts materials created for real communicative purposes offer learners access to lexical features that frequently remain underrepresented in textbooks: collocations, formulaic sequences, semantic prosody, register shifts, and culturally embedded meanings. Yet the pedagogical value of authenticity is not automatic. Research emphasizes that authentic input must be paired with principled task design and scaffolding to prevent cognitive overload and to convert exposure into durable lexical learning (A. Gilmore, 2007).

1.1. Purpose and research questions

This article aims to develop and justify an improved methodology for lexical competence development through authentic texts and to report evidence from classroom implementation. The study addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent does systematic instruction based on authentic texts improve learners' lexical competence compared with textbook-based instruction?
2. Which dimensions of lexical competence (breadth, depth, contextual appropriateness) show the strongest development under the proposed methodology?
3. How do learners perceive authentic-text instruction in terms of motivation and autonomy?

2. Conceptual framework: Lexical competence as breadth, depth, and contextual use

Lexical competence is not limited to knowledge of word meanings; it includes knowing how words behave in discourse and how they connect to form, meaning, and use. I. S. P. Nation (2001) conceptualizes vocabulary knowledge through multiple components (form–meaning–use), each of which has receptive and productive dimensions. N. Schmitt (2014) further highlights the importance of distinguishing breadth (how many words are known) from depth (how well words are known, including collocation, polysemy, and constraints on use).

A key methodological implication follows: if lexical competence includes register sensitivity and collocational control, then instruction should expose learners to language as it is actually used and should require meaningful processing of lexical items in context rather than repeated definition-matching.

3. Authentic texts in lexical instruction: Benefits and constraints

3.1. Authenticity and pedagogical rationale

A. Gilmore (2007) notes that "authenticity" is multidimensional and includes both the real-world origin of materials and the nature of classroom interaction learners engage in with those materials. Authentic texts can therefore contribute not only lexical input but also communicative relevance and learner engagement when tasks are interactionally meaningful.

3.2. Motivation and perceived relevance

One empirical justification for authenticity comes from motivational research. M. Peacock (1997) demonstrated that authentic materials can increase learner motivation under classroom conditions when compared with artificial materials. For lexical development, this is important because motivation affects persistence, attention, and willingness to engage in deeper processing—conditions that are necessary for durable vocabulary learning.

3.3. Lexical difficulty and the "coverage" problem

A major constraint is lexical density. I. S. P. Nation (2006) showed that high levels of text coverage are necessary for unassisted comprehension, with very large vocabulary demands for authentic reading and listening. This means that using authentic texts requires methodological control: careful selection, staged tasks, and support mechanisms (e.g., glosses, pre-task priming, strategic corpus consultation), rather than simplification that destroys authentic discourse features.

4. Methodological foundation: From exposure to learning

Authentic texts can support lexical competence only when learners are guided to (a) notice lexical patterns, (b) process them deeply, (c) retrieve and reuse them across time, and (d) transfer them into productive performance. The proposed methodology integrates three research-based principles:

1. Task-induced involvement: Vocabulary learning is strengthened when tasks create a need to process lexical items meaningfully (B. Laufer & J. Hulstijn, 2001).
2. Contextual learning and repeated exposure: Incidental learning from reading can occur, but depth gains depend on quality of context and processing (A. Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016; S. Webb, 2008).
3. Corpus-supported noticing: Data-driven learning (DDL) can generate strong effects for vocabulary and grammar learning when appropriately scaffolded. A. Boulton and T. Cobb (2017) reported large overall effects across DDL studies in their meta-analysis, supporting selective corpus consultation as part of lexical instruction.

5. Proposed methodology: The Authentic Text Lexical Competence Cycle

5.1. Overview

The improved framework is designed as a repeatable cycle consisting of:

(1) Text profiling and selection → (2) Pre-task lexical priming → (3) While-task lexical processing → (4) Post-task productive use → (5) Recycling and assessment.

5.2. Text selection criteria

To preserve authenticity while ensuring teachability, the following criteria are used:

- Proficiency alignment: texts matched to learners' CEFR level through lexical profiling and teacher judgment.
- Lexical richness with learnable yield: presence of high-frequency items plus useful mid-frequency collocations.
- Genre and register variability: inclusion of news, interviews, opinion essays, academic short texts, and professional blogs.
- Cultural accessibility: culture-loaded content supported through brief contextual pre-teaching rather than text simplification.

5.3. Task design across three stages

The methodology uses a structured task progression:

Pre-task (Lexical priming and prediction):

Learners activate schema, predict key vocabulary, and complete brief lexical priming activities (e.g., collocation matching, headline-based inference).

While-task (Lexical noticing + inferencing):

Students read/listen with meaning-focused goals, then complete lexical noticing tasks such as:

- identifying lexical bundles,
- inferencing unknown words from context,
- mapping collocations and register markers,
- minimal corpus consultation to verify collocational patterns.

Post-task (Productive lexical use):

Learners produce output that requires controlled but meaningful use of target lexis: summaries, mini-essays, debates, role-plays, or project tasks based on the text's theme.

5.4. Recycling mechanism (spaced retrieval)

After initial learning, the framework requires systematic recycling:

- short retrieval quizzes,
- vocabulary journals with example sentences from new authentic contexts,
- delayed writing tasks reusing target lexis,
- periodic "lexical review lessons" using new authentic texts that recycle prior items.

6. Empirical study: Design and implementation

6.1. Design

A quasi-experimental mixed-method design was employed:

- Experimental group: authentic-text methodology (task cycle + selective corpus support + recycling).
- Control group: textbook-centered instruction (word lists + definition/translation exercises + simplified reading passages).

Instruction lasted 12 weeks, with comparable contact hours for both groups.

6.2. Participants

Participants were 64 undergraduate EFL students (CEFR B1–B2):

- Experimental group: 32
- Control group: 32

6.3. Instruments

Data collection included:

1. Lexical competence pre-/post-tests measuring:
   - o vocabulary breadth (recognition),
   - o vocabulary depth (collocation/polysemy),
   - o contextual use (sentence completion + short writing).
2. Writing tasks (pre/post) evaluated with a lexical rubric (diversity, accuracy, collocational appropriateness, register fit).
3. Questionnaire and interviews exploring learner perceptions of authenticity and autonomy.

(For internationally recognized testing approaches, vocabulary size testing frameworks are commonly associated with I. S. P. Nation & D. Beglar's test design tradition; see

Nation & Beglar, 2007, for a widely used model.)

6.4. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis compared group gains from pre- to post-instruction. Qualitative data (interviews) were thematically coded to identify perceived benefits and challenges.

7. Results

7.1. Quantitative trends

The experimental group showed stronger improvement than the control group in:

- vocabulary depth indicators (collocations and nuanced meaning),
- contextual appropriateness in writing,
- lexical diversity and more precise word choice.

These patterns align with research suggesting that contextualized exposure and guided noticing support depth development more strongly than list-based instruction (A. Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016).

7.2. Learner perceptions

Questionnaire responses indicated that most learners perceived authentic texts as:

- more engaging than textbook passages,
- helpful for understanding "real" usage,
- motivating for independent vocabulary exploration.

These motivational outcomes are consistent with M. Peacock's classroom findings on authenticity and motivation.

8. Discussion

The findings support the methodological claim that authentic texts become pedagogically powerful when they are not used occasionally but are integrated through a structured instructional cycle. The gains observed in depth and contextual use can be interpreted through the lens of task-induced involvement (B. Laufer & J. Hulstijn, 2001): learners repeatedly engaged in meaning-focused processing, lexical decision-making, and output-based retrieval, which plausibly increased retention and transfer.

Additionally, the selective use of corpus tools strengthened learners' awareness of collocation and register. This is compatible with DDL evidence summarized by A. Boulton and T. Cobb (2017), although the present approach intentionally limits corpus demands to avoid overload at B1–B2 levels.

9. Pedagogical implications

1. Shift from "authentic text as extra material" to "authentic text as syllabus core." Authentic input should be planned as a consistent resource, not an occasional supplement.
2. Teach lexical competence as usage knowledge. Design tasks that require collocation choices, register decisions, and pragmatic appropriateness, not only definition recall.
3. Scaffold difficulty through tasks, not by simplifying texts. Authenticity should be preserved while cognitive load is managed by staged activities and support.
4. Integrate corpus consultation selectively. A small number of guided concordance tasks can significantly improve noticing without overwhelming learners.
5. Assess depth and contextual use, not only breadth. Use writing/speaking rubrics that reflect real-world lexical performance.

10. Limitations and future research

Three limitations should be acknowledged:

- the sample size was moderate and context-specific;
- the intervention period (12 weeks) may not capture long-term retention fully;
- the study focused mainly on reading-driven authentic texts; multimodal input (podcasts, video interviews) requires separate analysis.

Future work should include longitudinal designs, delayed post-tests, multimodal authenticity, and corpus-supported feedback systems.

11. Conclusion

This article proposed an improved methodology for developing lexical competence through authentic texts by combining task-based scaffolding, systematic recycling, and selective corpus-informed noticing. Evidence from a classroom implementation suggests that authentic texts, when integrated through a structured cycle, can support vocabulary depth, contextual awareness, and learner motivation more effectively than traditional textbook-centered approaches. The study provides a practical model that can be adapted for university EFL programs and aligned with international research-based teaching standards.

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