



THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language acquisition, enabling learners to understand, express, and negotiate meaning effectively. This study explores the nature and significance of vocabulary in foreign language learning through key theoretical insights from Wilkins, Nation, Schmitt, Thornbury, and Laufer. Findings show that vocabulary knowledge involves both breadth and depth, including collocations, associations, and contextual use. The research also highlights vocabulary's central role in communicative competence. Effective instruction requires systematic exposure, meaningful practice, and the teaching of lexical chunks.

Key words: Vocabulary acquisition; lexical competence; communicative competence; lexical chunks; collocations; language teaching; fluency; receptive and productive vocabulary.

Introduction

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in the process of learning and teaching a foreign language, as it forms the foundation upon which all communicative skills are built. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners struggle to understand spoken and written texts, express their ideas clearly, and participate effectively in communication. In many learning contexts, vocabulary has long been considered secondary to grammar; however, modern approaches in language pedagogy recognize that communication cannot occur without words. Therefore, expanding learners' lexical resources has become a primary objective in contemporary language education.

The development of vocabulary competence directly influences learners' academic performance, confidence, and linguistic autonomy. When students possess a rich vocabulary, they can decode meaning more easily, engage in more complex interactions, and use the target language with greater accuracy and fluency. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge supports the acquisition of other linguistic components, such as pronunciation, word formation, and syntactic





patterns. This interconnected nature of vocabulary demonstrates its significance as a central element of language proficiency.

Main part

Vocabulary is widely recognized as the foundation of language learning. Wilkins (1972) famously stated: “Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” This illustrates that vocabulary is not simply a component of language, but the core that carries meaning. The increasing focus on communicative teaching has further elevated the importance of developing learners’ vocabulary in a systematic and efficient way. Nation (2001) argues that vocabulary knowledge consists of form, meaning, and use. All three must be taught for vocabulary to be functional. He emphasizes systematic repetition and deep processing. Namely, to learn vocabulary, you have to learn its form, meaning and how to use it. Schmitt (2010) states that vocabulary learning is gradual and requires multiple encounters. He highlights the importance of both receptive and productive vocabulary for communication. Thornbury (2002) suggests that lexical chunks and collocations support fluency more than individual words. He argues that learners need quick access to ready-made lexical units. Laufer’s lexical threshold theory demonstrates that learners must know at least 3,000-word families to comprehend most texts. This proves that vocabulary size is strongly linked to academic success and if the one knows daily used vocabulary it becomes easy to communicate in social situations freely. Read (2000) states that vocabulary depth - associations, collocations, frequency, and usage - is as crucial as the number of known words. Effective vocabulary teaching must address both and there should be focus on these aspects of language in teachers’ plan to have deeper language acquisition.

According to Richards & Renandya (2002), these scholars note that vocabulary has historically been neglected compared to grammar, though it is more important for communication. They recommend integrating vocabulary teaching into all classroom activities. More specifically, if teachers should not only pay attention to grammar, but also vocabulary teaching with different kind of methods to learn easily, because vocabulary considered to the core element of communication in any language.

Canale and Swain’s (1980) influential model of communicative competence (later refined by Canale in 1983) demonstrates that vocabulary (often called lexical competence or treated as a core component of grammatical competence) is not a separate “skill” but the indispensable building block that permeates all four competencies:





Grammatical competence. It is difficult to form accurate sentences or structures without knowing the words and their morphological behavior (collocations, verb patterns, prepositions, etc.) Example: Knowing the difference between “depend on,” “rely on,” and “count on” is as much lexical as it is grammatical.

Sociolinguistic competence. Choosing contextually and culturally appropriate words (register, politeness levels, idioms, slang, taboo words, euphemisms) is almost entirely a matter of vocabulary. Example: Saying “pass away” vs. “kick the bucket” vs. “die” depending on formality and audience.

Discourse competence. Cohesion and coherence heavily rely on lexical devices: repetition, synonyms, superordinates/hyponyms, collocations, lexical chains, transition phrases, anaphora with precise referents, etc. Poor vocabulary → abrupt topic shifts, excessive repetition, or vague reference (“that thing,” “you know what I mean”).

Strategic competence. When grammar or pronunciation fails, learners fall back on lexical strategies: circumlocution (“the thing you use to cut paper... scissors!”), approximation, word coinage, paraphrase, or borrowing from L1. A rich vocabulary gives you more tools to keep communication going when you’re stuck.

Later models (Bachman 1990; Bachman & Palmer 1996, 2010; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995) make this even more explicit by placing vocabulary/lexis at the center or as a separate major component of language knowledge, rather than subordinating it under grammar. Key takeaway that many teachers and curricula still miss: You can have perfect grammar and still be communicatively incompetent if your vocabulary is insufficient or inappropriate. Conversely, learners with a strong, flexible lexicon can often communicate effectively even with simplified or imperfect grammar. So, vocabulary is not “just one part” of language ability; it is the thread that runs through every dimension of communicative competence. Teaching and testing it in isolation therefore make very little sense.

Effective vocabulary instruction requires a systematic and learner-centered approach that helps students develop both receptive and productive lexical competence. To achieve this, teachers should ensure that learners receive repeated and meaningful exposure to new words in various contexts, allowing vocabulary to be reinforced naturally over time. Instruction should also emphasize the teaching of lexical chunks, collocations, and multi-word expressions, as these ready-made units significantly contribute to fluency and





natural communication. Integrating vocabulary learning into all four language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - ensures that learners experience words in authentic and diverse situations. Additionally, teachers should encourage students to actively use newly learned vocabulary through communicative tasks, discussions, and writing activities. The use of technology, educational apps, games, and interactive tasks can make vocabulary learning more engaging and motivating, especially for digital-age learners. Finally, prioritizing high-frequency and topic-related vocabulary helps learners acquire the words they need most for academic success and everyday communication. Overall, a well-planned and learner-centered instructional approach strengthens vocabulary acquisition and supports students' overall language development.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that vocabulary is a crucial component of foreign language acquisition and a key determinant of learners' communicative competence. While traditional teaching approaches often prioritized grammar, contemporary linguistic research clearly shows that vocabulary is the core element that enables meaningful communication. Scholars such as Wilkins, Nation, Schmitt, Thornbury, and Laufer highlight that vocabulary knowledge involves more than memorizing word lists; it requires understanding form, meaning, use, and the relationships between words.

The analysis of communicative competence models, including those proposed by Canale and Swain, Bachman, and Celce-Murcia, further confirms that vocabulary permeates all aspects of language ability - grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Learners with strong vocabulary knowledge can communicate effectively even with imperfect grammar, whereas limited vocabulary significantly restricts meaningful interaction.

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