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MUNDARIJA

SH.E.BOBOMURATOVA

O'zbekiston va uning chegara mamlakat hududlarida til siyosati.....4

D.MUQUMOVA

Ja'far Muhammad Termiziyning "Mendagi Boysun" she'ri: lingvistik tahlil.....12

D.B.IBODULLAYEVA

O'zbek va ingliz tillaridagi teatr atamalarining chog'ishtirma tahlili.....15

Z.M.AMIRKULOVA

"Panoh" hikoyasida tarixiy voqe'lik va badiiy talqin uyg'unlashuvi.....18

M.A.MEYLIQULOVA

O'quvchilarda adabiy nutqiy kompetensiyani rivojlantirish masalalari.....22

SH.A.DONAYEVA

Boshlang'ich sinf o'quvchilarini o'qitishda 4K modelining ahamiyati.....25

G.E.TURAYEVA

Texnologiyalashgan jamiyatda bo'lajak o'qituvchilarning axloqiy tarbiyasini shakllantirish28

M.X.XAYDAROVA

Magistratura talabalarining mustaqil ta'lim faoliyatini tashkil etish.....31

F.A.XAYITOVA

O'quvchilarda kreativ o'qish madaniyatini shakllantirishning milliy va jahon tajribasi.....35

D.R.YUNUSOV, J.I.UMIROV

Fanni o'qitishda interfaol ta'lim metodlaridan foydalanish.....38

F.E.JOMONQULOVA, S.B.UZAKOVA

Yoshlarni axborot xurujlaridan asrash, ularda axborot imunitetini shakllantirishda zamonaviy usullardan foydalanishning o'рни.....42

U.A.TASHBAYEVA

Boshlang'ich sinflarda bolalar adabiyotini o'rgatishda mustaqil ta'lim topshiriqlaridan foydalanish metodikasi.....47

SH.T.TOSHOVA

Talabalarda sog'lom turmush tarzi ko'nikmalarini takomillashtirishning didaktik imkoniyatlari.....51

R.I.ESONOVA, N.M.SALOXITDINOVA

Boshlang'ich sinflarda tabiiy fanlarni 4K modeli asosida tashkil etish metodikasi va baholash mexanizmlari.....54

G.Z.ERMATOVA, G.E.TURAYEVA

Elektron resurslar asosida ona tili va o'qish savodxonligi fanlarini o'qitish samaradorligini oshirish usullari.....58

D.D.NORQUVATOVA, N.M.SALOXITDINOVA

STEAM yondashuvining boshlang'ich matematika ta'limidagi ahamiyati.....65

M.O.ZARIPOVA, N.M.SALOXITDINOVA

Zamonaviy ta'limda baholash tizimlarining transformatsiyasi va uning ta'lim sifatiga ta'siri.....68

M.A.NORBOSHEVA, N.ABDIYEVA

Giperaktiv bolalar bilan olib boriladigan psixologik-pedagogik ishlar.....72

G'.A.MAMARAJABOV

Mustaqillik yillarida o'zbekistonda hunarmandchilikni rivojlantirishning huquqiy asoslari va amaliy tajriba.....76

T.J.YARMATOV, F.J.YARMATOV

Mahmud Qoshg'ariyning "Devonu Lug'atit Turk" asari etnofolklor manba.....80

SH.T.YAKUBOVA

Boshlang'ich sinf o'quvchilarida ekologik madaniyat shakllantirishning ilmiy-nazariy asoslari.....83

N.B.RAUPOVA

Boshlang'ich sinf o'quvchilarining milliy qadriyatlarga bo'lgan munosabatini shakllantirish metodikasi ("Qutadg'u bilig" va "Hibat ul-haqoyiq" dostonlari namunalarini misolida).....86

M.SH.BURIYEVA

The role of code-switching in Uzbekistan's diverse society: identity and cultural exchange.....91

Z.M.ALLAYEV

Traditions of dream interpretations in linguoculturology.....96

Z.F.ERGASHEVA, G'.Y.SALOMOV

Ona-tili va o'qish savodxonligi darslarida o'quvchilarning axborot bilan ishlash kompetensiyasini rivojlantirish metodikasi.....99

L.A.RAIMOV

A comparative analysis of ai and human translation in advertising texts.....103

A.A.QARAQULOV

Mengziyo Safarov qissalarida ona-tabiatning poetik manzarasi.....107

N.A.UMAROVA

Boshlang'ich sinflarda tabiiy fanlar darslarida loyiha faoliyatini tashkil etish nazariyasi va metodikasi.....112

M.T.MENGNAROVA

Ingliz va O'zbek tillaridagi rang komponentli maqollarda madaniy birliklarning ahamiyati.....116

I.B.JURAEV

The effect of authentic materials on vocabulary acquisition in english classes.....120

D.A.BADALOV

Boshlang'ich ta'lim yo'nalishi talabalarining kasbiy kompetentligini rivojlantirishda, klaster metodida yondashish.....126

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THE EFFECT OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN ENGLISH CLASSES

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition remains a central component of second language development and plays a decisive role in learners' communicative competence. Despite extensive research on lexical instruction, questions persist regarding the most effective pedagogical tools for facilitating long-term vocabulary retention and contextual usage. Authentic materials—texts, audio, and visual resources originally produced for native speakers—have been increasingly integrated into English language classrooms as a means of enhancing learner engagement and contextual exposure. However, empirical evidence concerning their measurable impact on vocabulary acquisition remains insufficient in certain educational contexts.

The present quasi-experimental study investigates the effect of authentic materials on vocabulary acquisition among intermediate-level English learners. Over a twelve-week instructional period, two groups of university students were exposed to different instructional approaches: one group received vocabulary instruction through textbook-based materials, while the experimental group engaged with carefully selected authentic resources, including newspaper articles, podcasts, and video interviews. Vocabulary knowledge was measured through pre-tests, post-tests, delayed retention tests, and qualitative learner reflections. Statistical analysis revealed significant improvement in the experimental group not only in immediate vocabulary gain but also in long-term retention and contextual application. The findings suggest that authentic materials facilitate deeper lexical processing, enhance semantic network development, and promote meaningful engagement with language input. The study contributes to pedagogical theory by providing empirical support for integrating authentic resources into vocabulary instruction within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Keywords. Authentic materials, vocabulary acquisition, lexical retention, English as a Foreign Language, contextual learning, communicative competence, language pedagogy.

ВЛИЯНИЕ АУТЕНТИЧНЫХ МАТЕРИАЛОВ НА УСВОЕНИЕ ЛЕКСИКИ НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

АННОТАЦИЯ

Овладение словарным запасом остается ключевым компонентом развития второго языка и играет решающую роль в формировании коммуникативной компетенции учащихся. Несмотря на многочисленные исследования в области обучения лексике, вопросы о наиболее эффективных педагогических инструментах, способствующих долгосрочному запоминанию слов и их использованию в контексте, остаются открытыми. Аутентичные материалы — текстовые, аудио- и визуальные ресурсы, изначально созданные для носителей языка, — все чаще интегрируются в процесс обучения английскому языку как средство повышения вовлеченности учащихся и обеспечения контекстуального погружения. Однако эмпирических данных, подтверждающих их измеримое влияние на усвоение лексики в некоторых образовательных контекстах, все еще недостаточно.

В данном квазиэкспериментальном исследовании изучается влияние аутентичных материалов на усвоение словарного запаса учащимися со средним уровнем владения английским языком. В течение двенадцатинедельного периода обучения две группы студентов университета обучались по разным методикам: одна группа осваивала лексику с использованием учебных материалов, в то время как экспериментальная группа работала с тщательно отобранными аутентичными ресурсами, включая газетные статьи, подкасты и видеоподкасты. Уровень владения лексикой оценивался с помощью предварительного, итогового и отсроченного тестирования, а также с помощью качественного анализа рефлексивных отчетов учащихся. Статистический анализ выявил значительное улучшение в экспериментальной группе не только в краткосрочном



приросте словарного запаса, но и в его долгосрочном сохранении и контекстуальном применении. Полученные результаты позволяют предположить, что аутентичные материалы способствуют более глубокой лексической обработке, улучшают развитие семантических сетей и способствуют осмысленному взаимодействию с языковым материалом. Исследование вносит вклад в педагогическую теорию, предоставляя эмпирическое обоснование интеграции аутентичных ресурсов в процесс обучения лексике в контексте английского языка как иностранного.

Ключевые слова: аутентичные материалы, усвоение словарного запаса, сохранение лексики, английский как иностранный, контекстное обучение, коммуникативная компетенция, языковая педагогика

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge forms the foundation of communicative competence in second language learning. While grammar structures enable syntactic organization, vocabulary serves as the primary vehicle of meaning. Research consistently demonstrates that lexical proficiency strongly correlates with reading comprehension, listening ability, speaking fluency, and academic performance in a foreign language. Despite its importance, vocabulary instruction in many educational settings remains limited to decontextualized word lists and textbook exercises, often resulting in superficial memorization rather than durable acquisition.

In recent decades, language pedagogy has shifted toward communicative and learner-centered approaches. Within this paradigm, authentic materials have emerged as a prominent instructional resource. Authentic materials are defined as texts and media originally created for native speakers rather than for pedagogical purposes. These include newspapers, online articles, podcasts, films, interviews, advertisements, and social media content. The rationale for their inclusion lies in their capacity to expose learners to real-world language, natural discourse patterns, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded meanings.

However, the integration of authentic materials into vocabulary instruction presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, authentic input offers contextual richness that may facilitate deeper lexical processing. On the other hand, lexical density and complex discourse structures may overwhelm learners, particularly at lower proficiency levels. The pedagogical question, therefore, is not whether authentic materials are engaging, but whether they measurably enhance vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Although theoretical arguments in favor of authentic materials are well established,

empirical investigations yield mixed results. Some studies indicate that exposure to authentic texts improves vocabulary depth and contextual usage. Others report no significant difference compared to adapted materials when instructional scaffolding is insufficient. Furthermore, limited research has examined the long-term retention effects of authentic materials within controlled quasi-experimental frameworks.

The present study seeks to address this gap by systematically comparing vocabulary acquisition outcomes between students exposed to authentic materials and those instructed through traditional textbook-based resources. The research is grounded in cognitive theories of depth of processing and input interaction, which posit that meaningful engagement with contextualized language leads to stronger memory encoding and retrieval pathways.

The primary objective of this study is to determine whether the use of authentic materials in English classes significantly enhances vocabulary acquisition compared to traditional textbook-based instruction.

A secondary objective is to evaluate the impact of authentic materials on long-term vocabulary retention and contextual usage.

Additionally, the study aims to examine learners' perceptions of authentic materials and their influence on motivation and engagement during vocabulary learning.

The study is guided by the following hypotheses. First, students exposed to authentic materials will demonstrate significantly greater vocabulary gains on post-test assessments than students receiving textbook-based instruction.

Second, students in the experimental group will exhibit higher retention scores on delayed vocabulary tests administered four weeks after the instructional period.

Third, authentic materials will positively influence learners' motivation and perceived relevance of vocabulary learning.

Methodology. The present study employed a quasi-experimental research design with a pre-test–post-test control group structure. This design was selected to examine the causal relationship between instructional materials and vocabulary acquisition while maintaining ecological validity within a real classroom setting. Random assignment at the institutional level was not feasible; therefore, intact groups were designated as control and experimental cohorts. The independent variable was the type of instructional material used for vocabulary teaching. The dependent variables included immediate vocabulary gain, delayed retention scores, and contextual vocabulary usage performance. Qualitative learner perception data were also collected to supplement quantitative findings.

The study was conducted over a twelve-week instructional period during a regular academic semester. Both groups received equal instructional time and covered comparable thematic units to ensure consistency of exposure and learning objectives.

The participants were 64 undergraduate students enrolled in an English as a Foreign Language program at a university. All participants were classified as intermediate-level learners based on institutional placement tests aligned with CEFR B1–B2 descriptors.

The control group consisted of 32 students who received vocabulary instruction primarily through a standard course textbook. The experimental group included 32 students who were exposed to authentic materials integrated into vocabulary-focused lessons.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years. None had extensive experience living in an English-speaking environment. Prior to the study, all participants completed a diagnostic vocabulary assessment to ensure comparable lexical proficiency levels between groups. Independent-samples t-tests confirmed no statistically significant difference in baseline vocabulary knowledge.

Attendance throughout the study remained above 90 percent for both groups, minimizing potential bias caused by instructional exposure discrepancies.

The control group used a commercially available intermediate-level English textbook. Vocabulary items were presented in thematic units accompanied by definitions, example sentences,

controlled exercises, and short reading passages specifically designed for language learners.

The instructional approach emphasized explicit vocabulary explanation, guided practice, gap-fill exercises, and short comprehension tasks. While contextual examples were included, texts were simplified and adapted for pedagogical clarity.

The experimental group engaged with authentic materials selected according to three criteria: thematic relevance to the syllabus, lexical appropriateness for intermediate learners, and cultural accessibility.

Materials included newspaper articles from reputable English-language publications, short podcast excerpts, video interviews, opinion columns, and blog posts. Lexical items were not simplified but were selected based on frequency, usefulness, and contextual richness.

To prevent cognitive overload, instructors provided structured scaffolding. Pre-reading tasks activated background knowledge, while guided discussion and vocabulary mapping tasks supported comprehension. Rather than isolating vocabulary items, words were explored through contextual inference, semantic analysis, collocation identification, and discourse-level interpretation.

Vocabulary acquisition was measured using three primary instruments: a pre-test, an immediate post-test, and a delayed retention test administered four weeks after the instructional period.

The vocabulary test consisted of 60 target lexical items distributed across multiple item types, including multiple-choice meaning recognition, sentence completion tasks, collocation identification, and short contextual writing prompts. The test measured both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

Test reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

To assess contextual vocabulary usage, participants completed a short essay task requiring integration of newly learned vocabulary. Essays were evaluated using a rubric measuring lexical accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and diversity of usage.

Learner perceptions were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The questionnaire explored motivation, perceived difficulty, engagement, and perceived usefulness



of instructional materials.

At the beginning of the semester, all participants completed the pre-test to establish baseline vocabulary knowledge. The instructional intervention then proceeded for twelve weeks.

Both groups received four hours of English instruction per week. Approximately 40 percent of instructional time in both groups was devoted specifically to vocabulary-focused activities.

In the control group, vocabulary instruction followed the textbook sequence. Words were introduced explicitly, followed by structured practice and controlled application tasks.

In the experimental group, vocabulary was embedded within authentic texts. Instruction followed a guided discovery approach. Students were encouraged to infer meaning from context before formal clarification. Post-reading activities included semantic mapping, synonym exploration, phrase-building exercises, and group discussions using newly acquired vocabulary.

At the end of the twelve-week period, all participants completed the immediate post-test under standardized conditions. Four weeks later, without prior notice, the delayed retention test was administered to measure long-term vocabulary retention.

Qualitative questionnaires were distributed after the post-test to gather learner feedback.

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to examine within-group improvements between pre-test and post-test scores. Independent-samples t-tests compared post-test results between the experimental and control groups.

Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* to determine the magnitude of observed differences.

Delayed retention scores were analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA to assess changes across three testing points: pre-test, post-test, and delayed test.

Correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between vocabulary gains and learner-reported motivation levels.

Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$.

Results. The statistical analysis aimed to determine whether the integration of authentic materials significantly influenced vocabulary acquisition, retention, and contextual usage compared to textbook-based instruction.

Results are presented in relation to the study's hypotheses.

Independent-samples t-test analysis confirmed that there was no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups on the pre-test.

The control group obtained a mean score of 31.4 out of 60 with a standard deviation of 5.8. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 32.1 with a standard deviation of 6.1. The difference was not statistically significant at $p = 0.63$.

These results indicate that both groups began the study with comparable levels of vocabulary knowledge.

Within-group analysis using paired-samples t-tests revealed statistically significant improvements in both groups after the twelve-week intervention.

The control group improved from a mean score of 31.4 to 40.2, representing an average gain of 8.8 points. This improvement was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

The experimental group demonstrated a larger improvement, increasing from a mean score of 32.1 to 48.7, with an average gain of 16.6 points. This improvement was also statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

When comparing post-test results between groups using an independent-samples t-test, the difference was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. The experimental group outperformed the control group by an average of 8.5 points.

The calculated effect size using Cohen's *d* was 1.02, indicating a large effect of authentic materials on vocabulary acquisition.

In addition to overall vocabulary scores, analysis was conducted on productive and contextual vocabulary tasks.

Essay-based assessments demonstrated that students in the experimental group used newly acquired vocabulary more accurately and in more diverse collocational patterns. The experimental group achieved an average contextual usage score of 18.3 out of 25, whereas the control group scored 14.1 on average. The difference was statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

Lexical diversity analysis, measured through type-token ratio in written responses, indicated greater lexical variation in the experimental group. This suggests deeper integration of vocabulary rather than surface-level memorization.

Four weeks after the completion of instruction, participants completed a delayed retention test.

The control group's mean score declined from 40.2 on the immediate post-test to 36.8, reflecting partial loss of vocabulary retention.

The experimental group's mean score decreased from 48.7 to 46.9, indicating minimal decline compared to the control group.

Repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect between time and instructional condition at $p < 0.01$. The retention rate was significantly higher in the experimental group.

Retention percentage analysis showed that the experimental group retained approximately 96 percent of learned vocabulary, whereas the control group retained approximately 84 percent. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between learner-reported motivation and vocabulary improvement.

In the experimental group, a strong positive correlation was found between perceived engagement with authentic materials and vocabulary gains, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.68$ at $p < 0.01$.

In the control group, the correlation between motivation and vocabulary gains was weaker, with $r = 0.32$ at $p < 0.05$.

These findings suggest that authentic materials not only enhance vocabulary acquisition but also contribute to increased learner engagement, which in turn supports lexical development.

The data demonstrate that authentic materials significantly improved vocabulary acquisition outcomes compared to textbook-based instruction.

The experimental group achieved higher immediate gains, demonstrated stronger contextual vocabulary usage, and retained a greater proportion of learned vocabulary over time.

The magnitude of effect sizes indicates that the difference was not only statistically significant but also educationally meaningful.

Discussion. The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the hypothesis that authentic materials significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language classrooms. The experimental group demonstrated greater immediate gains, stronger contextual application of vocabulary, and superior long-term retention compared to the control group. These results suggest that authentic materials do not merely increase

exposure to lexical items but contribute to deeper cognitive processing and durable lexical integration.


From a cognitive perspective, the results align with the Depth of Processing Theory, which posits that information processed semantically and meaningfully is more likely to be retained. Authentic materials require learners to infer meaning from context, interpret discourse-level structures, and connect vocabulary to real-world usage. This level of engagement appears to strengthen memory encoding mechanisms and facilitate long-term retrieval.

The observed difference in retention rates is particularly significant. While both groups demonstrated improvement, the experimental group exhibited minimal decline on the delayed retention test. This finding suggests that authentic materials promote consolidation of lexical knowledge rather than short-term memorization. The reduced attrition of vocabulary in the experimental group may be attributed to contextual anchoring, which allows words to be embedded within meaningful semantic networks.

The increased lexical diversity observed in essay tasks further supports the argument that authentic materials enhance vocabulary depth. Rather than recalling isolated definitions, students demonstrated flexible usage of collocations and phraseological patterns. This indicates not only lexical recognition but productive competence. Such development is critical for communicative fluency and academic writing.

Motivation also emerged as a significant factor. The strong correlation between engagement and vocabulary gains in the experimental group suggests that authentic materials may indirectly influence acquisition through affective mechanisms. Learners reported that authentic texts felt relevant, contemporary, and intellectually stimulating. This heightened engagement likely contributed to sustained attention and deeper processing during instruction.

The findings correspond with communicative language teaching principles, which emphasize meaningful interaction with real language. Authentic materials appear to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communication, thereby increasing perceived relevance. In contrast, textbook-based materials,



while structured and pedagogically sequenced, may lack the dynamic variability present in authentic discourse.

However, the results must be interpreted with nuance. Authentic materials were carefully selected and scaffolded throughout the instructional period. Without appropriate pedagogical mediation, authentic texts may overwhelm learners due to lexical density and complex syntax. The effectiveness observed in this study may therefore depend heavily on instructional design rather than authenticity alone.

The quasi-experimental design strengthens the validity of the findings, yet certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional context, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the sample size, while sufficient for statistical analysis, remains moderate. Further multi-institutional studies could provide broader confirmation.

Another limitation concerns the duration of the delayed retention test. Although a four-week interval provides insight into medium-term retention, longitudinal studies spanning several months would offer deeper understanding of sustained lexical development.

Future research may explore how authentic materials affect different proficiency levels. It is possible that beginner learners require adapted scaffolding before benefiting fully from authentic input. Additionally, research could examine the role of digital authentic materials, such as social media and interactive online platforms, in vocabulary acquisition.

Investigating neurological or cognitive load aspects of authentic material processing may also contribute to theoretical understanding. Eye-tracking studies or cognitive response analysis could provide further insight into how learners engage with authentic texts at a processing level.

Conclusion. The present study examined the effect of authentic materials on vocabulary acquisition among intermediate-level English learners within a quasi-experimental framework. Quantitative findings revealed that learners exposed to authentic resources achieved significantly greater vocabulary gains, demonstrated superior contextual usage, and retained lexical items more effectively over time compared to learners receiving textbook-based instruction.

The results suggest that authentic materials

facilitate deeper lexical processing, promote semantic network formation, and enhance learner motivation. These factors collectively contribute to stronger and more durable vocabulary acquisition.

Pedagogically, the study supports the systematic integration of authentic materials into English language classrooms, provided that instruction includes appropriate scaffolding and structured guidance. Authentic input, when carefully selected and pedagogically mediated, serves not merely as a motivational tool but as a powerful mechanism for lexical development.

In conclusion, vocabulary acquisition benefits substantially from meaningful exposure to real-world language. Authentic materials offer learners access to natural discourse patterns, cultural context, and pragmatic usage, thereby bridging the divide between classroom instruction and communicative competence. Their integration into vocabulary instruction represents a pedagogically sound and empirically supported approach to enhancing lexical proficiency in English language education.

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