

Developing Lexical Competence Through Literature: A Study of Intermediate Students of Pakistan

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Abstract

This study brings to light the fact how much teaching English through literature renders any pay off in developing and honing the EFL/ESL learners' lexical competence. This study strives to investigate the role of literature in developing the ESL/EFL learners' lexical competence, find out the ESL/EFL learners' attitude towards teaching lexical competence through literature, know the lexical competence level of the ESL learners, examine ESL/EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and get insight into the difference between the ESL/EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary. In the Pakistani context, literature seems to be inadequate language teaching tool at HSSC level. To achieve the set objectives, the researcher went for the quantitative research methodology. So, a questionnaire comprising of 15 items encompassing the different aspects of vocabulary was designed to collect data from 600 subjects (male/female) of intermediate level. The researcher has also conducted "Vocabulary Level Test" and "Word Associate Test" as achievement tests. The collected data were analyzed through software package (SPSS XX). The findings of this study explicitly reveal that the EFL learners remain unable to develop lexical competence when they are taught English through literature. This study recommends that the teaching of English should be application oriented and task-based strategies and activities should be resorted to by the EL educators.

Keywords: lexical competence, literature, ESL learners, language skill, activities

1. Introduction

Lexical competence is a part of linguistic competence rather more precisely a part of semantic competence (Marconi, 1997). Lexis or vocabulary refers to an item of meaning. The leaning of second language involves the comprehension, acquisition and recalling of lexical items as it constitutes the base of learning language. Lexical competence also means the knowledge of the vocabulary of a language and the ability to use it (The Council of Europe, 2001). Thirmumalai (2002) claims that lexical competence not only means knowing the meanings of the words but it also means having the knowledge the way these words are used in their sociolinguistic, linguistic and cultural context.

This study strives to highlight that traditional approach to teaching vocabulary i.e., through literature or text books leads the ESL learners to de-motivation, frustration and unsuccessful communication. The ESL/EFL learners of intermediate level are mostly found afflicted with the vocabulary deficit as vocabulary teaching is a relatively disregarded aspect in the process of language teaching and learning in the context of Pakistan particularly at intermediate level. It has been found out that poor vocabulary is one of the most important constraints in successful communication. It has aptly been said that one can survive without grammar but cannot survive without vocabulary. The lack of lexical competence is a major obstacle for the learners in learning language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing (Malek, 2000). The reason behind this lies in the approach adopted by the FL teachers who do not give due importance to those activities which can be helpful in honing the ESL learners' lexical competence.

The problem that confronts the researcher is that when the EFL/ESL learners are taught vocabulary through literature, they remain unable to develop their vocabulary to the fullest extent. This becomes more challenging when they have to learn vocabulary anew in order to pass the entrance examinations conducted by different

universities. In these exams, these ESL/EFL learners have to attempt the questions like synonyms, antonyms, analogies and sentence completion. These are the questions which the ESL/EFL learners are not exposed to during their college career of two years.

1.1 Significance of Lexical Competence

Lexical competence enjoys the status of a pivotal aspect in the second/foreign language teaching and learning because of its transversality in linguistics and sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language. Nam (2010) highlights the significance of the teaching and learning of vocabulary in the ESL context when he claims that the learning of vocabulary paves the way for the honing of the language skills. He considers the poor vocabulary an impediment to the effective learning of English language. Harmon et al. (2009) claim that it is an on-going process in which the EFL learners encounter new words used in a meaningful and comprehensible text. In this regard, Robb (2009) also opines that a rich vocabulary ensures comprehension and learning.

1.2 Significance of English in Pakistan

English has become an international language or an “international lingua franca”. It has achieved such a status as is recognized by every country across the world. In Pakistan, English occupies a place of honor and prestige among the languages spoken here. In recent times, owing to the remarkable success of the English-speaking nations in the fields of industry and politics, the people, governments, and institutions have steered their focus and interest towards this language. It has generally been observed that strong language competence renders students good pedestal and they get entry into higher institutions as the learning of English language yields so much intense importance in Pakistan in the present scenario. English has also become the symbol of education and an elite status in the Pakistani society and has become the language of media, science, technology and a means of inter-national as well as intra-national communication. Ghani (2003) styles this language “a gateway to success” in Pakistan. Akram & Mehmood (2007) have analyzed the factors which motivate the Pakistani students to go for the learning of English language. They claim that the motivational factors like studies abroad, greater job opportunities, social or missionary aspirations, better economic prospects and academic ends make them learn this language.

1.3 Teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language in Pakistan

English is a compulsory subject up to graduation level in Pakistan but it has been observed that even after spending a lot of time in learning English, majority of school and college students are unable to write grammatically correct English. It has been observed that the teaching of English in Pakistan, specifically in state-run schools and colleges, is highly ritualized. Seldom do the students focus on learning English when they are mentally obsessed in learning texts for the sake of its reproduction. According to Coleman (2012), the reproduction of set texts and the provision of memorized written answers to questions about those texts mean that the teaching of English neglects speaking, listening and critical reading which are termed as the integral features of language competence. Akram & Mehmood (2007) have also analyzed and enumerated some of the problems and challenges which are being faced in teaching English as a foreign language in Pakistan. A very pertinent and relevant issue regarding the teaching of English as a foreign language in Pakistan has been raised by them is that of medium i.e. literature. They seem to be convinced that this medium of teaching English language is inadequate to impart the required competence among the learners of this language.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the role of literature in developing the ESL/EFL learners’ lexical competence.
- To find out the ESL/EFL learners’ attitude towards teaching lexical competence through literature.
- To know the size of the ESL/EFL learners’ vocabulary.
- To examine ESL/EFL learners’ vocabulary knowledge.
- To get insight into the difference between the ESL/EFL learners’ receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary.

1.5 Research Questions

- What is the role of literature in developing the ESL/EFL learners’ lexical competence?
- What is the ESL/EFL learners’ attitude towards teaching lexical competence through literature?
- What is the size of the ESL/EFL learners’ vocabulary?
- How much is the ESL/EFL learners’ vocabulary knowledge.

- What is the difference between the ESL/EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary?

2. Literature Review

Caro & Mendinueta (2017) have presented a review regarding lexis, lexical competence and lexical knowledge. In this respect, they have thrown light on the difference between the concepts of vocabulary and lexis, the definition of lexical competence and its various aspects and the framework of lexical competence. Above all this, Caro & Mendinueta (2017) have explicated the concepts of the breadth and depth of lexical knowledge. According to the researchers, lexical breadth means the number of words which a learner knows while the depth of lexical knowledge stands for a multidimensional constructs which includes not only pronunciation and spellings but also the quality of learners' vocabulary, extent of a learners' knowledge of vocabulary, morphological and syntactic properties and the depth of knowledge regarding the word association and interaction in their proper context.

Kaur et al. (2013) have explored those factors which cause the lack of lexical knowledge among the tertiary students. They think that the learners' confidence level, learning strategies, poor academic habits, lack of extra efforts and initiative, much too reliance on dictionary, non-transferability of learning, lack of post-class communication with the teacher and traditional pedagogical approach contribute a lot in the lack of ESL/EFL learners' lexical competence.

Lexical knowledge is a multifaceted phenomenon and it not only includes vocabulary size but also vocabulary depth and its use (Yuksel, 2011). That's why Yuksel (2011) claims that lexical competence is an umbrella term and encompasses all the afore-mentioned components. The researcher has reviewed different models regarding lexical competence and among these models are separate trait model, global model, two dimensional modal and three dimensional models. Yuksel (2011) also seems to be convinced that the receptive and productive components of vocabulary are interconnected. Taking into account all of these components is an imperative requisite for gaining an insight into the ESL/EFL learners' lexical competence.

Mohideen (2012) believes that lexical competence means the learning of form, meaning, distribution, connotation and denotation of the lexical items. Word association, euphemistic expressions, sense relations, collocations, religious aspects and idioms are also aspects of lexical items as are encompassed by the domain of lexical competence. The knowledge of the offensive vocabulary and inappropriate use of lexical items also involves lexical competence. Nam (2010) highlights the significance of the teaching and learning of vocabulary in the ESL context when he claims that the learning of vocabulary paves the way for the honing of the language skills. He considers the poor vocabulary an impediment to the effective learning of English language. Harmon et al. (2009) claim that it is an on-going process in which the EFL learners encounter new words used in a meaningful and comprehensible text. Recognizing the significance of different classroom activities and strategies to enhance the EFL learners' vocabulary, Halstijn & Laufer (2001) maintain that the EFL learners should go for composition tasks because they ensure the retention of the target vocabulary items. They are also of the opinion that those students who engage themselves in composition tasks i.e., "vocabulary production processing" remember the vocabulary items better than those learners who don't. The same strategy for the better and longer retention of vocabulary has also been suggested by Lee & Muncie (2006).

El-Dakhs (2015) has conducted a study to examine the EFL Arab University students' vocabulary knowledge through a gap-fill task for the subjects' productive knowledge of general service as well as academic vocabulary. The subjects of this study are the students of preparatory, second and fourth year students of the university education. The researcher has also investigated the influence of medium of instruction on the lexical development of the students of two different departments of the university. El Dakhs (2015) has reached the findings that the students of Saudi High Schools have relatively poor vocabulary knowledge. The researcher has also found out that the students' productive knowledge is much less than their receptive knowledge. This study has also shown that an increased language exposure improves the lexical competence of the learners. Shah et al. (2013) have conducted a study to discriminate the intermediate L2 learners' status of language by establishing the validity and reliability of lexical frequency profile. The subjects of this study belong to rural background of Pakistan. They have found out that the Pakistani learners particularly the learners having rural background need such a teaching plan as can ensure their vocabulary knowledge. To this end, these researchers suggest that vocabulary learning strategies should be an integral part of syllabus designing. Shah et al. (2013) recommend that teachers use the results of lexical richness to determine and identify the L2 learners' lexical needs.

3. Research Methodology

This study is primarily quantitative in nature. So, the researcher has gone for the quantitative research methodology. According to Dornyei (2011), "quantitative research involves data collection procedures that result

primarily in numerical data which is then analyzed primarily by statistical methods.” Typical example: survey research using a questionnaire, analyzed by statistical software such as SPSS version XX.

3.1 Population and Subjects of the Study

The population of this study is all the intermediate students of the Punjab. The subjects of the present study are 600 (male and female) students of intermediate level of different colleges of Pakistan.

3.2 Research Instruments

The research instruments of this study are a questionnaire and achievement tests.

3.2.1 Questionnaire

To obtain data from the sample of the study, a questionnaire consisting of fifteen questionnaire items encompassing the different aspects of vocabulary was constructed so that the maximum aspects of the major areas of lexical competence might be explored. All the questionnaire items of this research instrument are close-ended in Likert scale and the respondents have been asked to mark their response from “strongly agree (SA)” to “strongly disagree (SDA)”.

3.2.2 Achievement Tests

In order to test the ESL learners’ productive and receptive knowledge of vocabulary, the researcher conducted two tests i.e. Vocabulary Levels Test designed by Paul Nation and Batia Laufer in 1999 and Word Associate Test designed by Read (2004). Vocabulary Levels Test was administered to estimate the size and the knowledge of the ESL learners’ vocabulary at five different levels. It is a gap-fill test which consists of five levels of which each has 18 points and the pass marks for this test are 83 for each section. The results of this test were categorized into five groups i.e., 00-20, 21-40, 41-60, 61-80 and 81-100 percent.

The researcher also conducted Word Associate Test to know the ESL learners’ receptive knowledge of vocabulary. In fact, this test was divided into two sections. The first section was named Word Synonym Test while the second was termed as Word Association Test. Here, each test consisted of 40 points with four distracters each. The students were asked to select two words which they thought relevant to the stimulus word in each test. The results of this test were categorized into five groups i.e., 00-30, 31-45, 46-60, 61-75, 76-90 and 91-100 percent. All the results of this study have been presented in the tabular form and they have also been illustrated with the help of charts.

4. Results & Discussion

Table 1. ESL/EFL Learners’ attitude toward teaching and learning lexical competence through literature

S. No.	Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SDA	Mean	SD
1	I can easily comprehend the contextual meaning of the lexical items used in the text.	141	375	6	65	13	2.96	1.312
2	Only the synonyms of the lexical items used in the text are tested in the exams.	119	347	18	96	20	3.94	.934
3	I cannot detect the connotative meaning of the used lexical item in the text.	25	164	9	279	123	3.75	1.052
4	I learn through text how words change their forms.	34	154	6	275	131	2.48	1.208
5	During the reading of text books, I give due importance to homonyms.	118	282	10	145	45	2.48	1.242
6	While teaching a piece of literature, idiomatic expressions and their usage are not always discussed.	122	379	00	72	27	3.47	1.256
7	The reading of the text books always helps me in enhancing my word bank.	130	302	10	120	38	3.83	1.03
8	In text books, I do not get access to many words of spoken and written material in modern English.	65	232	16	239	48	3.61	1.206
9	I always focus on the pronunciation of new lexical items when they become the part of my word bank.	34	217	10	266	73	3.05	1.241
10	Contracted forms are practiced when I come across them in text books.	102	243	12	182	61	2.79	1.215
11	Punctuation is always focused during the teaching of a lesson.	108	308	13	132	39	3.24	1.32
12	Through literature, I do not learn how to make appropriate linguistic of lexical items according to the situation I am in.	63	205	11	275	46	3.52	1.201
13	I get a comprehensive command over my spellings in the language class.	147	333	6	99	15	2.94	1.235
14	I have to use dictionary to look up the meaning of lexical items used in the text.	23	152	8	254	163	3.83	1.055
15	In English class, the teacher teaches vocabulary through different activities.	120	362	10	94	14	2.36	1.23

The respondents were asked to render their opinion regarding the use of vocabulary in teaching English through literature. In this respect, they were asked such questions as encompassed the areas like connotative and denotative meanings of the lexical items, homonyms, idiomatic expressions, pronunciation, contracted forms, spellings and the use of dictionary. The respondents were also asked if they could become able to make an appropriate choice of the lexical items after their being taught English through literature.

In order to explore the use of vocabulary in the teaching of English through literature, the present study finds that the EFL learners develop their word bank and improve their spellings when they are taught English through literature. According to this study, 83.5% of the subjects claim that the reading of the textbooks always helps them enhance their word bank. In order to unearth the role of literature particularly that of the short-stories in building the EFL learners' vocabulary, Al-Dersi (2013) has also conducted a study in which he demonstrates that short-stories promote an elementary grasp of English to internalize vocabulary and an extensive reading increases vocabulary level of the EFL learners. He rounds off his study by maintaining that short-stories are a powerful pedagogic tool in order to promote EFL learners' vocabulary development by making the process more enjoyable and meaningful. He also claims that this linguistically rich device needs adequate attention and strategy in any program of vocabulary teaching.

The present study also demonstrates that 80% subjects of this study claim that the teaching of English through literature also motivates the EFL learners to use dictionary to look up the meaning of the unknown lexical items of their textbooks. In this regard, other researchers like Laufer & Hills (2000) suggest that the EFL learners can learn the unknown lexical items by using dictionary which offers effective and useful look-up options. In the same way, Mountain (2001) suggests that the use of thesaurus can also be useful for vocabulary teaching.

The present study has brought to light the fact that only the synonyms are asked in the class and the examination hall. It has been corroborated by 86% of the subjects of the present study. It has also been found that mostly the EFL learners tend to ignore other aspects of vocabulary. For instance, antonyms, collocation, connotative meaning of the lexical items of the target language remain unfocussed in the language class. The other aspects of vocabulary teaching like how the lexical items change their forms, the use of idiomatic expressions and the choice of appropriate lexical items and their usage remain ignored in the language class. This is so the EFL learners are supposed to prepare just the text for the examination ends. But in spite of all these things, the learning of synonyms helps the EFL learners reap some benefits while being taught English through literature. These findings of this study relate with those reached at by Webb (2007) who has conducted a study on the effects of synonymy on the learning of second-language vocabulary. The results of Webb's (2007) study indicate synonymy may facilitate vocabulary learning. The researcher demonstrates that learners may acquire knowledge of synonyms more easily than non-synonyms.

The present study also brings to light the fact that the FL educators do not take pains to design and develop such activities as can ensure the comprehensive learning of the L2 vocabulary. This study shows that 69.5% of the respondents disagree to the statement that in English class the teacher teaches vocabulary through different activities. Recognizing the significance of different classroom activities and strategies to enhance the EFL learners' vocabulary, Halstijn & Laufer (2001) maintain that the EFL learners should go for composition tasks because they ensure the retention of the target vocabulary items. They are also of the opinion that those students who engage themselves in composition tasks i.e., "vocabulary production processing" remember the vocabulary items better than those learners who don't. The same strategy for the better and longer retention of vocabulary has also been suggested by Lee & Muncie (2006).

It has also been found that prescribed nature of the syllabus, even already marked topics; ready-made material and traditional approach of the FL educators hamper the way to teach vocabulary in a comprehensive way in the language class. The same reservations have been expressed by Berne & Blachowicz (2008) who maintain that some of the teachers are not well-conversant with the best strategies for the teaching of vocabulary.

As far the EFL learners' level of vocabulary is concerned, this study finds that they do not get any chance to know how to make choice of an appropriate lexical item, learn homonyms and the connotative meanings of lexical items of the target language. It has also been found that this is due to the absence of adequate strategies and proper activities to teach vocabulary in the language class. This study also takes into account the study conducted by Dole et al. (1995) in which they reason that if the EFL learners have understanding about the procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge, it will not only exercise a positive influence on their learning of L2 vocabulary but it also will improve their comprehension of the text they read. By procedural knowledge they mean "how" to select a lexical item while by conditional knowledge they mean "why" a lexical item has been selected.

Table 2. ESL/EFL learners' size & productive knowledge of vocabulary

Levels	Groups				
	00-20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81-100%
Level 2000	80	152	168	144	56
Level 3000	268	206	82	44	00
Level 5000	220	272	74	34	00
UWL	300	220	56	24	00
Level 10000	496	86	12	06	00

Table 2 consists of the ESL learners' score of the achievement test. This test comprised of five levels and the score of the ESL learners has been categorized into five groups. The results of each level of the test have been discussed as follows;

Level 1

The first level is termed as 2000 level. Table 2 shows that there are 80 (13.3%) students who have scored in between 00 to 20 percent of the total score and 152 ESL learners fall between 21 to 40 percent whereas 28% students' score is between 41 to 60 percent. The students whose score is between 61 to 80 percent are 144 (24%). Only 9.3 percent of the subjects of the study are those who have passed this test as there is score is between 81 to 100 percent. All these results have been illustrated in the chart given as follows;

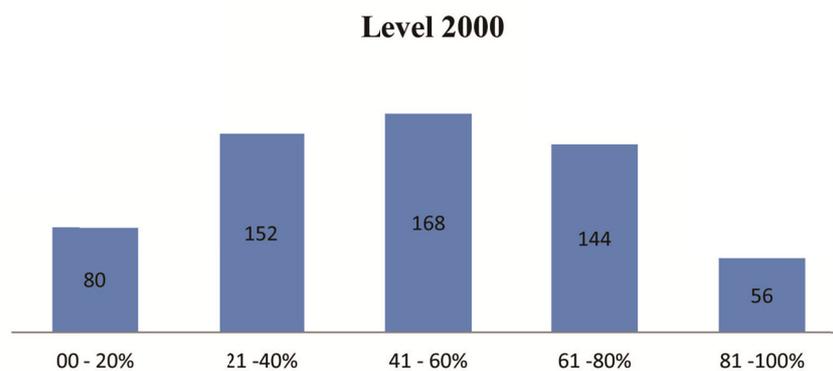


Figure 1. Results of 2000 level

Level 2

Table 2 shows that at 3000 level, there are 268 (44.7%) ESL learners have scored between 00 to 20 percent while 206 (34.3%) students are those who have got score between 21 to 40 percent. The ESL learners who belong to the third group of the test are 13.7% percent of the whole subjects of the present study and 44 (7.3%) students are able to score between 61 to 80%. None of the students has scored between 81 to 100 percent. All these statistics have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

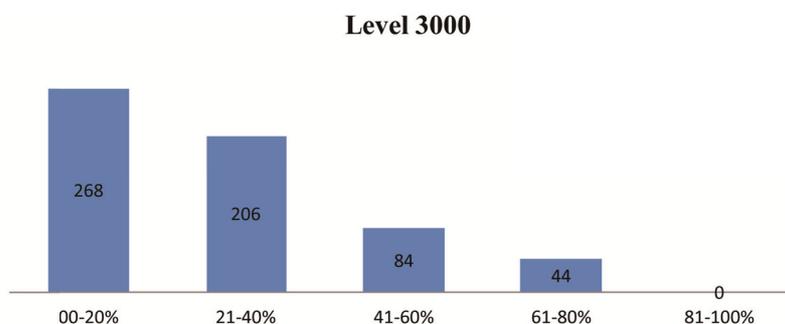


Figure 2. Results of 3000 level

Level 3

Table 2 shows that at 5000 level, there are 220 (36.7%) ESL learners have scored between 00 to 20 percent while 272 (45.3%) students are those who have got score between 21 to 40 percent. The ESL learners who belong to the third group of the test are 12.3% percent of the whole subjects of the present study and 34 (5.7%) students are able to score between 61 to 80%. None of the students has scored between 81 to 100 percent. All these statistics have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

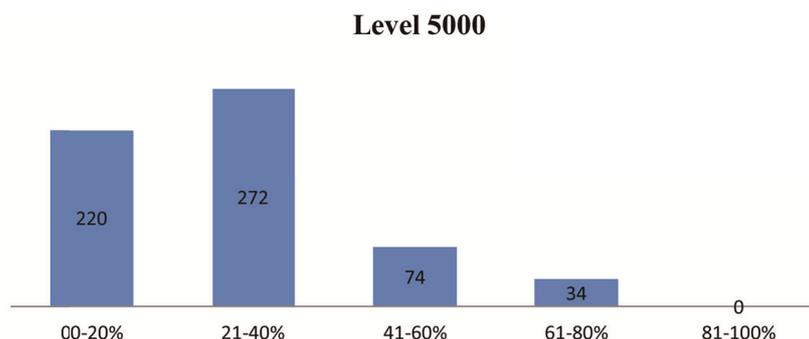


Figure 3. Results of 5000 level

Level 4

Table 2 shows that at UWL level, there are 300 (50%) ESL learners have scored between 00 to 20 percent while 220 (36.7%) students are those who have got score between 21 to 40 percent. The ESL learners who belong to the third group of the test are 56 (9.3%) percent of the whole subjects of the present study and 24 (4%) students are able to score between 61 to 80%. None of the students has scored between 81 to 100 percent. All these statistics have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

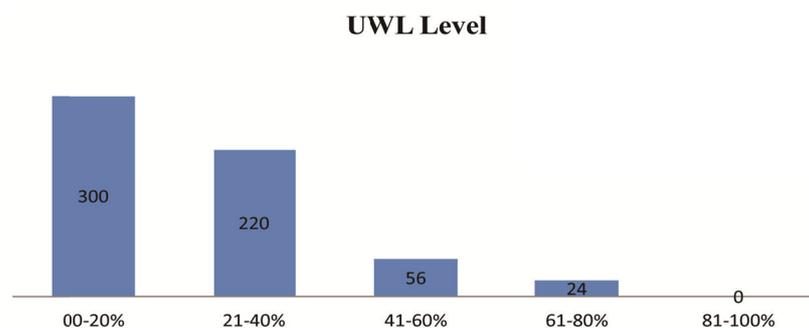


Figure 4. Results of UWL level

Level 5 Table 2 shows that at 10000 level, there are 496 (82.7%) ESL learners have scored between 00 to 20 percent while 86 (14.3%) students are those who have got score between 21 to 40 percent. The ESL learners who belong to the third group of the test are just 2% percent of the whole subjects of the present study and 6 (1%) students are able to score between 61 to 80%. None of the students has scored between 81 to 100 percent. All these statistics have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

Level 10000

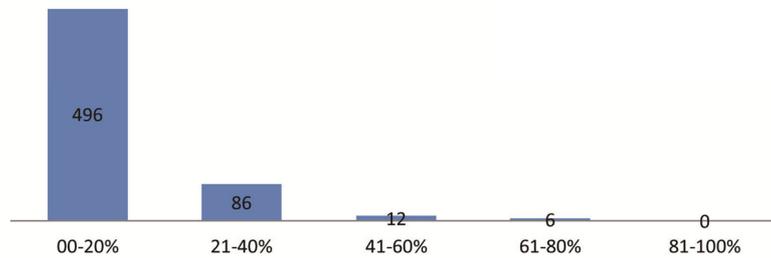


Figure 5. Results of level 10000

This study has also found out that with the increase of the vocabulary level the number of the ESL learners in 00-20 percent group also increases. This shows the poor level of the ESL learners’ vocabulary size and knowledge. This trend also demonstrates that the ESL learners in Pakistan are unable to enhance their vocabulary knowledge when they are taught English language particularly vocabulary through literature. Figure 6 shows how this group (00-20% group) swells with the increase in the vocabulary level.

00-20% Group

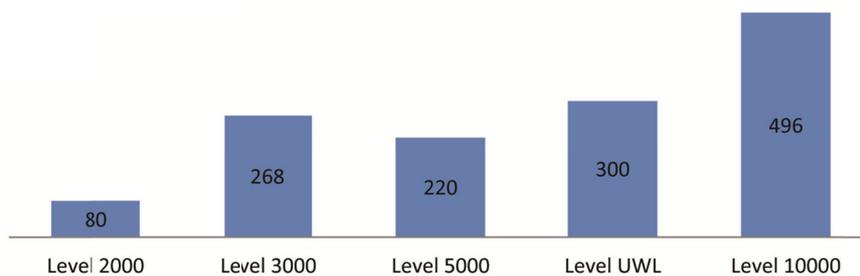


Figure 6. Increasing number in 00-20% group

Table 3. Results of word synonym test

Level	Groups					
	00 30%	31 45%	46 60%	61 75%	76 90%	91 100%
Word Synonyms	51	59	140	253	90	07

Table 3 shows that the ESL learners who fall between 00 to 30 percent are 51 and they are the 8.5% of the whole population of the study while the students who belong to second group (31-45%) are 59 and they comprise the 9.8% of the total subjects of the study. There are 23.3% (140) ESL learners whose core varies between 46 to 60 percent. On the other hand, majority of the ESL learners i.e. 253 (24.2%) are those students who fall in the fourth group whose score is between 61 to 75 percent whereas there are 15% (90) learners who have scored between 76 to 90 percent. Only 7 ESL learners are those whose score is between 91 to 100 percent and they comprise the 1.17 percent of the population of the study. All these analyses have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

Results of Word Synonym Test

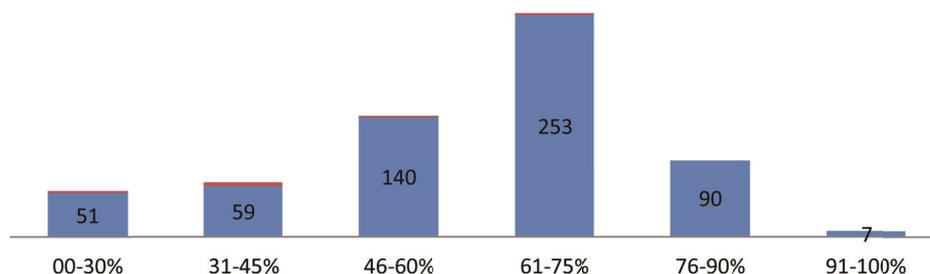


Figure 7. Results of word synonym test

Table 4: Results of word associate test

Levels	Groups					
	00_30%	31_45%	46_60%	61_75%	76_90%	91_100%
Word Association	39	67	281	184	24	05

Table 4 shows that the ESL learners who fall between 00 to 30 percent are 39 and they are the 6.5% of the whole population of the study while the students who belong to second group (31-45%) are 67 and they comprise the 11.17% of the total subjects of the study. There are 46.83% (281) ESL learners whose core varies between 46 to 60 percent. On the other hand, 30.7% (184) of the ESL learners are those who fall in the fourth group whose score is between 61 to 75 percent whereas there are 4% (24) learners who have scored between 76 to 90 percent. Only 5 ESL learners are those whose score is between 91 to 100 percent and they comprise the 0.83 percent of the population of the study. All these analyses have been illustrated in the figure given as follows.

Results of Word Associate Test

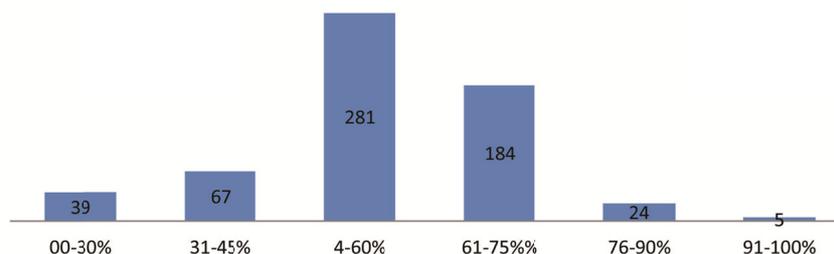


Figure 8. Results of word associate test

5. Conclusion

This study has made a probe into the use of literature in developing lexical competence at intermediate level with a particular context of the Pakistani ESL learners. This study explicitly reveals that students do not get a chance, in the real sense, to develop their lexical competence when they are taught English language through literature. They remain unable to learn about the connotative meanings of the lexical items used in their textbooks, how these lexical items change their forms and the choice of the appropriate lexical item. However, it has also been brought to light that the students develop their word bank in learning English through literature so far the synonyms are considered in the given context. But this does not develop their size of vocabulary and productive and receptive knowledge of vocabulary. This study recommends that the teaching of English should be application oriented and task-based strategies and activities should be resorted to by the EL educators.

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