

Knowledge of Vocabulary: Tertiary Level Learners' Major Problem in Writing

Tasneem Siraj Mahboob*

Abstract: *Despite twelve years of formal English instruction, Bangladeshi university students exhibit significant deficiencies in lexical application, particularly in writing. This study investigates the causes of this inadequacy and proposes remedial strategies. Utilizing a questionnaire-based methodology, data were collected from 190 undergraduate EFL learners and 40 instructors at various public and private universities. Key findings identify an overreliance on rote memorization, insufficient focus on collocations, and a lack of productive practice as primary causes. The implication is that pedagogical shifts are urgently needed. This paper proposes a structured intervention focused on contextualized learning and frequent assessed writing to bridge the gap between lexical knowledge and proficient use. Implementing this plan is crucial for enhancing students' lexical competence and overall communicative proficiency.*

Keywords: *knowledge of vocabulary, inadequacy, improvement, lexical proficiency*

Introduction

In the globalized academic and professional landscape, English language proficiency is an indispensable asset for socioeconomic mobility in Bangladesh. Despite a compulsory twelve-year English education curriculum, a significant proportion of students enter higher education with profound lexical deficiencies, severely hampering their ability to construct coherent and contextually appropriate written discourse (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Sultana, 2018). This inadequacy transcends mere vocabulary size; it reflects a critical failure in acquiring depth of knowledge—including collocations, synonyms, and register—which is paramount for effective written communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Haider & Akhter, 2022).

The persistence of this issue raises urgent questions about the efficacy of prevailing pedagogical practices. Critics argue that the national curriculum remains entrenched in rote-memorization and grammar-translation methods, which prioritize passive recognition over active application, failing to meet the communicative demands of the 21st century (Karim & Mohamed, 2019; Khan, 2020). A pronounced focus on high-stakes examinations further encourages strategic learning of set phrases rather than fostering genuine lexical competence (Das et al., 2021). While the factors are

* Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka

multifaceted—encompassing pedagogical, sociocultural, and policy dimensions—targeted research on the root causes within Bangladesh's unique EFL ecosystem remains critically underexplored.

This study therefore aims to address this research gap by investigating the determinants of lexical deficiency among undergraduate EFL learners in Bangladesh. Moving beyond identification, the research synthesizes its findings to propose a strategic, evidence-based framework for lexical development to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers.

Literature Review

The foundational role of vocabulary mastery in writing proficiency is well-established. Muncie (2002, as cited in Fallazadeh, 2007) positions lexical expansion as a cornerstone of ESL writing development. This view is reinforced by Morris and Cobb (2004), who posit a direct correlation between vocabulary proficiency and academic success, suggesting vocabulary profilers can serve as predictive diagnostic tools.

Within the Bangladeshi context, the challenges are particularly acute. Arju's (2013) research indicates that 80% of university applicants demonstrate deficient English proficiency, with micro-analyses of writing revealing semantic confusion, erroneous synonym choice, and a crippling lack of diversity. This confirms that the core issue is not the quantity of words memorized but the quality of understanding and the ability to deploy words with precision. Her conclusion—that rote memorization fails to meet practical communicative needs—directly challenges traditional pedagogical methods.

The consequences of this deficiency are severe. Schmitt and McCarthy's (1997) assertion that an extensive vocabulary is pivotal underscores the scale of the challenge. Studies like Ashrafuzzaman and Alam (2018) begin to map a path forward by cataloging autonomous learning strategies—from contextual reading to digital media consumption—employed by tertiary students. However, their focus on first-year students in private universities may not capture wider realities, and the study lists strategies without evaluating their relative efficacy. The literature thus converges on the need to move beyond diagnosis toward implementing and evaluating structured, context-tailored pedagogical interventions.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

According to students:

1. What kind of problems do students face while writing?
2. How does knowledge of vocabulary contribute to improving writing?

3. What are the effective techniques for students to enhance their knowledge of vocabulary?

According to teachers:

1. What are the major difficulties students face while writing?
2. What are the main reasons for students' poor knowledge of vocabulary?
3. How can teachers help students to improve their knowledge of vocabulary?

Methodology

Participants

Participants included 190 first-year undergraduate English majors and 40 teachers, randomly selected from eight private and two public universities in Bangladesh. The teacher cohort consisted of 12 literature specialists, 3 who taught both literature and applied linguistics, and 24 practitioners of ELT, TESOL, Linguistics, and Applied Linguistics. Their teaching experience varied: 32.5% had a maximum of two years, 42.5% had three to eight years, and 25% had nine or more years of experience.

Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected via two separate Google Forms questionnaires (one for students, one for teachers) distributed via email from March to April 2023. The student questionnaire contained thirteen multiple-choice items and two open-ended questions. The teacher questionnaire contained eight multiple-choice items and two open-ended questions.

Data Analysis Quantitative data from multiple-choice questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically.

Findings

A. Student Perspectives

Awareness and Challenges: A large majority of students (87.9%) were knowledgeable about the concept of academic writing (Fig. 1),

3. Are you familiar with the concept of academic writing ?

190 responses

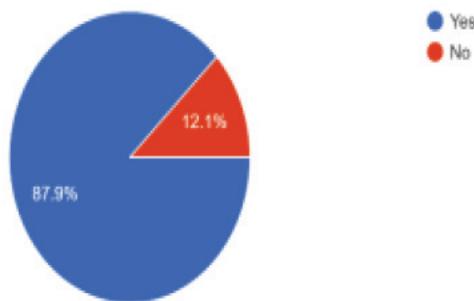


Figure: 1

and 85.8% reported encountering problems while doing it (Fig. 2).

4. Do you encounter any kind of problem /s while writing?

190 responses

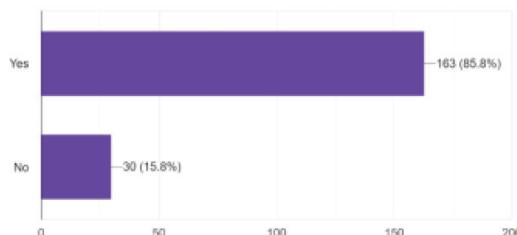


Figure: 2

When writing paragraphs, 57% cited a lack of vocabulary as their primary difficulty, surpassing issues with grammar (49%), coherence (39%), and sentence structure (31.1%) (Fig. 3).

5. If your answer to question number 4 is 'yes', then what kind of problems do you face while writing paragraph? (You may choose more than one option)

190 responses

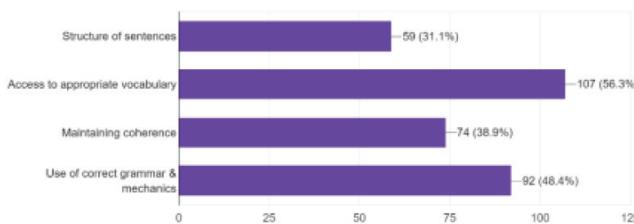


Figure:3

The primary purposes for paragraph writing were examinations (68.9%) and assignments (62.1%) (Fig. 4).

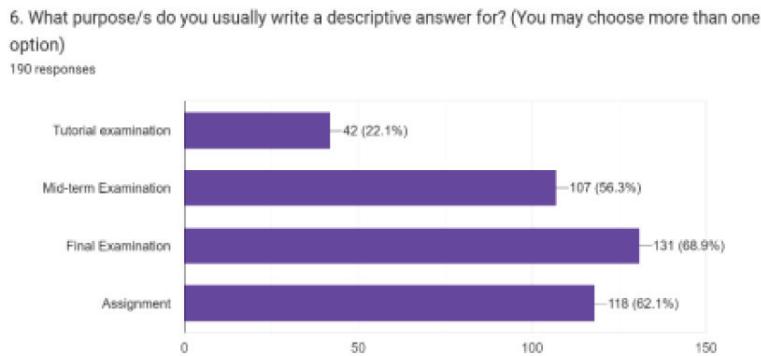


Figure: 4

Vocabulary as the Core Difficulty: Crucially, 60% of students identified “accessing suitable vocabulary/language” as the most difficult aspect of writing, ahead of organizing ideas (44.2%) and using correct grammar (43.7%) (Fig. 7).

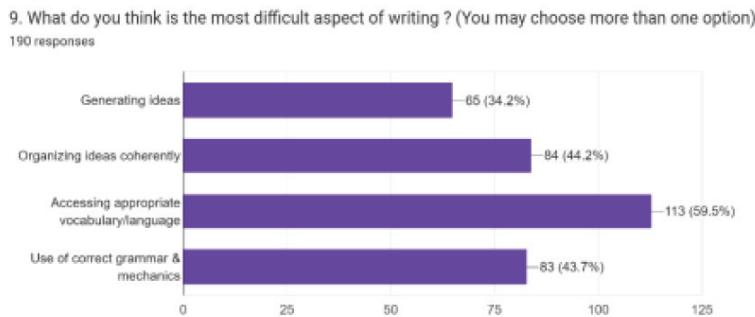


Figure:7

When probed further, 45.4% expressed direct difficulty in accessing appropriate vocabulary, while 36.1% reported a moderate level of difficulty (Fig. 8).

10. According to the level of difficulty, where would you put accessing appropriate vocabulary/language?

183 responses

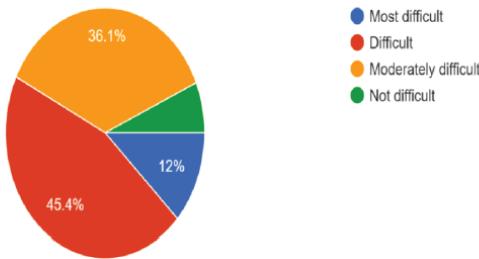


Figure:8

The specific vocabulary challenges included using synonyms/antonyms (66.3%), selecting prepositions (41.6%), using transitions (36.8%), and finding appropriate adjectives (32.6%) (Fig. 9).

11. What category of words do you find difficult to use? (You may choose more than one option)
190 responses

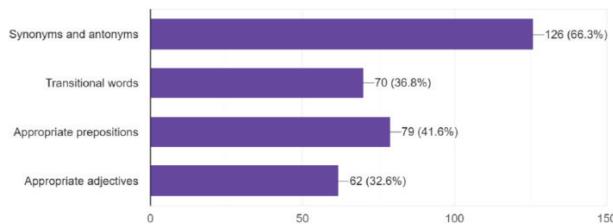


Figure:9

Causes and Proposed Solutions: An overwhelming 94.6% of students believed their vocabulary knowledge could be improved (Fig. 11).

13. If your answer to question number 12 is 'yes', do you think there is still scope of enhancing your knowledge of vocabulary?

186 responses

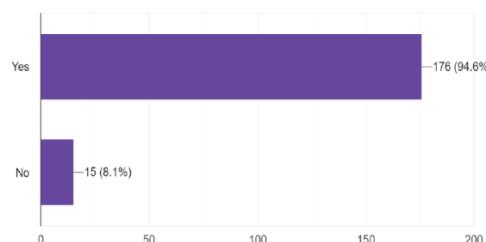


Figure: 11

They attributed their difficulties to a lack of reading habits and insufficient exposure to English. Their suggested improvement strategies, gathered from open-ended responses, included:

- Reading diverse materials (newspapers, fiction, blogs).
- Listening to podcasts, lectures, and news (e.g., BBC).
- Watching visual media (films, shows) with subtitles.
- Using word games (Scrabble, puzzles), dictionaries, and maintaining vocabulary notebooks. Most students(87.8%) reported that university courses had equipped them with new strategies (Fig. 12),

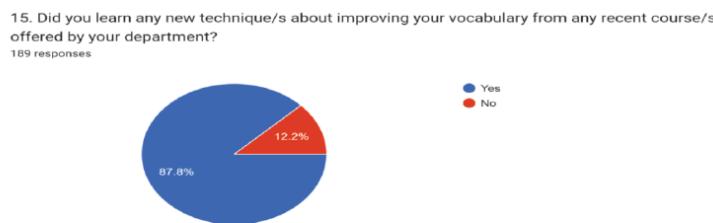


Figure:12

with watching subtitled content (71.3%), listening to lectures (62.4%), and using a dictionary (62.4%) deemed most effective (Fig. 13).

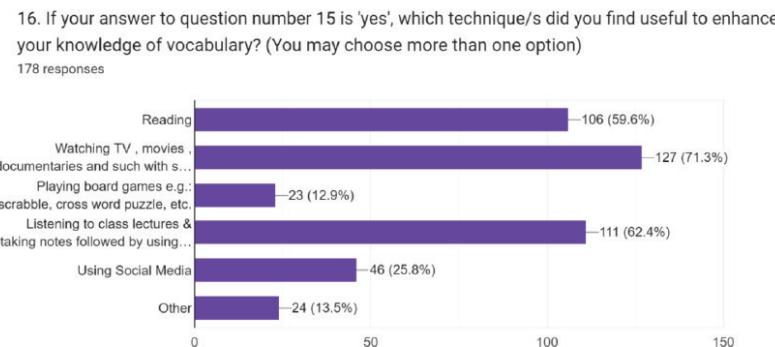


Figure: 13

B. Teacher Perspectives

Observed Student Difficulties: Nearly all teachers (95%) had taught writing recently (Fig. 14).

3. Have you taught any writing course with freshmen students in last two years?
40 responses

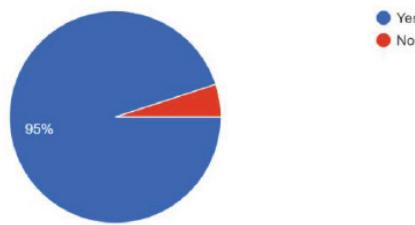


Figure:14

They identified students' main problems as poor sentence structure (86.8%), lack of appropriate vocabulary (65.8%), and difficulties maintaining coherence (63.2%) (Fig. 15).

4. If your answer to question number 3 is 'yes', what kind of problem/s students face with writing?
(You may choose more than one option)
38 responses

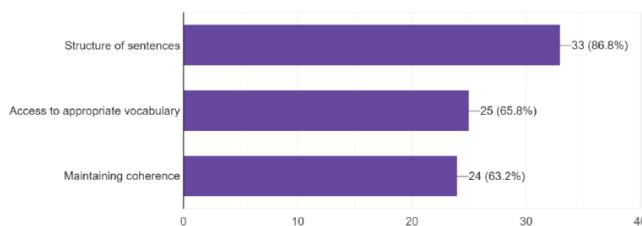


Figure:15

Perceived Causes and Recommended Strategies: Teachers attributed students' vocabulary deficiencies primarily to a lack of reading habits (77.5%) and insufficient exposure to English (67.5%) (Fig. 16).

5. According to your opinion, what do you think is the main reason/s for students' poor knowledge of vocabulary? (You may choose more than one option)
40 responses

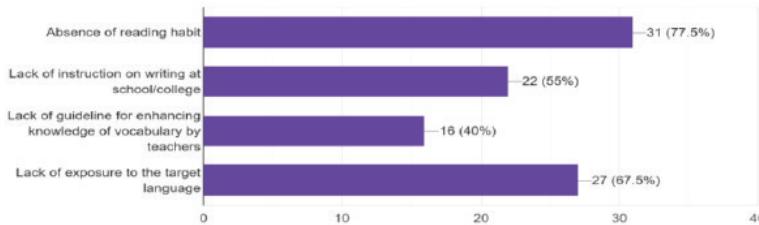


Figure: 16

To address this, they strongly recommended extensive reading (92.5%) and watching visual media with subtitles (85%) (Fig. 17).

6. Do you suggest any of the following technique/s or activity to your students to improve their knowledge of vocabulary? (You may choose more than one option)
40 responses

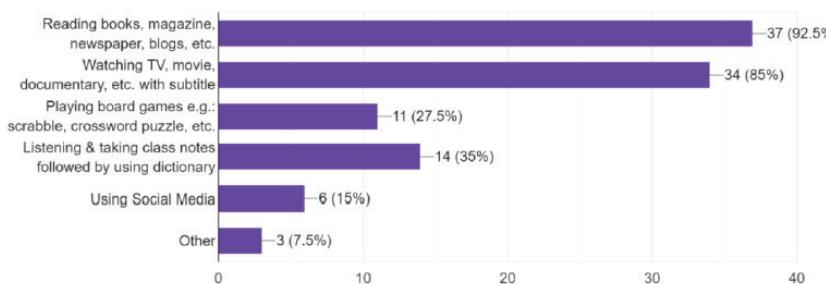


Figure: 17

A significant majority (92.5%) believed enhancing vocabulary directly improves writing skills (Fig. 18).

8. Do you think by enhancing knowledge of vocabulary students can improve writing?
40 responses

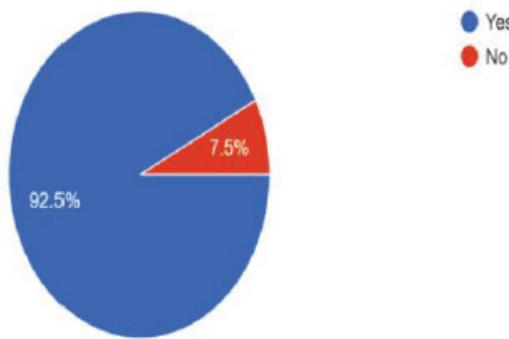


Figure: 18

Their primary method for helping students was providing verbal feedback (37.5%), followed by written feedback and vocabulary quizzes (25% each) (Fig. 19).

9. Which of the followings do you do to help students to improve their knowledge of vocabulary ?
40 responses

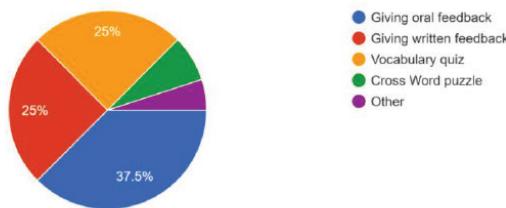


Figure: 19

Discussion

This study investigated the critical impact of vocabulary knowledge on the writing proficiency of Bangladeshi tertiary EFL learners. The findings from both students and teachers converge to identify insufficient lexical knowledge, particularly depth of knowledge like collocations and register, as the most significant barrier to effective writing.

The results directly address the research questions. The primary problem students face is not generating ideas but accessing the appropriate vocabulary to express them (RQ1). Both groups confirm that sound vocabulary knowledge is foundational to improving writing, as it underpins sentence structure, coherence, and overall clarity (RQ2 & Teacher RQ1). The reasons for this deficiency are overwhelmingly linked to pedagogical and experiential factors: an overreliance on rote memorization, a lack of extensive reading habits, and insufficient meaningful exposure to and practice with the target language (Teacher RQ2). This aligns with the criticisms of the traditional curriculum highlighted in the literature review (Karim & Mohamed, 2019; Khan, 2020).

Notably, there is strong agreement between students and teachers on effective remediation strategies (RQ3 & Teacher RQ3). Both cohorts advocate for immersive, contextual, and productive approaches—such as extensive reading, consuming English media with subtitles, and using new words in practice—over passive memorization. This consensus highlights a clear disconnect between the learners' needs and the current pedagogical methods, which appear to prioritize examination-focused, passive learning. The teachers' predominant use of verbal feedback, while valuable, suggests a potential area for development towards more structured, activity-based interventions like the word games and collaborative tasks students found effective.

Conclusion and Implications

This study confirms that lexical deficiency, characterized by a lack of depth of knowledge, remains the principal obstacle to writing proficiency for Bangladeshi university students. The causes are rooted in outdated pedagogical methods that emphasize memorization over application and a exam-oriented system that discourages extensive reading and authentic language use.

The implications are significant. A fundamental pedagogical shift is required, moving from traditional grammar-translation methods to a communicative approach that prioritizes contextualized vocabulary learning. Curriculum designers and policymakers need to integrate strategies both students and teachers find effective: mandating extensive reading programs, incorporating multimedia resources, and designing assessments that reward lexical diversity and accuracy rather than the reproduction of memorized phrases.

Teacher training should focus on equipping educators with tools to move beyond verbal feedback towards implementing engaging, productive vocabulary-building activities in the classroom. Future research could focus on implementing and measuring the efficacy of such a structured intervention program on students' actual writing performance.

References

Alam, M. A., & Ashrafuzzaman, M. (2018). Learning vocabulary at tertiary level: Strategies, techniques and materials. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 8(3), 110–121. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326346675>

Arju, S. (2013). A study on ESL vocabulary acquisition needs and classroom practice: A Bangladeshi context. *Stamford Journal of English*, 6, 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.3329/sje.v6i0.13902>

Baumann, J. F., & Graves, M. F. (2010). What is academic vocabulary? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(1), 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.54.1.1>

Biemiller, A. (2012). Words for English-language learners. *TESL Canada Journal*, 29(6), 198–203. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v29i0.1123>

British Council. (n.d.). *TeachingEnglish*. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Vocabulary and language teaching*. Routledge.

Corona, C., Spangenberger, S., & Venet, I. (1998). Improving student writing through a language rich environment (Publication No. EA029462) [Master's action research project, St. Xavier University]. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED429462>

Donohue, J. (2000). [Review of the book *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice*, by D. Ferris & J. S. Hedgcock]. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(2), 175–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136216880000400206>

Ediger, M. (1999). Reading and vocabulary development. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 26(1), 7–15.

Fallahzadeh, M. H. (2007). A survey of the students and interns' EFL writing problems in Shiraz University of Medical Science. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(3), 49–65.

Gairns, R., & Redman, S. (1986). *Working with words: A guide to teaching and learning vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press.

Jahan, A., & Jahan, N. (2011). Working with vocabulary at tertiary level in Bangladesh. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 2(2), 45–57. <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEP>

Jensen, S. J., & Duffelmeyer, F. A. (1996). Enhancing possible sentences through cooperative learning. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 39(8), 658–659.

Leech, G. (2004). *Meaning and the English verb* (3rd ed.). Longman.

Mahmudah, D. R. (2014). The correlation between students' writing ability and their vocabulary mastery. *Exposure: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Inggris*, 3(2), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.26618/ejpbi.v3i2.837>

Morris, L., & Cobb, T. (2004). Vocabulary profiles as predictors of the academic performance of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainees. *System*, 32(1), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.05.001>

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). Learning vocabulary in another language. Cambridge University Press.

Online Professional English Network (OPEN). (n.d.). OPEN Program. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.openenglishprogram.org/>

Paquot, M. (2010). Academic vocabulary in learner writing: From extraction to analysis. Continuum.

Schmitt, N., & McCarthy, M. (Eds.). (1997). Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy. Cambridge University Press.

Soraya, K., Suparman, U., & Driana, E. (2020). The influence of vocabulary mastery and reflectivity on students writing skill at senior high school. In Proceedings of the 1st International Multidisciplinary Conference on Education, Technology, and Engineering (IMCETE 2019) (pp. 380–383). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200303.080>

Thornbury, S. (2002). How to teach vocabulary. Pearson Education.

Wilkins, D. A. (1972). Linguistics in language teaching. Edward Arnold.

