

Exploring ESL Learners' Experiences of Implicit Vocabulary Instruction and Its Role in Vocabulary Acquisition: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

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Vocabulary is central to second-language learning; however, explicit instruction and rote memorization continue to dominate many ESL classrooms in Pakistan. This qualitative study explored intermediate-level ESL learners' experiences of implicit vocabulary instruction and examined how contextual reading, incidental exposure, inferencing, and collaborative meaning-making contributed to vocabulary acquisition. Forty intermediate ESL learners—20 male and 20 female—were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 30–45 minutes and analyzed thematically. Five themes emerged: (1) increased word awareness and inferencing ability through engagement with texts; (2) greater confidence in independent reading; (3) collaborative meaning-making as pedagogical scaffolding; (4) persistent difficulty interpreting complex or ambiguous contexts; and (5) the influence of examination culture on vocabulary-learning strategies. The findings indicate that implicit vocabulary instruction can support lexical processing, retention, reading confidence, and learner autonomy, but its effectiveness depends on appropriate text selection, learners' proficiency, repeated exposure, and teacher support. The study contributes a learner-centered perspective to vocabulary pedagogy in Pakistan and recommends integrating implicit and explicit instruction within an assessment system that rewards meaningful language use.

Keywords: vocabulary acquisition, implicit vocabulary instruction, incidental learning, contextual reading, qualitative research, ESL learners



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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of second-language learning and a prerequisite for communicative competence. Wilkins' (1972) well-known observation that little can be conveyed without grammar but nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary captures the central role of lexical knowledge in communication. ESL learners require more than the ability to recall dictionary definitions; they must understand how words function in context for academic, professional, and everyday purposes. In Pakistan, English has substantial educational and socioeconomic value (Pathan, 2012), yet many learners continue to experience limited vocabulary and difficulty producing meaningful language despite years of formal instruction (Dar & Khan, 2015).

Research on Pakistani ESL classrooms suggests that vocabulary instruction often remains teacher-centered, decontextualized, and dependent on memorization and explicit recall (Anjum & Memon, 2020). Large classes, syllabus-driven teaching, examination pressure, limited resources, and inadequate training in communicative and learner-centered pedagogy further restrict opportunities for incidental and contextual vocabulary learning (Ghani & Hafeez, 2025; Saleem et al., 2025).

The distinction between explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction has therefore attracted sustained scholarly interest. Explicit instruction directs learners' conscious attention to word forms, meanings, and uses. Implicit instruction, by contrast, enables vocabulary learning to occur as a by-product of meaning-focused activities such as reading, listening, discussion, and communication (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1989). Under implicit learning conditions, learners may gradually develop knowledge of unfamiliar words through repeated and meaningful encounters without making deliberate memorization their primary goal.

Although implicit vocabulary learning is theoretically attractive, qualitative evidence from Pakistan remains limited. Existing studies tend to evaluate instructional techniques or measurable learning outcomes, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how learners themselves perceive and experience contextual and incidental word learning. The present study addresses this gap by exploring learners' experiences of implicit vocabulary instruction, the strategies they use, the conditions that support or constrain learning, and the influence of Pakistan's examination-oriented educational culture.

1.1. Research Questions

- What attitudes and perceptions do Pakistani ESL learners hold toward implicit vocabulary instruction?
- How do learners describe the influence of implicit vocabulary instruction on their vocabulary-learning strategies?
- What factors enable or constrain opportunities for implicit vocabulary learning?
- How does an examination-oriented educational system shape learners' engagement with implicit and explicit vocabulary learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Approaches to vocabulary learning have gradually shifted from behaviorist practices centered on repetition and memorization toward cognitive, lexical, and sociocultural perspectives that emphasize meaning, context, interaction, and repeated exposure. Nation (2010) conceptualizes word knowledge through three broad dimensions: form, meaning, and use. Knowledge of form includes spoken and written forms and word parts; knowledge of meaning includes form–meaning connections, concepts, referents, and associations; and knowledge of use includes grammatical

functions, collocations, and constraints. This multidimensional account demonstrates why memorizing a single dictionary definition cannot produce complete lexical competence.

Schmitt (2010) similarly views vocabulary knowledge as a continuum extending from initial recognition to fluent productive use. Lexical development is incremental: learners usually need to encounter a word repeatedly across different contexts before they can understand and use it accurately. The pedagogical challenge is therefore to create sufficient frequency, variety, and depth of exposure. Research on recycling lexical items also emphasizes that systematic re-encounters support retention and should be considered by teachers, learners, textbook writers, and test designers (Azim, Hussain, Bhatti, & Iqbal, 2020).

Explicit vocabulary instruction deliberately focuses learners' attention on target words through definitions, word lists, translation, memorization, and vocabulary exercises. It is efficient when learners require rapid access to high-frequency or examination-related vocabulary. Implicit or incidental learning occurs when vocabulary is acquired during meaning-oriented activity and the learner's principal aim is comprehension or communication rather than memorization (Rieder, 2003; Demir, 2013). The two approaches are not necessarily competing alternatives; each may serve different instructional purposes.

Krashen's (1989) Input Hypothesis provides theoretical support for incidental vocabulary acquisition by proposing that language develops through comprehensible input that is slightly beyond the learner's current competence. Repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts allows learners to infer, refine, and consolidate lexical knowledge. Ellis (1994) likewise explains that learners may abstract linguistic regularities through repeated exposure without full conscious awareness of the learning process.

Empirical debate nevertheless continues. Nation (2010) argues that deliberate vocabulary learning is necessary because incidental exposure alone may be too slow or uneven. Other researchers maintain that extensive reading can generate substantial vocabulary growth when texts are accessible, engaging, and sufficiently rich in recurring lexical items (Aslam et al., 2026). In practice, balanced instruction may be most appropriate: explicit teaching can clarify difficult or essential words, while contextual reading and communication can deepen, recycle, and extend knowledge.

The Pakistani context creates both opportunities and constraints for such integration. English is used extensively in education and employment in a multilingual society, but classroom teaching has traditionally prioritized grammar, text explanation, translation, and examination preparation. Vocabulary often receives limited systematic treatment, and learners may encounter few opportunities to infer meaning, negotiate understanding, or reuse words communicatively (Anjum & Memon, 2020; Ghani & Hafeez, 2025).

Recent Pakistani research has explored cooperative learning, morphology-based instruction, technology-assisted learning, and AI-supported language practice (Dad et al., 2024; Javed, 2025; Saleem et al., 2025). These studies indicate that vocabulary learning benefits from interaction, repeated exposure, meaningful application, and structured support. However, few studies have examined learners' lived experiences of implicit vocabulary learning in intermediate classrooms. The current study therefore focuses on the subjective processes through which learners notice words, infer meanings, collaborate with peers, develop confidence, and respond to examination demands.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate learners' subjective experiences of implicit vocabulary learning. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it enabled detailed examination of how participants perceived, engaged with, and benefited from contextual vocabulary-learning opportunities. The study was informed by Creswell and Poth's (2018) principles for rigorous qualitative inquiry.

3.2. Participants and Settings

The study was conducted at educational institutions in Punjab, Pakistan. Forty intermediate-level ESL learners aged 13–19 participated, comprising 20 male and 20 female students. Purposive sampling was used to obtain variation in gender, proficiency, and institutional background. At the time of data collection, all participants were enrolled in intermediate programs and had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least ten years.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on the research questions. The interview protocol was reviewed by experts in applied linguistics for content relevance and clarity. Questions addressed participants' vocabulary-learning difficulties, their experiences of explicit and implicit instruction, their use of contextual clues, and the role of reading and peer interaction. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were conducted in private rooms at the participants' institutions. English and Urdu were used flexibly so that participants could express themselves comfortably.

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants received clear information about the study and provided informed consent. They were informed that participation was voluntary, would not affect their academic standing, and could be discontinued at any time. The interview process was designed to minimize discomfort, particularly when participants discussed language anxiety or learning difficulties.

3.4. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The researchers familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed and refined the themes, defined and named them, and prepared the final report. Coding was conducted line by line, and patterns were developed through repeated comparison and revision. Member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail of analytical decisions were used to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis produced five themes: increased word awareness and inferencing ability; greater confidence in independent reading; collaborative meaning-making as scaffolding; persistent difficulties in complex contextual interpretation; and the influence of examination culture on vocabulary-learning strategies.

4.1. Theme 1: Increased Word Awareness and Inferencing Ability

Participants reported that contextual reading exposed them to unfamiliar words and gradually improved their ability to infer meanings. They described becoming more attentive to lexical items and using surrounding sentences, repeated encounters, and prior knowledge to construct approximate meanings.

"When I read English passages, I see words that I do not know. Sometimes I can work out their meanings from the surrounding sentences. When the same word appears in another passage, I become more familiar with it, although I may still not know its exact meaning." (Participant 1)

This account reflects the incremental character of implicit vocabulary acquisition described by Ellis (1994). Learners did not necessarily acquire complete word knowledge from a single encounter; rather, familiarity developed through repeated exposure in meaningful contexts.

"I can memorize the words that the teacher gives us for a test, but I often forget them afterwards. When the teacher reads a story and explains a word through the story, I remember the word, the story, and how the word was used." (Participant 9)

The participant distinguished short-term test preparation from durable contextual learning. This observation is consistent with Nation's (2010) emphasis on repeated contextual encounters and with the principle of lexical recycling, which promotes retention through planned re-exposure across tasks and contexts (Azim et al., 2020).

4.2. Theme 2: Greater Confidence in Independent Reading

Implicit vocabulary learning also appeared to strengthen reading confidence. Participants increasingly accepted that complete word-by-word comprehension was unnecessary for understanding the main idea of a text. This tolerance of ambiguity reduced anxiety and encouraged independent reading.

"At first, I was nervous about reading English books because I expected many unknown words. After reading in class, I realized that I do not need to know every word to understand the central idea. This has encouraged me to read more independently." (Participant 7)

Inferencing ability and tolerance of ambiguity are important components of successful second-language reading. The data suggest that contextual reading can help learners move from dependence on dictionaries and teachers toward more autonomous processing.

"Previously, one page could take me an hour because I checked every new word in the dictionary. Now I first try to infer the meaning from the passage. I stop less often, so reading is easier and more enjoyable." (Hasan)

For less proficient readers, this shift from word-by-word decoding to more global comprehension represented a significant development. The experience supports the view that contextual vocabulary learning can contribute simultaneously to motivation, fluency, and reading self-efficacy (Aslam et al., 2026).

4.3. Theme 3: Collaborative Meaning-Making as Pedagogical Scaffolding

Peer interaction and collaborative reading served as important forms of scaffolding. Participants described asking classmates for help, discussing possible meanings, and jointly interpreting texts. Collaboration enabled learners to remain engaged when individual inferencing was insufficient.

"Some students read difficult words aloud and explain them. Classmates help one another understand unfamiliar words. Sometimes we discuss the passage and reach a meaning together without the teacher explaining everything." (Mariam)

This process is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural account of learning, in which interaction supports cognitive development. The joint construction of word meaning may facilitate incidental vocabulary learning while also promoting supportive peer relationships.

"During reading lessons, I encounter words I do not know. When someone reads with me, I learn how to pronounce them, and talking to classmates often helps me understand better than reading alone." (Saima)

The finding also accords with Javed's (2025) evidence that collaborative learning can improve vocabulary retention among Pakistani learners. Structured peer discussion can therefore complement teacher explanation and create additional opportunities for implicit learning.

4.4. Theme 4: Persistent Difficulties in Complex Contextual Interpretation

Despite generally positive experiences, participants reported difficulty inferring unfamiliar words when texts were linguistically complex, conceptually unfamiliar, or contextually insufficient. Polysemous words were especially problematic because learners could select a meaning that did not fit the passage.

"Sometimes the context does not provide enough clues. If the passage is very difficult or concerns a topic I know little about, I cannot infer the meaning even after reading it repeatedly. At that point, I need an explanation or a dictionary." (Ahmed)

This limitation illustrates why implicit vocabulary learning depends on comprehensible input and adequate contextual support (Nation, 2010). Learners with limited proficiency may require explicit clarification, particularly when contextual cues are weak.

"Some words have more than one meaning. When I meet them in a passage, I am not always sure which meaning is correct. Sometimes I guess incorrectly, and that affects my understanding of the whole passage." (Nadia)

Inferencing alone cannot provide complete and consistently accurate word knowledge. As Schmitt (2010) notes, lexical competence includes collocation, grammatical behavior, semantic range, and contextual constraints. A balanced approach is therefore needed: learners should infer first where appropriate, but teachers should verify meanings and address difficult lexical features explicitly.

4.5. Theme 5: Examination Culture and Vocabulary-Learning Strategies

Examination culture strongly shaped participants' learning choices. Board examinations were perceived as rewarding exact definitions, prescribed meanings, and sentence-level recall rather than contextual understanding. Consequently, learners often returned to memorization even when they personally valued contextual learning.

"The examination requires us to learn exact word meanings. The teacher gives us a list for the test and asks us to define a word or use it in a sentence. Reading widely is not part of the examination plan." (Zara)

This assessment pattern can weaken the perceived relevance of implicit learning because students prioritize practices that appear directly linked to examination success.

"I enjoy reading and understanding words in context, but during examinations I prefer word lists. I do not have enough time to read many passages or stories when I am preparing for the test." (Imran)

Participants therefore adopted a dual strategy: memorization for examinations and contextual reading for what they regarded as genuine language learning.

"I use two methods: I memorize the list for the examination, and I try to read more when I want to learn English properly." (Sarah)

This distinction suggests that learners recognize the complementary value of explicit and implicit approaches but select between them according to assessment demands. More authentic assessment of vocabulary in context would make it easier to integrate meaningful vocabulary learning into Pakistani classrooms.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Pedagogical Recommendations

Teachers should combine implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction. Contextual reading can promote incidental learning, while focused explanation should be provided for essential, ambiguous, or low-frequency words.

Texts should be appropriately challenging, relevant to learners' interests, and rich enough in contextual clues to support inferencing. Less proficient learners require shorter texts, pre-reading support, and guided comprehension.

Collaborative reading should be structured through pair or group discussion, guiding questions, peer explanation, and joint interpretation of unfamiliar vocabulary.

Inferencing strategies should be taught explicitly. Learners should practice using definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms, word parts, grammatical information, and broader discourse context.

Target vocabulary should be recycled across readings, discussions, writing tasks, quizzes, and later units so that learners encounter words repeatedly in varied contexts.

5.2. Curriculum and Assessment Recommendations

Curriculum developers should reduce the mismatch between communicative learning objectives and examinations that reward isolated recall. Vocabulary assessment should include contextual interpretation, collocation, appropriate use, and meaning in discourse.

Extensive-reading opportunities should be provided both inside and outside the classroom. Graded readers can support inferencing, motivation, fluency, and confidence when selected according to proficiency.

Technology-assisted reading and vocabulary tools may increase exposure and recycling, but their selection should reflect accessibility, local context, learners' needs, and the availability of appropriate first-language support.

5.3. Teacher Professional Development

Teachers need sustained training in communicative and learner-centered vocabulary pedagogy, including the principles and limitations of implicit learning.

Professional-development workshops should demonstrate how to integrate explicit explanation, contextual reading, inferencing, collaborative learning, and lexical recycling.

Teachers should be supported in developing contextualized resources, comprehension questions, vocabulary guides, and activities that require learners to notice, infer, discuss, and reuse words.

5.4. Future Research

- Longitudinal studies should examine the durability of vocabulary learned through contextual and incidental exposure.
- Comparative studies should investigate the relative and combined effects of implicit and explicit instruction across proficiency levels and educational stages.
- Research on teachers' beliefs and classroom practices could clarify the practical conditions that support or obstruct instructional innovation.
- Classroom intervention studies should test feasible models of integrated vocabulary instruction in Pakistani institutions.
- Mixed-methods research should combine learners' qualitative experiences with quantitative measures of vocabulary growth, retention, and transfer.

6. CONCLUSION

This exploratory qualitative study examined Pakistani ESL learners' experiences of implicit vocabulary instruction through contextual reading, incidental exposure, inferencing, and collaborative meaning-making. Participants associated these experiences with greater word awareness, stronger inferencing ability, improved reading confidence, and increased independence. Repeated contextual encounters appeared to support more durable lexical learning

than isolated memorization, particularly when learners could connect a word with a story, passage, or communicative event.

The findings also demonstrate that implicit learning is neither automatic nor sufficient in every situation. Complex texts, limited background knowledge, weak contextual cues, and polysemous vocabulary can lead to misunderstanding. Learners therefore benefit from carefully selected texts, explicit instruction in inferencing, teacher clarification, peer support, and systematic recycling of lexical items.

A further constraint is the examination-oriented culture of Pakistani education. Participants frequently separated vocabulary learning for tests from vocabulary learning for meaningful communication. Sustainable improvement will require alignment among classroom pedagogy, curricular materials, teacher education, and assessment. The most promising approach is not to replace explicit instruction with implicit instruction, but to integrate both strategically so that learners can meet immediate academic demands while developing deeper, transferable, and communicatively useful vocabulary knowledge.

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