

Where Proficiency Begins: The Case for Lexicogrammatical Primacy in EFL Instruction

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Abstract

This critical synthesis argues that lexicogrammatical knowledge (knowledge of words, multiword expressions (MWEs), and their typical grammatical patterning) is a major factor shaping second language (L2) proficiency across receptive and productive domains. Drawing on meta-analyses and influential empirical studies within a usage-based framework, this paper examines four propositions: (a) lexical knowledge robustly predicts receptive performance, (b) productive use of MWEs is associated with speaking fluency and writing quality, (c) explicit grammar instruction may contribute less uniquely when lexical patterns are accounted for, and (d) strategy instruction appears less effective when lexical coverage falls below approximately 95%. Across the reviewed studies, lexicogrammatical knowledge appears to be a central source of variation in L2 performance, while grammar instruction alone and strategy training tend to yield smaller gains without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. This interpretation aligns with usage-based accounts of language learning and finds a broad analogy in how statistical language models exploit co-occurrence patterns. The paper argues for prioritizing lexical enrichment, embedding grammar within chunk-based input, and sequencing strategy training after adequate lexical coverage, offering educators a framework for curricula that promote more naturalistic proficiency.

Key terms: lexicogrammar, multiword expressions, vocabulary knowledge, L2 proficiency, English as a foreign language, usage-based linguistics, critical synthesis

1. Introduction

Second language (L2) pedagogy has often been organized around the traditional four skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) alongside separate attention to language systems such as vocabulary and grammar (Brown & Lee, 2015). In contrast, the CEFR Companion Volume frames proficiency primarily in terms of communicative language activities and modes of communication, rather than a simple “four skills” model (Council of Europe, 2020). Within skills-oriented pedagogy, reading and listening instruction commonly emphasizes strategy use (e.g., skimming for main ideas, inferencing unknown words) and metacognitive approaches to comprehension (Grabe, 2009; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). While some approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching, integrate attention to both skills and language systems, a persistent challenge across many mainstream curricula is that lexicogrammatical knowledge is not consistently emphasized or treated as the primary organizing principle of instruction.

Usage-based and corpus-informed research challenges the common practice of presenting grammar and lexis as separate instructional targets. Evidence suggests that vocabulary and grammar may be more effectively acquired when treated as an integrated system, since knowledge of words inherently includes knowledge of their typical syntactic environments and collocational patterns (Ellis, 2002; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Sinclair, 1991). The term “lexicogrammar,” originally developed within Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to capture the inseparability of lexical and grammatical choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Matthiessen, 2007), is adopted here within a usage-based framework to emphasize that recurrent word combinations and the syntactic patterns they occur in are learned together through collocations and colligations (Ellis, 2002; Sinclair, 1991).

Seen in these terms, lexical knowledge encompasses not just individual words but also their statistically

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predictable co-occurrences, which underpin fluency and comprehension across modalities (Ellis, 2002; Wray, 2002). For instance, knowing a word involves knowing that speakers typically say ‘strong coffee’ rather than ‘powerful coffee’, ‘make a decision’ rather than ‘do a decision’, and ‘interested in’ rather than ‘interested on’. It also involves knowing the larger grammatical environments in which words typically occur. For example, ‘suggest’ commonly takes a *that*-clause (“I suggest that we leave early”), ‘avoid’ typically selects a following *-ing* form (“She avoided answering the question”), and ‘give’ often appears in a ditransitive construction involving both a recipient and a transferred item (“He gave the student some helpful feedback”). The regularity with which certain words appear together, and the grammatical frames they inhabit, shapes how learners process and produce language. This principle finds a suggestive parallel in AI—particularly in neural language models (Large Language Models), which generate coherent text by learning statistical patterns of word co-occurrence from large amounts of input (Contreras Kallens et al., 2023). While the mechanisms of human and machine learning differ fundamentally, usage-based research suggests that human learners similarly rely on frequency-sensitive mechanisms to abstract linguistic patterns from input, with lexicogrammatical knowledge emerging from patterned exposure (Ellis, 2002).

This reconceptualization has significant implications for L2 instruction. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that sufficient lexical coverage, i.e., knowing approximately 95–98% of a text’s vocabulary, is a prerequisite for effective comprehension, rendering strategies less impactful without a robust lexical foundation (Hu & Nation, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011). Similarly, productive proficiency in speaking and writing correlates strongly with lexical sophistication and the deployment of multiword sequences (Crossley & McNamara, 2012; Tavakoli & Uchihara, 2020). Research on productive vocabulary knowledge further confirms that learners with larger productive lexicons demonstrate greater oral ability (Uchihara & Saito, 2019). These findings challenge the efficacy of curricula that emphasize isolated grammar instruction or strategy training at the expense of vocabulary development.

This critical synthesis examines whether the evidence supports reorienting L2 pedagogy toward lexicogrammatical primacy. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent does lexical knowledge (breadth, depth, and MWEs) predict receptive skill performance in L2 learners?
- RQ2. How does productive use of MWEs relate to speaking fluency, and how do lexical sophistication and cohesion relate to writing quality?
- RQ3. What unique contribution does explicit grammar instruction make to L2 proficiency when lexical patterns are accounted for?
- RQ4. Under what conditions is strategy instruction effective for L2 comprehension, and what role does lexical coverage play?

By synthesizing evidence across these questions, this paper builds a case for pedagogical approaches that prioritize lexicogrammar (that is, the integrated unit of vocabulary and grammar) as the foundation of L2 proficiency.

2. Methodological Approach

This paper offers a critical synthesis of peer-reviewed empirical research from 2015–2025, supplemented by foundational pre-2015 works that established the theoretical and empirical groundwork for usage-based approaches to L2 acquisition. Rather than conducting a systematic review of primary studies, this synthesis draws on existing meta-analyses and influential empirical investigations to construct a theoretically coherent argument for lexicogrammatical primacy (cf. Boers & Webb, 2018). This approach accommodates the diversity of study designs, from corpus analyses to experimental interventions, while enabling a nuanced exploration of pedagogical implications that may be hidden by combining data quantitatively.

Sources were identified through academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC) and reference chaining, with

selection guided by relevance to the four research questions outlined above. The synthesis focuses primarily on adolescent and adult L2 learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, though implications may extend to other populations and target languages. Foundational works (e.g., Ellis, 2002; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) provide theoretical grounding for the usage-based framework, while recent meta-analyses (e.g., Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2023) supply the quantitative evidence synthesized here.

A critical synthesis is appropriate for this inquiry because the goal is not to compute aggregate effect sizes but to evaluate whether converging evidence across diverse methodologies supports a paradigm shift in L2 pedagogy. The synthesis is organized thematically around the four research questions, each corresponding to a proposition about lexicogrammar's role in L2 proficiency.

In total, this synthesis draws on 20 unique empirical studies and meta-analyses, distributed across the four research questions as follows: RQ1 (lexical knowledge and receptive skills, $n = 7$), RQ2 (multiword expressions and productive skills, $n = 8$), RQ3 (explicit grammar instruction, $n = 5$), and RQ4 (strategy instruction and lexical coverage, $n = 4$), with some studies contributing evidence relevant to multiple questions. Because several studies informed more than one research question, the subtotal across questions exceeds the number of unique studies included. To ensure methodological transparency, sources were identified through systematic searches of academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC) using search terms including *lexicogrammar*, *vocabulary knowledge and L2 proficiency*, *multiword expressions and fluency*, *explicit grammar instruction EFL*, and *reading strategy instruction lexical coverage*. Searches spanned 2000–2025, supplemented by foundational pre-2000 works. Inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed empirical studies and meta-analyses involving adolescent or adult L2 English learners; studies focusing exclusively on first language acquisition or lacking quantitative outcome data were excluded. Additional sources were identified through reference chaining. Although this synthesis does not claim the full systematic rigor of a PRISMA-compliant review, because its aim is theoretical coherence rather than exhaustive coverage, the procedures outlined above are intended to enhance transparency and replicability in source selection. Because no formal risk-of-bias tool was applied, greater interpretive weight was assigned to meta-analyses, large-sample studies, and peer-reviewed studies with clearly reported methods and quantitative outcome measures. Smaller-scale or purely theoretical works were used primarily to contextualize the empirical findings rather than to serve as the main evidentiary basis for the argument.

3. Synthesis of Findings

The following sections integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence to evaluate each research question. For each proposition, the synthesis identifies converging patterns across studies while acknowledging limitations and areas requiring further investigation.

3.1 Lexical Knowledge and Receptive Skills

Lexical knowledge, encompassing vocabulary breadth (number of known words) and depth (richness of word knowledge, including collocational associations), consistently emerges as a robust predictor of L2 reading and listening comprehension. Earlier research suggests that learners often need around 95–98% lexical coverage for adequate comprehension, with higher coverage generally supporting more fluent, meaning-focused processing (Hu & Nation, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011; van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). However, more recent work indicates that this relationship is better understood as gradual and context-sensitive than as a single universal threshold. For example, Song and Reynolds (2022), in a study of Chinese EFL undergraduates, found that lexical coverage remained a significant but weak predictor of reading comprehension across narrative and expository genres, with no single coverage level emerging as clearly optimal. Their findings suggest that while higher lexical coverage generally supports comprehension, the strength and nature of this effect vary by genre and background knowledge, reinforcing the case for sustained

vocabulary development rather than reliance on any fixed percentage target.

The quantitative evidence strongly supports this conclusion. In a meta-analysis of 116 primary studies (126 independent studies; 276 correlations) totaling 20,969 participants, Zhang and Zhang (2022) reported substantial associations between vocabulary knowledge and both reading comprehension ($r = .57$) and listening comprehension ($r = .56$). Taken together, these correlations indicate that vocabulary knowledge is a strong concurrent marker of L2 comprehension across both reading and listening, though the evidence remains correlational. Complementary evidence from a large-scale meta-analysis of incidental vocabulary learning (Webb, Uchihara, & Yanagisawa, 2023) further confirms that repeated encounters with vocabulary through reading and listening generate meaningful gains, reinforcing the case for extensive, lexicogrammatically rich input as a foundation for receptive skill development.

Importantly, grammatical knowledge also shows a substantial association with reading comprehension; however, evidence about grammar's unique contribution beyond vocabulary requires studies that model lexical and grammatical predictors jointly. Zheng, Miao, Dong, and Yuan's (2023) meta-analysis found a substantial correlation between grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension (Fisher's $z = .54$), confirming that grammar matters. From the perspective adopted here, this finding is consistent with the lexicogrammatical framework: grammar and vocabulary are not competing explanations but integrated facets of the same underlying knowledge. Learners who know more vocabulary also tend to know more about how words combine syntactically, because lexical knowledge inherently includes collocational and colligational (i.e., relating to typical grammatical environments) information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The practical implication is that building vocabulary simultaneously builds grammatical intuition—a point with significant pedagogical ramifications.

3.2 Multiword Expressions and Productive Skills

In productive modalities such as speaking and writing, the use of multiword expressions (MWEs) such as “take into account,” “on the other hand,” and “as a result” is closely associated with more fluent and more proficient performance. These expressions are not simply vocabulary items in isolation. Rather, they are conventionalized sequences that package lexical meaning and grammatical patterning together, making them a clear illustration of the lexicogrammatical continuum. Research on L2 speech shows that learners who use more multiword sequences tend to display stronger fluency (Tavakoli & Uchihara, 2020), while research on productive vocabulary likewise indicates that richer productive lexical knowledge is associated with better oral ability (Uchihara & Saito, 2019). One plausible explanation is processing efficiency: retrieving a familiar sequence places less demand on attention than constructing an utterance word by word, leaving more cognitive resources available for message planning and discourse management.

Evidence from writing and speaking assessment points in a similar direction. Crossley and McNamara (2012) suggest that higher-quality L2 writing is associated more with linguistic sophistication than with the mere presence of overt cohesive markers, while Eguchi and Kyle (2020) show that multidimensional indices of lexical sophistication help distinguish learners across oral proficiency levels. Together, these findings suggest that successful production depends not only on knowledge of individual words or abstract rules, but also on control of the recurrent phraseological and lexicogrammatical patterns that proficient users routinely draw on.

Crossley and McNamara (2012) found that cohesion and lexical sophistication measures in L2 essays correlate strongly with holistic quality ratings. Eguchi and Kyle (2020) further demonstrated that multidimensional lexical sophistication indices differentiate L2 learners across proficiency levels in oral interviews, supporting the role of sophisticated vocabulary use in perceived proficiency. These patterns suggest that “sounding like a native speaker” may depend less on mastering abstract grammatical rules than on internalizing the formulaic sequences that native speakers routinely deploy.

Recent instructional and developmental research strengthens this argument. Thomson, Coxhead, Boers, and

Warren (2023) found that a fluency workshop increased learners' knowledge and conversational use of MWEs, providing direct support for the pedagogical value of focused work on formulaic language. Boone, De Wilde, and Eyckmans (2023) likewise documented longitudinal growth in productive collocation knowledge among L2 German learners, indicating that formulaic competence develops systematically over time rather than appearing incidentally or all at once. Taken together, these studies support treating MWEs not as peripheral additions to vocabulary teaching, but as central building blocks of fluent production.

A further point is that MWEs often carry grammar within them. Expressions such as "look forward to" typically require a following -ing form, while phrases such as "make a decision" instantiate a recurrent verb–article–noun pattern. Teaching such expressions, therefore, also exposes learners to recurring grammatical organization. From a lexicogrammatical perspective, this is precisely the point: vocabulary and grammar are not best understood as separate systems, but as interdependent patterns learned together through repeated exposure and use.

3.3 The Limited Unique Contribution of Explicit Grammar Instruction

If grammar is embedded within lexical patterns, what role remains for explicit grammar instruction? Usage-based research suggests that learners acquire morphosyntactic structures substantially through repeated exposure to high-frequency lexical chunks rather than through rule memorization (Ellis, 2002, 2012). Frequent encounters with phrases like "going to [verb]" or "have been [verb]-ing" enable learners to abstract grammatical patterns inductively, without necessarily articulating the underlying rules.

This does not mean explicit instruction is useless. Meta-analytic syntheses show that explicit, form-focused instruction can facilitate L2 development, but effects vary by linguistic target and instructional approach, which supports treating grammar teaching as a useful accelerator rather than the primary engine of proficiency development (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). It may accelerate acquisition of forms that are infrequent or lack perceptual salience in the input. However, it does suggest that curricula and textbooks that devote substantial instructional time to grammar explanation and drill may be less efficient than those providing rich exposure to patterned, meaningful input. The key insight from frequency-based approaches is that learning is fundamentally grounded in sensitivity to statistical regularities: the more often learners encounter a form in context, the more deeply it becomes entrenched in their linguistic system (Ellis, 2002; Ambridge et al., 2015).

Lewis's (1993) 'lexical approach' anticipated these findings, advocating instruction centered on collocations and formulaic sequences rather than isolated grammar rules. Subsequent research has largely vindicated this position. When learners acquire vocabulary in context, attending to how words combine and what grammatical frames they inhabit, they simultaneously acquire the grammar that governs those combinations. The practical recommendation follows: rather than teaching the subjunctive as an abstract rule, teach "I wish I had," "If I were you," and similar high-frequency exemplars. Grammatical patterns emerge from repeated combinations of specific lexical items.

3.4 The Conditional Efficacy of Strategy Instruction

Strategy instruction, which is often a part of university EFL textbooks, trains learners to skim, scan, discover the main idea of paragraphs or the entire text, and infer word meanings, to name just a few. This type of strategy instruction has intuitive appeal and a substantial research base. Yet the evidence reveals a critical constraint: strategies enhance performance primarily when learners possess sufficient lexical coverage. Below a certain threshold, approximately 95% coverage, comprehension struggles regardless of taught strategies (Hu & Nation, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011).

Sun et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis reported an overall positive relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension, indicating that more successful readers tend to report greater use of affective, elaborative, monitoring, and organizational strategies. However, because these findings are correlational, they do not show that

strategy use can compensate for limited linguistic knowledge. Meta-analytic evidence from intervention studies similarly indicates that explicit strategy instruction can improve L2 reading outcomes, but the size of gains varies across studies, and not all strategies are equally effective (Yapp et al., 2021). Lexical-threshold research points to an important constraint on these benefits: comprehension depends heavily on how much of the running text learners already know, with approximately 95% lexical coverage associated with minimal comprehension and 98% with more optimal comprehension (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). The available evidence therefore suggests that strategy instruction is best understood as enhancing comprehension when a sufficient lexical base is already in place, rather than as a substitute for foundational lexicogrammatical knowledge.

In this context, the term “vocabulary development” encompasses not only single-word knowledge but also MWEs, lemma families, and collocational associations. A learner who knows “take” but not “take into account” or “take for granted” lacks the phraseological knowledge to process texts where these expressions appear. Strategy instruction, then, is best conceptualized as a complement to, not a substitute for, robust lexicogrammatical development. The pedagogical implication is clear: establish lexical foundations before investing heavily in strategy training.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The synthesis yields several actionable recommendations for L2 instruction:

1. **Prioritize lexicogrammatical development.** Curricula should systematically build vocabulary using high-frequency word lists, spaced repetition systems, and extensive reading and listening. The target is 95–98% lexical coverage for materials at each proficiency level (Nation, 2022). Vocabulary size tests can guide material selection and track progress (Schmitt et al., 2011).
2. **Integrate grammar within lexical contexts.** Teach grammatical structures through recurrent chunks rather than isolated rules. For instance, the subjunctive emerges naturally from expressions like “I wish I had” or “It’s essential that she be present.” Explicit collocation instruction (e.g., teaching “make a decision” alongside variants like “reach a decision” and “come to a decision”) may reinforce both lexical and grammatical knowledge simultaneously (Boers & Webb, 2018; Lewis, 1993).
3. **Sequence strategy instruction appropriately.** Introduce comprehension strategies like skimming, scanning, and inferencing *only* after confirming adequate lexical readiness through vocabulary assessment. Strategies are tools that amplify existing competence; they cannot compensate for fundamental lexical gaps (Hu & Nation, 2000).
4. **Leverage authentic, MWE-rich input.** Select teaching materials—graded readers, podcasts, videos, authentic texts—that expose learners to naturalistic formulaic language. Such input models how proficient speakers combine words and provides the frequency-weighted exposure that drives implicit learning (Tavakoli & Uchihara, 2020).

These recommendations do not diminish the importance of grammar or strategy knowledge but reframe their role: grammar is often effectively acquired through lexical exposure, and strategies are most effective when built on a solid vocabulary foundation. The shift is from teaching language components in isolation to teaching language as an integrated lexicogrammatical system.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations constrain the conclusions drawn here. First, this synthesis focuses primarily on English-language research; findings may not generalize straightforwardly to typologically distinct languages where morphological complexity or writing systems differ substantially. Second, the reliance on correlational evidence in many reviewed studies limits causal inferences; experimental research directly comparing lexicogrammar-focused and traditional

curricula remains relatively sparse. Third, most studies examined adolescent and adult learners in EFL contexts; younger learners, heritage speakers, and immersion settings may present different patterns.

Future research should pursue several directions. Longitudinal studies tracking learners exposed to lexicogrammar-centered versus traditional instruction could establish whether the proposed approach accelerates proficiency development. Investigations across typologically diverse languages would clarify whether lexicogrammatical primacy reflects universal acquisition mechanisms or is specific to English and similar languages. Additionally, the parallel between human learning and the statistical pattern-learning exhibited by neural language models suggests a novel research avenue: computational modeling might help identify which input characteristics most efficiently drive lexicogrammatical acquisition (Contreras Kallens et al., 2023). It would also be valuable to investigate whether explicit grammar instruction is necessary for low-frequency or highly complex structures that may not emerge readily from input alone.

6. Conclusion

Lexicogrammatical knowledge—the integrated mastery of vocabulary and the grammatical patterns in which words typically occur—emerges from this synthesis as a central foundation of L2 proficiency across reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The evidence points to a clear, if necessarily qualified, conclusion: learners who know more words, and who know them more deeply, including their collocational and colligational associations, tend to comprehend more successfully and produce language more fluently. This is not to suggest that lexicogrammatical knowledge is the sole determinant of proficiency; phonological competence, pragmatic knowledge, and discourse-level organizational abilities also make important contributions to oral and written performance. Rather, the claim advanced here is that lexicogrammar provides a pedagogically tractable foundation on which these other competencies can develop. From this perspective, grammar is not irrelevant, but is more usefully understood as embedded in lexical knowledge than as a wholly separate competence requiring isolated instruction.

The pedagogical implications are similarly clear. L2 instruction should place greater emphasis on vocabulary development in a systematic manner, with particular attention to multiword expressions and recurring lexical patterns. Grammatical instruction is likely to be most effective when embedded in lexicalized contexts, so that learners encounter structures through the chunks and patterns in which they are naturally realized. Strategy instruction also retains an important role, but the evidence suggests that it is likely to be most beneficial when learners possess enough lexical knowledge to make texts broadly comprehensible. This reorientation does not require abandoning existing materials or methods altogether. Rather, it calls for a shift in emphasis toward the aspects of language knowledge that appear to support performance most consistently across modalities.

For educators, this synthesis offers both confirmation and challenge. Many experienced teachers have long recognized the centrality of vocabulary in their students' progress, and the research reviewed here largely supports that professional intuition while also clarifying why vocabulary matters in more than a narrow lexical sense. At the same time, the findings challenge the persistence of curricula organized primarily around grammatical syllabi or decontextualized strategy training. If the argument of this paper is correct, durable gains in proficiency are likely to depend less on the accumulation of abstract rules than on the gradual development of lexicogrammatical knowledge through repeated, meaningful encounters with language in use.

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