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The Effect of Contextual Vocabulary Teaching on EFL Students' Productive Skills

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of contextualized vocabulary instruction on EFL students' speaking and writing performance using mixed-method design. Quantitative data were collected through a vocabulary pre-test and post-test containing receptive and productive tasks, a speaking rubric. While qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and a focus group discussion. The results revealed the quantitative data through quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design with two intact classes (N = 60; 30 students per group) was implemented in one Ethiopian secondary school. Over six weeks, the experimental group learned 20 target words through meaningful texts, dialogues, and role-plays, whereas the control group learned the same words as isolated items without context. The two groups did not differ at pre-test (p = .773). At post-test, the experimental group (M = 76.83, SD = 5.47) outperformed the control group (M = 61.27, SD = 8.96), with a large effect size. Qualitative evidence indicated that students and teachers perceived contextual vocabulary teaching as more engaging and as supporting the recall and use of new words, while also requiring additional teacher preparation. To have better performances of students' productive skills, contextual vocabulary teaching should be alternatively taught in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: contextual vocabulary teaching, EFL, productive skills, quasi-experimental design, speaking, writing

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Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is a central component of language learning and underpins the development of both speaking and writing. Krashen (1982) and Moeller et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of comprehensible input and vocabulary knowledge in second language learning, and McCarthy (1990) observed that learners with strong grammar still cannot communicate a wide range of ideas without an adequate vocabulary. Developing productive vocabulary, that is, the ability to retrieve and use words in speech and writing, is generally regarded as more demanding than recognizing their meanings (Nation, 2022). Instruction that stops at receptive knowledge therefore risks leaving learners unable to use the words they have studied. This concern is particularly relevant in Ethiopian secondary schools, where, as discussed below, vocabulary teaching is often dominated by memorization.

Four complementary theoretical positions motivate the present study. First, Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1980) holds that new information is processed, stored, and recalled more readily when it can be linked to learners' background knowledge; words presented in meaningful contexts offer such links, whereas isolated word lists do not. Second, constructivist theories (Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978) and related accounts of learning (Mayer, 2003) view learning as the active construction of knowledge through meaningful experience and social interaction rather than through rote memorization. Third, Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis proposes that acquisition is most effective when learners receive comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level, and Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis adds that producing language pushes learners to process vocabulary more deeply and accurately. Finally, task-based approaches (Ellis, 2003) stress that words are best learned and consolidated when learners must use them to accomplish authentic communicative tasks.

Taken together, these perspectives lead to a testable expectation. Contextual instruction supplies rich input, connects new words to existing schemata, creates opportunities for interaction, and requires learners to use the words in speaking and writing tasks. If these mechanisms operate as theorised, students taught contextually should show stronger productive vocabulary use than students who study the same words as decontextualized items. The present study tests this expectation and uses qualitative evidence to examine whether the proposed mechanisms are visible in the classroom.

There is broad agreement that vocabulary teaching should move beyond memorizing individual words. Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) argued that the aim should be rich and accessible lexical knowledge built through re-exposure, practice in context, and use, and Webb (2020) similarly emphasized repeated encounters with words in communicative contexts rather than in isolated lists. Webb and Nation (2021) added that vocabulary development, both receptive and productive, depends on continued retrieval practice, spaced learning, and purposeful use. Teng and Xu (2022) examined how task type and repetition frequency affect the shift from receptive to productive vocabulary knowledge. A common thread in this work is that context by itself is not sufficient: instruction is most effective when context is combined with retrieval, feedback, and application. Consequently, comparisons between contextual and decontextualized teaching should specify exactly which of these elements the contextual condition contains.

Experimental evidence on context-based vocabulary teaching is encouraging but uneven. Al-Ghazo and Ta'amneh (2022) compared two groups of 30 learners and reported that learners taught to guess meaning from context outperformed a control group in vocabulary competence and reading comprehension, although neither outcome measured productive use directly. Extrapolating across studies is difficult because participant level, treatment length, measurement, and instructional setting differ considerably. In addition, such studies have largely been conducted outside Ethiopia, and their results may not transfer to settings with large classes and limited resources.

Research in the Ethiopian EFL context points to a gap between what is recommended and what happens in classrooms. Getie (2021) reported that a lexical approach emphasizing chunks and collocations in communicative activities improved Ethiopian EFL learners' vocabulary competence, and Getie et al. (2020) found that Ethiopian high school learners perceived lexically based instruction positively and enjoyed learning vocabulary through it. However, Getie (2020) evaluated a Grade 9 English textbook and concluded that it was not well suited to teaching vocabulary lexically. Zewdu (2020) showed that teachers hold positive perceptions of communicative vocabulary teaching but that their classroom practice does not match these perceptions, with large classes, low student interest, and poor-quality textbooks identified as obstacles.

Shube and Hanshu (2023) likewise reported generally positive perceptions of vocabulary teaching among secondary school teachers in Addis Ababa, drawing mainly on their teaching experience and disciplinary background. Overall, memorization remains common in secondary schools, a practice that Nation (2022) considers less effective than meaningful use. These studies carry different methodological weight: Zewdu (2020) and Shube and Hanshu (2023) describe teachers' perceptions and practices, Getie (2020) evaluates a textbook, and Getie (2021) is the only study among them that tested an instructional approach experimentally, in a quasi-experimental study with 95 students.

Three limitations of this literature motivate the present study. First, much Ethiopian research describes teachers' perceptions and classroom practices or measures vocabulary knowledge in general, rather than testing whether context-based instruction improves learners' productive use of vocabulary. Second, few studies combine controlled comparison with qualitative evidence on why an approach works or fails in a particular classroom. Third, evidence from Ethiopian secondary schools on the link between lexical knowledge and productive competence remains scarce. The current study addresses these gaps by comparing contextual and decontextualized vocabulary instruction in a Grade 11 classroom and by complementing the quantitative comparison with observation, interview, and focus group data.

The study investigated the effect of contextual vocabulary teaching on Grade 11 EFL students' productive vocabulary use in speaking and writing. In this article, "productive vocabulary use" refers to students' performance on tasks that require them to produce target words in speech or writing (see Instruments). Two research questions guided the study:

(1) Is there a statistically significant difference in vocabulary post-test performance between students taught through contextual instruction and students taught through decontextualized instruction?

(2) How do students and teachers perceive contextual vocabulary instruction and its influence on students' use of new words in speaking and writing?

Methods

The study used a convergent mixed-methods approach built around a quasi-experimental, pre-test–post-test control group design. Two intact Grade 11 classes in a single

school (Neway Challenge School) were matched for comparability and assigned to an experimental (contextual instruction) or a control (decontextualized instruction) condition at the class level.

The participants were 60 Grade 11 students aged 16 to 18 years, with 30 in each class. The school and the two classes were purposefully selected because the students were comparable in socio-economic background and English proficiency. Students were classified as intermediate-level learners on the basis of their previous national examination results and their teachers' ratings. Equivalence at the start of the study was checked with the vocabulary pre-test (see Quantitative Results).

To collect the quantitative data on the field, students at that school were not randomly assigned to conditions, the design cannot rule out pre-existing differences between the two classes beyond those captured by the pre-test, nor can it separate the effect of the method from teacher and classroom characteristics. These threats to internal validity are addressed in the Limitations subsection. The two classes were assigned to the experimental and control conditions at the class level, and this assignment was not randomized.

While the qualitative data investigated the delivered instruction by two English teachers for each class, both were oriented to the procedures and requirements of the study before the intervention began. Qualitative data (classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, and a focus group discussion) were collected to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results. For the qualitative component, 10 students (five from each class) were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews, the two intervention teachers were also interviewed, and a focus group discussion was held with three experienced Grade 11 English teachers.

Ethical clearance and institutional permission were requested from the Research Coordinator, Department of English Language and Literature, Addis Ababa University, before data collection. Because the participants were 16 to 18 years old, permission was sought from parents or guardians, and the students themselves gave their consent. The researcher is a teacher at the school, which could create undue influence. To limit this risk, students were told that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any point, and that their decision would not affect their assessment or their relationship with their teachers. Responses

were coded rather than identified by name to protect anonymity, and the interview, focus group, and observation records are stored securely and are used only for this study.

Both groups were taught the same 20 target words, selected from the Grade 11 English syllabus, over six weeks. Each lesson lasted 60 minutes and covered about six to eight words so that students could concentrate on a manageable number of items (Nation, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2021). In the experimental group, target words were introduced in meaningful contexts: texts, dialogues, and a unit on telemedicine, in which words such as affordability, initiatives, settlements, inequalities, and charitable first appeared in a real-world situation. Students then practiced the words through class discussions, role-plays, pair and collaborative work, guided writing, and the reuse of the words in new tasks. The same 20 words were taught in control group as isolated vocabulary items, that is, through word lists and definitions without a supporting context.

Table 1 summarizes each instrument, the skill or construct it addresses, and the group of participants involved. Only the vocabulary tests and the speaking rubric yielded quantitative scores. The observation checklist, interviews, and focus group provided qualitative data. No separate, standardized writing test was administered, so claims about writing in this article rest on the writing task within the post-test and on the qualitative evidence.

Table 1

Summary of Instruments, Constructs Targeted, and Participants

Instrument	Skill / construct	Format and content	Participants and timing
Vocabulary pre-test	Receptive and contextual knowledge of the 20 target words (baseline)	Multiple-choice items with target words in sentences containing contextual clues; matching words to definitions or synonyms	Both groups, before the intervention
Vocabulary post-test	Receptive and productive knowledge of the target words, including writing and speaking tasks	Dialogue completion, rational cloze, sentence completion, matching, multiple choice, guessing from context, and a paragraph-writing and presentation task	Both groups, after the intervention
Speaking assessment rubric	Speaking (productive): fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, pronunciation	Analytic rubric adapted from CEFR descriptors	Both groups, after the intervention

Instrument	Skill / construct	Format and content	Participants and timing
Classroom observation checklist	Instructional practice, learner engagement, use of target words in speaking activities	Structured checklist completed by the researcher	Both classes, during the intervention
Semi-structured interviews	Perceptions of vocabulary learning, effectiveness, and challenges	Interview guide with probing questions	10 students (5 per class) and 2 intervention teachers
Focus group discussion	Teachers' views and experience of vocabulary teaching	Facilitated discussion with probing questions linked to the research questions	3 experienced Grade 11 English teachers

Both tests were constructed around the same 20 target words. The pre-test combined multiple-choice and matching items. In the multiple-choice items, the target word appeared in a sentence with contextual clues, and students chose the correct meaning; in the matching items, they paired words with definitions or synonyms. These formats are commonly used to assess depth of vocabulary knowledge (Harley et al., 1990). The post-test required students to use the words in a wider range of tasks: completing dialogues, filling gaps in a rational cloze, completing sentences, matching words to definitions or synonyms, choosing the correct word (including synonyms, antonyms, prefixes, and suffixes), guessing missing words from context, and writing a paragraph on a given topic using the learned words and then presenting it orally. Test design drew on guidance in Nation (2022), Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), and Webb (2020).

The rubric was adapted from the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). It assessed four criteria: fluency (flow and smoothness of speech), accuracy (grammatical correctness), vocabulary use (range and appropriateness of word choice), and pronunciation (clarity and intelligibility).

The observation checklist recorded instructional practice, learner engagement, and spontaneous use of new words in speaking activities, and it was used in both classes. The semi-structured interviews explored participants' opinions of their vocabulary learning experience, the effectiveness of the teaching, and the challenges they faced. The focus group discussion complemented the interviews by bringing together several teachers' perspectives and experience in relation to the research questions.

The tests and marking schemes were reviewed by experts and teachers for face and content validity, and their feedback was used to refine the items and scoring criteria. The instruments were also pilot-tested. Inter-rater reliability for the speaking rubric was good (ICC = 0.89), and the internal consistency of the vocabulary test was high (Cronbach's α = 0.88). For the qualitative data, credibility was supported by triangulating observation, interview, and focus group sources. No coding-reliability statistic (such as intercoder agreement) is reported for the qualitative analysis; this is noted under Limitations.

The vocabulary pre-test was administered to both classes before instruction. The six-week intervention was then delivered by the two class teachers. During the intervention, the researcher observed lessons using the observation checklist and noted how target vocabulary was taught and used. After the intervention, the post-test and speaking assessment were administered, and the interviews and focus group discussion were conducted. Schedules were agreed in advance with the school and the participants.

Quantitative data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 21. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for each group. Independent-samples *t*-tests were used to compare the groups at pre-test (to check equivalence) and at post-test, and Cohen's *d* was calculated as the effect size, with values of 0.80 or greater interpreted as large (Cohen, 1988).

Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed with NVivo 14 following a constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2014) in three stages informed by grounded theory. In open coding, transcripts and observation notes were coded line by line, and categories were refined as new data arrived until no new categories appeared (data saturation). In axial coding, relationships between categories were identified using four elements: causal conditions, teaching strategies, intervening conditions, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In selective coding, the categories were integrated around a small number of core categories chosen for their centrality, frequency, inclusiveness, and clarity (Strauss, 1987), and the relations between core and other categories were defined (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The qualitative results were then compared with the quantitative results to examine whether they converged.

Result and Discussion

Table 2 presents the descriptive and inferential statistics for the two tests. At pre-test, the experimental group (M = 48.63, SD = 6.21) and the control group (M = 48.17, SD = 5.98) did not differ significantly, $t(58) = 0.29$, $p = .773$, which indicates that the groups were comparable before the intervention.

Table 2

Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for the Vocabulary Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Test	Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(58)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Pre-test	Experimental	30	48.63	6.21	0.29	.773	—
	Control	30	48.17	5.98			
Post-test	Experimental	30	76.83	5.47	8.12	< .001	2.10
	Control	30	61.27	8.96			

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; t = independent-samples t-test; Cohen's d = standardised mean difference. Following Cohen (1988), $d \geq 0.80$ indicates a large effect. The t and d values were calculated from the group means and standard deviations in the table (pooled variance, df = 58).

At post-test, the experimental group scored markedly higher (M = 76.83, SD = 5.47) than the control group (M = 61.27, SD = 8.96). An independent-samples t-test showed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(58) = 8.12$, $p < .001$, and the effect size was large (Cohen's d = 2.10). The answer to RQ1 is therefore that contextual instruction was associated with significantly higher vocabulary post-test performance than decontextualized instruction. Scores from the speaking rubric are not analysed in this article; claims about speaking therefore rest on the speaking-related task within the post-test and on the qualitative evidence.

The observation, interview, and focus group data converged on a consistent account of how contextual instruction operated. Table 3 organizes the results by the four axial-coding categories and gives illustrative evidence for each.

Table 3

Axial-Coding Categories and Illustrative Evidence

Category	Description	Illustrative evidence
Causal conditions	Rich, meaningful input: target words presented in realistic situations (the telemedicine unit), texts, discussions, and activities based on real-world discourse	Students described learning through contexts they called "real" as easier, more enjoyable, and more useful for communication outside school.

Category	Description	Illustrative evidence
Teaching strategies	Presentation of vocabulary in context, guided writing, class discussions, role-plays, pair work, and reuse of target words in meaningful tasks	Observations showed students using target words in essays, report writing, discussions, and a role-play of a telemedicine application.
Intervening conditions	Factors affecting delivery and effectiveness: student involvement, perceived relevance, opportunities for interaction and practice, teacher planning demands, and need for professional development	Teachers reported that contextual teaching required additional preparation and further training.
Consequences	Productive use of vocabulary: greater lexical accuracy and elaboration in writing, and more confidence and fluency in speaking	Teacher: "New vocabulary use creatively and naturally when they are taught through meaningful context." Student: "Stories and discussion give me confidence to remembering words and writing sentences appropriately."

Most students said that learning vocabulary through meaningful contexts, which they described as "real", helped them learn words more easily and more enjoyably, and that the words were useful for communication outside school. They also reported greater motivation and confidence because they were encouraged to use new words rather than memorise definitions. One student explained, "Vocabulary from stories and discussions makes me easier to remember words and use it in sentences appropriately." Classroom observations showed experimental-group students using target words such as *affordability*, *initiatives*, and *inequalities* in essays, report writing, discussions, and the telemedicine role-play.

Teachers noticed that students participated more confidently in speaking activities, were more willing to practise, and feared making mistakes less. In writing, they observed more accurate use of target words and more elaborated responses to open-ended tasks. One teacher commented, "New vocabulary use creatively and naturally when they are taught through meaningful context." Students in the experimental group also perceived that the approach supported their receptive, reproductive, and productive knowledge of the target words.

Despite these positive outcomes, teachers reported that designing contextual lessons demanded considerable preparation and that they needed further training to teach vocabulary in this way. Both teachers and students nevertheless favored the contextual approach over decontextualized teaching.

Overall, the qualitative data answer by showing that students and teachers viewed contextual instruction as engaging, relevant, and conducive to using new words in speaking and writing, while recognizing its demands on teachers. These results converge with the quantitative advantage of the experimental group.

Students who learned the target words through contextual instruction outperformed those who learned the same words as isolated items, and students and teachers described mechanisms that are consistent with the theoretical framework. The advantage is in line with Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1980): words embedded in the telemedicine unit were connected to a real-world situation that students could relate to, which may have made them easier to store and recall. It is also consistent with constructivist accounts (Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978), because students constructed meaning through discussion, role-play, and collaborative tasks rather than by memorizing definitions. The role-plays and writing tasks gave students repeated opportunities to produce the words, as the Output Hypothesis predicts (Swain, 1985), while the texts and dialogues provided the comprehensible input emphasized by Krashen (1982).

The result also agrees with earlier research. Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) and Webb and Nation (2021) stressed repeated, varied encounters and purposeful use, and research on task type and repetition frequency (Teng & Xu, 2022) is likewise concerned with how learners move from receptive to productive knowledge. Al-Ghazo and Ta'amneh (2022) found an advantage for learners taught to infer meaning from context, and the present results are also consistent with Getie (2021), who reported positive effects of lexically based instruction on vocabulary competence among Ethiopian EFL learners, and with Getie et al. (2020), whose learners perceived such instruction positively.

An important caveat is that the contextual condition differed from the control condition in several ways at once: context, interaction, output tasks, and probably the amount of active practice. The design therefore shows that the contextual package was more effective than decontextualized teaching, but it cannot isolate the contribution of context itself. This is consistent with the observation in the literature that context alone is rarely sufficient and works best together with retrieval, feedback, and application (Webb & Nation, 2021).

The qualitative results help to explain the quantitative result. Students' reports of greater confidence and willingness to speak, together with teachers' observations of more

accurate and elaborated writing, suggest that the gains were not confined to test performance. The intervening conditions identified by teachers (preparation time and training needs) are consistent with Ethiopian evidence that large classes, low student interest, and poor-quality textbooks hinder communicative vocabulary teaching (Zewdu, 2020) and that the Grade 9 textbook is poorly suited to lexical teaching (Getie, 2020). They suggest that the benefits observed here depend on teachers having the time and support to design contextual lessons.

For teachers, the results suggest presenting target words in meaningful texts and situations and following this with tasks that require learners to speak and write using the words. For textbook writers and curriculum designers, they support providing more contextualized vocabulary activities, an area in which Getie (2020) judged the Grade 9 textbook to be wanting. For teacher educators and school leaders, the teachers' comments point to the need for training and planning time if contextual vocabulary teaching is to become routine.

Conclusion

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the study involved one school and two intact classes (N = 60), so the results cannot be generalized to other schools or regions. Second, because students were not randomly assigned, pre-existing differences between the classes may have influenced the outcome even though the pre-test showed equivalence; with only one class per condition, differences between the two teachers and classrooms are confounded with the effect of the method. Teacher qualifications and experience are not reported here, so teacher effects cannot be characterised, and the control condition is described only briefly, so differences between the conditions beyond the presence of context cannot be fully excluded. Third, the researcher was a teacher at the school, which could have shaped participants' responses despite the safeguards described in Ethical Considerations. Fourth, the quantitative evidence on productive skills rests on a vocabulary test that included writing and speaking tasks; scores from the speaking rubric are not analysed in this article, and no separate, standardised writing measure was used, so conclusions about speaking and writing rely partly on qualitative evidence. Fifth, the intervention lasted six weeks and no delayed post-test was administered, so the durability of the gains is unknown. Finally,

the qualitative data come from a small purposive sample, and no coding-reliability statistic is reported for them.

This study found that Grade 11 EFL students taught new words in meaningful contexts achieved higher vocabulary post-test scores, with a large effect, than students taught the same words as isolated items, and that students and teachers perceived contextual instruction as supporting the productive use of new words in speaking and writing. The results contribute Ethiopian secondary-school evidence to a field in which most experimental work comes from other settings. Given the single site, the small sample, and the intact-class design, the results are best treated as promising rather than conclusive. Future studies should use larger samples from several schools, assign classes to conditions more rigorously (preferably with several classes and teachers per condition), include delayed post-tests, measure speaking and writing with separate validated instruments, and examine which components of the contextual package (context, interaction, output, retrieval) account for the gains.

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