

Towards a Systematic Description of Lexical Units for Developing EFL Learners' Professional Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This article explores methodological approaches to the development of lexical competence in professionally oriented foreign language instruction. In contemporary higher education, effective professional communication in a foreign language requires not only grammatical accuracy but also a well-structured system of lexical knowledge relevant to a specific field. The study aims to examine the theoretical foundations of lexical skill formation and to identify an optimal set of lexical abilities necessary for preparing students for professional interaction. The research is based on the analysis of methodological and psychological literature devoted to vocabulary instruction and speech activity. The paper considers the distinction between productive and receptive lexical skills, their psychophysiological foundations, and the structural components of lexical competence. Particular attention is paid to the stages of lexical skill formation and to the role of collocations, semantic associations, and situational relevance in mastering professional vocabulary. The findings demonstrate that effective lexical training should integrate semanticization, automatisisation, contextual practice, and the development of compensatory strategies. The study concludes that a systematic and communicatively oriented approach to teaching lexical units ensures their accurate retrieval, appropriate combination, and flexible use in professional discourse, thereby enhancing students' overall professional communicative competence.

Keywords

Lexical competence; lexical units; professionally oriented language teaching; professional communicative competence.

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Introduction

Effective foreign language instruction has increasingly shifted from a predominantly grammatical orientation toward a more comprehensive model of communicative competence that places strong emphasis on lexical knowledge. Contemporary frameworks of language proficiency stress that vocabulary range, precision, and appropriateness are central to successful communication in academic and professional domains (Council of Europe, 2018). In professionally oriented contexts, learners must not only understand grammatical structures but also comprehend and produce field-specific discourse shaped by conventionalized lexical patterns.

Lexical units extend beyond individual words to include multi-word collocations, terminological expressions, and formulaic sequences that function as meaningful wholes in communication. The lexical approach conceptualizes language as being largely composed of prefabricated chunks rather than solely rule-generated sentences (Lewis, 1993). From this perspective, verb–noun and adjective–noun combinations, institutionalized expressions and discipline-specific phraseological units constitute the building blocks of fluent professional discourse. Mastery of such units is essential for achieving both accuracy and naturalness in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings.

Research over the past decade has demonstrated that lexical knowledge is strongly associated with communicative effectiveness, particularly when learners acquire vocabulary in contextually embedded and collocationally rich environments. Studies indicate that contextualized lexical instruction enhances vocabulary retention and meaning disambiguation more effectively than isolated word memorization (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2020). Furthermore, corpus-informed investigations show that frequent co-occurrence patterns facilitate faster processing and retrieval, supporting psycholinguistic models of chunk-based storage and access (Ellis, 2015; Webb & Nation, 2017). Recent empirical findings also confirm that explicit attention to collocations improves both receptive comprehension and productive performance in ESP classrooms (Boers et al., 2021; Zhang & Graham, 2022).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of lexical chunks and collocations, there remains a lack of systematic frameworks that clearly define the criteria for lexical unit formation and explain how these criteria can be pedagogically operationalized in professional language instruction. While previous studies have explored lexical competence in communicative and blended learning environments (Boers et al., 2021; Zhang & Graham, 2022), limited attention has been paid to integrating structural characteristics of lexical units (e.g., frequency of co-occurrence, semantic compatibility, register appropriateness) with psycholinguistic retrieval processes and staged instructional design. In particular, empirical work mapping the relationship between lexical unit types and their functional deployment in professional discourse communities remains underexplored.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address this gap by synthesizing contemporary theoretical perspectives on lexical skill formation and proposing a comprehensive set of criteria for selecting and combining lexical units in professionally oriented foreign language instruction. The study aims to (a) clarify the structural and functional dimensions of lexical competence, (b) systematize lexical combination criteria grounded in corpus and psycholinguistic research, and (c) outline pedagogically actionable components for integrating lexical units into ESP

curricula to support both receptive and productive language development. By offering a structured and theoretically grounded framework, this study contributes to advancing research and practice in lexical competence development within professional language education.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is conceptual in design and is situated within contemporary research on lexical competence, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and usage-based approaches to second language development. Rather than reporting primary empirical data, the paper advances a theoretically grounded synthesis aimed at systematizing the description of lexical units in professionally oriented EFL instruction.

Recent scholarship published in leading journals such as *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* (post-2020) converges on the view that lexical competence is multidimensional and functionally distributed across receptive, productive, strategic, and discourse-organizational domains (Schmitt, 2020; Webb, 2020). Vocabulary knowledge is no longer conceptualized as a static form–meaning pairing; instead, it is understood as dynamic, probabilistic, and usage-sensitive knowledge embedded in phraseological patterning and genre-specific discourse practices (Ellis, 2015; Schmitt, 2020).

From a usage-based and psycholinguistic perspective, lexical development is shaped by frequency effects, associative network strengthening, and repeated contextual activation. High-frequency collocations, lexical bundles, and formulaic sequences become cognitively entrenched, enabling faster retrieval and reduced processing load during real-time communication (Ellis, 2015; Wray, 2002). Professional discourse, in particular, is characterized by dense phraseological structuring, including discipline-specific noun phrases, verb–noun collocations, stance expressions, and institutionalized reporting patterns (Hyland, 2008; Biber & Gray, 2016). Mastery of such patterned language is a defining feature of professional communicative competence.

Within ESP and EAP research, lexical units are increasingly treated as combinatorial constructions rather than isolated lexical items (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2020). These include:

- single lexical items with field-specific semantic extensions;
- collocations (e.g., adjective–noun, verb–object patterns);
- lexical bundles and recurrent multi-word sequences;
- terminological compounds and semi-fixed expressions;
- discourse-organizing and evaluative phraseology typical of institutional genres.

Their formation and pedagogical selection are governed by several interrelated criteria:

1. Frequency and distributional regularity in discipline-specific corpora;
2. Semantic compatibility and argument structure constraints;
3. Collocational strength and colligational probability;
4. Register and genre specificity;
5. Communicative function within professional tasks.

Recent empirical research demonstrates that productive lexical control does not automatically derive from receptive familiarity. Instead, the transition from recognition to

fluent deployment requires structured output practice, noticing of phraseological constraints, and repeated engagement with authentic disciplinary discourse (Boers et al., 2021; Webb, 2020). Moreover, corpus-informed and data-driven learning approaches have been shown to strengthen learners' sensitivity to combinatorial norms and increase flexibility in lexical variation (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Lee, Warschauer, & Lee, 2019).

Conceptually, lexical skill in professionally oriented EFL instruction can therefore be defined as a synthesized and automatized capacity to:

- retrieve lexical units rapidly and accurately;
- integrate them into syntagmatic chains consistent with genre conventions;
- adapt them strategically through paraphrasing and substitution;
- regulate lexical choice in accordance with communicative intention and professional context.

This view aligns with contemporary models of skill acquisition that conceptualize language learning as a progression from controlled semantic processing to automatized and flexible performance (DeKeyser, 2015). Lexical development proceeds through stages of:

- (1) noticing and semanticization,
- (2) controlled contextual integration,
- (3) automatization through repeated task-based activation, and
- (4) variational expansion within authentic professional discourse.

By synthesizing post-2020 theoretical and empirical insights, the present framework contributes to the field in three ways. First, it systematizes the typology of lexical units relevant to professional communication. Second, it operationalizes criteria for lexical unit selection and combinability grounded in corpus evidence and psycholinguistic theory. Third, it articulates a pedagogically actionable model linking lexical typology, cognitive retrieval mechanisms, and staged instructional sequencing in ESP contexts.

This theoretically integrated approach provides a foundation for designing professionally oriented lexical instruction that moves beyond vocabulary accumulation toward discourse-embedded lexical competence capable of sustaining accurate, fluent, and contextually appropriate professional communication.

Theoretical Synthesis and Analysis

This study does not report primary empirical findings; therefore, the present section advances a theoretical synthesis of the literature reviewed above and proposes an integrated conceptual model of lexical skill formation in professionally oriented EFL instruction. Drawing on contemporary research in applied linguistics, ESP, and usage-based theory (Ellis, 2015; Schmitt, 2020; Webb, 2020), the analysis reconceptualizes lexical competence as a cognitively structured, discourse-embedded, and pedagogically sequenced construct.

Reconceptualizing Lexical Skill in Professional Contexts

The synthesis of methodological and psycholinguistic scholarship demonstrates that lexical skill cannot be reduced to isolated word knowledge or mechanical combinability.

Rather, it constitutes a dynamic, multi-component capacity integrating semantic precision, combinatorial control, discourse sensitivity, and strategic adaptability.

Building on established distinctions between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2020), lexical competence can be reframed as a continuum of activation: from recognition (receptive control), to controlled production, to automatized deployment, and ultimately to flexible variation within professional discourse. Although the receptive-productive distinction remains analytically useful, current research indicates that these dimensions develop interdependently and are mediated by frequency of contextual activation and depth of processing (Ellis, 2015; Webb, 2020).

Thus, lexical skill in ESP contexts should be conceptualized as:

- cognitively entrenched through repeated disciplinary exposure;
- structurally organized through collocational and colligational probability;
- functionally embedded in professional communicative tasks;
- strategically regulated during real-time speech production.

This reconceptualization aligns with usage-based perspectives that view language knowledge as probabilistic and pattern-sensitive rather than rule-based and atomistic (Ellis, 2015).

Structural Model of Lexical Skill Components

Synthesizing the reviewed theoretical perspectives allows lexical skill to be systematized into five interrelated dimensions:

1. Form-Meaning Integration

Mastery of phonological, orthographic, and semantic representations and their stable mapping within professional registers (Nation, 2013).

2. Associative and Collocational Networking

Activation of lexical units within associative networks, enabling accurate selection based on semantic compatibility and combinatorial norms (Schmitt, 2020).

3. Syntagmatic and Discourse Integration

Ability to incorporate lexical units into genre-specific syntactic patterns and rhetorical structures characteristic of professional communication (Hyland, 2008).

4. Automatized Retrieval

Rapid, low-effort access to high-frequency and professionally relevant lexical units, reducing cognitive load during speech production (DeKeyser, 2015).

5. Strategic and Compensatory Regulation

Capacity for paraphrasing, substitution, reformulation, and adaptive lexical variation when encountering lexical gaps or communicative constraints (Webb, 2020).

This structural model extends earlier classifications by explicitly integrating psycholinguistic retrieval mechanisms with discourse-functional criteria central to ESP instruction.

Criteria for Lexical Unit Selection in ESP Instruction

The theoretical synthesis enables the formulation of operational criteria for selecting lexical material in professionally oriented curricula. Consistent with corpus-informed and

usage-based research (Ellis, 2015; Schmitt, 2020), lexical units should be prioritized according to:

- corpus-based frequency within the target discipline;
- collocational strength and distributional stability;
- semantic specificity relevant to professional tasks;
- genre-bound functional value (e.g., reporting, evaluating, hypothesizing);
- transferability across related professional contexts.

Such criteria shift lexical instruction beyond general vocabulary expansion toward strategic phraseological competence grounded in authentic professional discourse.

Staged Development of Lexical Competence

Integrating skill acquisition theory with communicative methodology suggests a staged progression of lexical development (DeKeyser, 2015; Ellis, 2015):

1. **Noticing and Semanticization** – focused attention to meaning, usage constraints, and collocational patterns;
2. **Controlled Contextualization** – guided integration into structured professional tasks;
3. **Automatization** – repeated activation through communicative practice and task-based engagement;
4. **Variational Expansion** – flexible adaptation across genres, registers, and professional scenarios.

This staged model reconciles traditional methodological perspectives with contemporary usage-based accounts, conceptualizing lexical development as a progression from controlled processing to automatised and strategically flexible performance.

Theoretical Contribution

The principal contribution of this study lies in synthesizing diverse strands of lexical research into a coherent, professionally oriented framework. Specifically, the paper:

- systematizes the typology of lexical units relevant to ESP contexts;
- integrates psycholinguistic, methodological, and discourse-functional perspectives;
- proposes operational criteria for lexical selection and combinability;
- articulates a staged model linking semanticization, automatization, and strategic variation.

By repositioning lexical competence as a discourse-embedded, cognitively structured, and pedagogically sequenced construct, this theoretical synthesis provides a principled foundation for the design of ESP curricula aimed at developing accurate, fluent, and contextually appropriate professional communicative competence.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the need for a systematic and theoretically grounded framework for understanding and developing lexical competence in professionally oriented EFL instruction. By synthesizing contemporary research in applied linguistics, ESP, corpus linguistics, and usage-based theory, the paper reconceptualized lexical skill as a

multidimensional, cognitively structured, and discourse-embedded construct that extends far beyond isolated vocabulary knowledge.

The analysis has demonstrated that lexical competence in professional contexts is not limited to form–meaning mapping but involves collocational control, genre sensitivity, automatized retrieval, and strategic adaptability. In ESP settings, lexical units function as combinatorial constructions shaped by frequency, semantic compatibility, register constraints, and communicative purpose. Therefore, effective lexical instruction must be guided by principled criteria that prioritize discipline-specific frequency, collocational strength, functional value, and transferability across professional tasks.

A central contribution of the study lies in proposing an integrated structural model of lexical skill consisting of five interrelated dimensions: form–meaning integration, associative and collocational networking, syntagmatic and discourse integration, automatized retrieval, and strategic regulation. By linking these dimensions with psycholinguistic mechanisms of entrenchment and retrieval, the paper provides a coherent account of how lexical competence develops from controlled semantic processing to fluent and flexible professional performance.

Furthermore, the staged model of lexical development—progressing from noticing and semanticization to controlled contextualization, automatization, and variational expansion—offers a pedagogically actionable framework for curriculum design in ESP contexts. This sequencing reconciles skill acquisition theory with usage-based perspectives and supports the systematic integration of lexical units into communicative, task-based instruction.

Overall, the study advances the field by repositioning lexical competence as a discourse-oriented and cognitively grounded capacity essential for professional communicative effectiveness. By systematizing lexical unit typology, operationalizing criteria for lexical selection, and articulating a staged developmental model, the paper provides a principled foundation for designing ESP curricula that move beyond vocabulary accumulation toward sustained, accurate, and contextually appropriate professional communication.

Future research may empirically test and refine the proposed framework across specific disciplinary domains, learner populations, and instructional modalities in order to further validate and expand its applicability in professionally oriented language education.

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