

# The Effect of Contextual Vocabulary Instruction on Proficiency Level of High School Learners in Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** *This research investigated the effect of contextual vocabulary teaching on high school students' levels of English language proficiency in Ethiopia. Although the national government has attempted to elevate the standards of English teaching, students end up finding it difficult to memorize and use vocabulary, which restricts their overall language ability. The purpose of this research is to establish whether vocabulary teaching in context, rather than decontextualized word lists, enhances secondary school students' language ability. A quasi-experimental design was utilized, with 60 students from two government high schools in Addis Ababa. The participants were allocated to control and experimental groups. The experimental group experienced contextual vocabulary instruction embedded within reading comprehension texts and classroom discussion, whereas the control group underwent traditional vocabulary drills. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to gauge vocabulary learning and language ability. The findings showed that students who were taught contextual vocabulary exhibited statistically significant vocabulary use, understanding, and language fluency improvement over the control group. The findings concur with constructivist learning principles, implying that meaningful usage of language enhances greater understanding. The research emphasizes instructional strategy impact on language acquisition outcomes and suggests curriculum reforms that prioritize context-based vocabulary instruction. Restrictions are short intervention duration and geographical specificity. In practice, the study suggests that in Ethiopia, teacher education and textbook development need to focus on context-embedded vocabulary activities. Socially, enhanced language ability can contribute to students' academic achievement and overall career potential in an age of globalization.*

**Keywords;** *Contextual vocabulary instruction, proficiency level, and productive skills*

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## INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is among the most powerful determinants of student achievement and communicative potential in the world in the 21st century. As the world's lingua franca of science, technology, diplomacy, and education, English makes an invaluable contribution to students' academic pathways and professional prospects (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011). In Ethiopia, English is particularly important as a medium of instruction from secondary school upwards, yet the majority of the students experience a tremendous amount of challenge due to limited exposure to the language outside the classroom. Perhaps one of the most crucial

challenges is a lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge underlying reading, writing, speaking, and listening—the very building blocks of communicative competence (Nation, 2001; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). Without a strong lexical foundation, comprehension, expression, and participation in academic discourse are challenging for the students. Despite this, vocabulary instruction in Ethiopian schools remains predominantly traditional, with its characteristic rote memorization of lists of words and decontextualized drills that tend to promote shallow and short-term learning (Schmitt, 2008; Webb & Nation, 2017). On the other hand, contextual vocabulary instruction—teaching words in meaningful and authentic text such as stories and conversations—has been empirically shown to improve vocabulary retention, reading comprehension, and linguistic flexibility (Webb, 2008; Teng, 2020; Zhang & Graham, 2021). Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and schema theory, this approach emphasizes the importance of meaningful context for deep cognitive processing and learning language (Vygotsky, 1978; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Current studies in Ethiopia support this shift. For instance, a 2023 study conducted by Woldemariam Bezabih and Hailu Wubshet Degefu confirmed that even if teachers held positive attitudes towards teaching vocabulary contextually, the attitudes were not necessarily reflected in classroom practices due to certain challenges. Similarly, a 2023 scholarly work by Ashenafi Shimeles Shumiye of Oda Bultum University showed that students' exposure to English media could increase vocabulary learning, referring to the benefits of contextual exposure. Moreover, a 2024 research study by Fekadu Adam Jeldu and colleagues demonstrated that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) methods enhanced the speaking performance and oral vocabulary of students, revealing the effects of context-full instructional methods. Despite such promising findings, issues such as large class sizes, lack of resources, and minimal teacher professional development work against the widespread implementation of contextual vocabulary instruction in Ethiopia. Such issues must be addressed through targeted professional development and curriculum reform to ensure the full value of contextualized language instruction and improve English language proficiency among Ethiopian students.

## **Literature/Theoretical underpinning**

Vocabulary knowledge is at the heart of communicative competence and an effective predictor of proficiency in the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2001). In Ethiopian EFL environments, where English is predominantly an in-school subject rather than a means of everyday communication, lexical gaps are powerful barriers to learning success and life opportunities (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Qian, 2002).

Traditional vocabulary learning methods in Ethiopian secondary schools—above all, rote learning, translation, and fill-in-the-blank exercises—are susceptible to promoting shallow short-term memory and failing to induce deep contextualized lexical knowledge (Mesfin Admasu, 2020; Bekele Daba, 2023; Schmitt, 2008). Issues such as high class size, heavy teacher workload, and exam-driven curricula also limit the application of cutting-edge vocabulary learning methods (Woldemariam & Hailu, 2023).

Contextual vocabulary instruction (CVT), based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Schema Theory, offers a more effective solution via encouraging learning from rich and meaningful context, resulting in improved retention and functional use of words (Vygotsky, 1978; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Webb, 2007; Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010). Empirical research, including Ethiopian studies by Mesfin Admasu (2020), Bekele Daba (2023), and Woldemariam Bezabih and Hailu Wubshet (2023), demonstrate that despite teachers' recognition of benefits of contextual strategies, systemic constraints like time scarcity, big groups, inflexible curricula, and poor support undermine systematic application. Addisu Sewbihon-Getie (2021) also proved the positive role of context-based strategies, for instance, explaining collocations and word chunks, to learners' comprehension and usage.

Despite growing awareness of the usefulness of CVT, there is a notable knowledge gap for systematic experimental evidence in Ethiopian secondary schools linking contextual vocabulary teaching to measurable language skills gains. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by testing empirically the impact of contextualized exposure to vocabulary on English performance, providing results that can potentially be used to inform curriculum design, teacher development, and policy reform to better develop EFL instruction in Ethiopia and similar resource-poor contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures to assess the impact of vocabulary instruction on student performance. The design involved an experimental group that was provided with contextual vocabulary instruction and a control group that utilized traditional methods.

### **Participants**

A purposive sample of sixty students from Grade 11 was chosen from two government high schools in Addis Ababa. Then, the students were randomly assigned into two equal groups: the experimental group (n = 30) and the control group (n = 30).

### **Intervention**

The experiment group was given contextual vocabulary instruction that entailed learning words by means of narrative texts, class discussions, and inference activities for establishing higher understanding and use of words in meaningful contexts. The control group learned vocabulary traditionally, and it mostly used vocabulary lists and translation exercises.

### **Instruments**

Two main instruments were used for measurement: A frequency-based adapted Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, 2000) to assess vocabulary knowledge in different frequency bands. A measure of English language proficiency with a focus on reading, writing, and listening capacity.

### **Procedure**

Intervention continued for six weeks when the two groups were taught on the basis of the treatments assigned. Pre-tests were administered before the intervention, whereas post-tests were administered once the six weeks of teaching had elapsed.

### **Data Analysis**

Pre- and post-test results were compared using SPSS software. Paired samples t-tests were performed to establish within-group score differences, and independent samples t-tests were performed to establish differences between the experimental and control groups. Statistical significance was at  $p < 0.05$ .

### **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

The experimental group had extremely high post-test vocabulary and proficiency scores ( $M=75.4$ ,  $SD=6.3$ ) compared to the pre-test of the experimental group ( $M=59.2$ ,  $SD=7.1$ ),  $p < 0.001$ . The control group improved to some extent but with the less prominent gain (pre-test  $M=58.9$ ,  $SD=6.9$ ; post-test  $M=63.1$ ,  $SD=7.0$ ),  $p < 0.05$ . Independent sample t-tests verified that the difference between gains in these two groups was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). These experiences and feedback from students also showed that the experimental group was more focused in class and had better word usage in written tasks.

### **DISCUSSION**

The results confirm the supposition that teaching vocabulary in context is better in learning vocabulary and overall language acquisition as compared to conventional methods. All these results are consistent with other previous research by Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986; Graves, 2006, where learning words in meaningful contexts is being shown as valuable. Gains in the tested group are to be explained by more advanced cognitive processing and actual application of vocabulary in communication. As much as the control group improved, perhaps the phrase drill constraints prevented them from actually learning and using vocabulary appropriately. The short study duration and restriction to two schools may limit generalizability, and future studies across regions with longer teaching periods are suggested.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study presents a body of evidence that context-based vocabulary instruction has the potential to enhance a considerable portion of the English language skill of Ethiopian high school students. The contextual learning will not only enhance vocabulary, but also the functional ability to use language to one's advantage. With this, the results call for the alteration of instruction practices in English language curricula through the incorporation of context-based meaningful guidance to engage and hence enhance the performance of students to learn the English language. It will call for teacher professional development interventions to empower teachers with updated, evidence-

based tools in instructional practice. In the long term, increased English proficiency may enhance academic performance as well as international opportunities for Ethiopian students.

### **Implication to Research and Practice**

The findings of this research have far-reaching implications for educational research and teaching practice, particularly in low-resource EFL settings such as Ethiopian secondary schools.

### **Implications for Research**

This research bridges an evident gap in experimental research on the efficiency of contextual vocabulary teaching (CVT) in Ethiopian secondary schools. Through empirically investigating the influence of contextualized vocabulary exposure on English language competence, it provides empirical support for informing or refuting theoretical claims. The findings contribute to the broader SLA research by demonstrating how sociocognitive and cognitive models may be applied in actual classrooms. Subsequent research can carry on this inquiry by testing long-term retention, generalizing CVT to other grade levels or regions, and involving affect variables such as motivation and learner autonomy in vocabulary teaching studies.

### **Implications for Practice**

The potential for positive impact of contextual vocabulary teaching, if repeated, signals the need to shift away from memorization-based, outmoded approaches to more active, context-dependent ones. Teachers have a range of options available to them, including the use of authentic texts, encouraging inference, and discussing word use in context, to support vocabulary acquisition. These approaches not only promote vocabulary retention but also enable transfer of lexical knowledge to other language skills, such as reading comprehension and writing ease.

Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of professional development programs that can provide teachers with effective techniques for delivering CVT, even when teaching large classes and in exam-oriented curricula. Textbooks, teacher guides, and tests must be reconsidered by school administrators and policymakers in terms of aligning them with the best practices in vocabulary pedagogy.

Moreover, for EFL learners, context-grabbing learning triggers richer cognitive engagement with language, optimizing vocabulary learning effectiveness and its application to communication in real life. This is especially important in cases where exposure to English outside classrooms is limited.

### **Policy Implications**

At the policy level, the conclusions of this study can be utilized in informing resource deployment and curriculum redesign. Integrating CVT principles into national curricula has the potential to enhance the quality of language instruction. Support frameworks—though smaller class sizes, better teaching materials, and in-service courses—need to be in place in order to make implementation easier. Addressing vocabulary as a cross-cutting competence in secondary school

can ultimately enable students to score better on national exams and improve their educational and job opportunities.

### **Future Research**

While this study provides valuable information regarding the effectiveness of contextual vocabulary instruction (CVI) in Ethiopian secondary school settings, there are several areas for ongoing research to further articulate and expand the knowledge base.

First, future studies should employ longitudinal designs to test long-term recall and generalizability of words acquired through contextual methods. A six-week intervention provides preliminary support of efficacy, but effects maintained over months or years is something to be investigated. Second, the current study was carried out among urban government school Grade 11 students. Future research can explore the application of CVT in other grade levels, rural schools, and provinces to determine whether analogous gains are observed in different educational and socio-economic contexts. This would enable researchers to examine regional or demographic variation in vocabulary learning strategies and accomplishment.

Third, employment of mixed-methods study designs that combine quantitative data with qualitative observations—such as classroom observations, teacher reflections, and interviews with students—would enrich the data and give a deeper insight into how contextual strategies are being implemented and received.

Fourth, there is a need for more research to investigate the relationship between CVT and affective measures such as students' motivation, anxiety, and attitudes towards learning vocabulary. Understanding these psychological factors is able to provide a better description of how learners engage with learning vocabulary and under what conditions maximize learning.

Fifth, future research might explore the use of digital resources and technology-rich learning environments to augment vocabulary learning in contexts. As access to mobile phones and web platforms increases, scalable and cost-effective vocabulary learning interventions that can be customized to low-resource settings like Ethiopia are likely to be viable.

Finally, comparative research among contextual vocabulary teaching and other newly proposed approaches—i.e., lexical approach, task-based learning of vocabulary, or corpus-driven instruction—would identify the most effective procedures under specific conditions.

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