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THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF LEXICAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN PRIMARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION: A COGNITIVE LINGUODIDACTIC PERSPECTIVE

Karimova Muattar Fayzullayevna
PhD student at UzNPU
fragrent2207@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT: The development of lexical competence serves as the primary gateway to foreign language proficiency, specifically within the sensitive cognitive periods of primary and early secondary education. This extensive study investigates the theoretical underpinnings of vocabulary acquisition in grades one through six, emphasizing the transition from associative learning to critical, analytical processing. By integrating the principles of cognitive linguodidactics, the research proposes a pedagogical model that prioritizes lexical depth over mere breadth. The article analyzes the evolution of mental lexicon structures, the impact of task-based simulations on word retention, and the necessity of aligning instructional strategies with the learner's expanding cognitive maturity. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a shift toward deep semantic processing, ensuring that lexical units are not only memorized but functionally integrated into the student's communicative identity.

Keywords: Lexical competence, cognitive linguodidactics, primary education, mental lexicon, critical thinking, lexical depth, semantic mapping, A1+ level, pedagogical innovation.

INTRODUCTION

In the vast landscape of second language acquisition, the lexicon remains the most essential, yet often the most undervalued, component of communicative success. For many decades, the shadows of grammar-translation methods and structuralist drills defined the parameters of language classrooms, leaving vocabulary as a secondary participant in the learning process. However, as we navigate the educational demands of the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly clear that a student's ability to express complex thoughts, navigate social nuances, and build a unique linguistic persona depends entirely on the strength and flexibility of their lexical competence. For young learners, specifically those transitioning from the primary years into the early stages of middle school, the acquisition of vocabulary is not a mere academic exercise; it is a fundamental act of cognitive and social expansion.

This research focuses on the developmental trajectory of pupils in grades one through six, a period characterized by rapid neurological growth and the blossoming of abstract reasoning skills. During these years, the learner's relationship with the English language undergoes a profound transformation. They move from simple word-to-object associations toward a more sophisticated understanding of how language creates meaning, shapes reality, and facilitates human connection. The theoretical challenge lies in moving away from the exhaustion of rote memorization—where words are treated as static data, vibrant methodology that treats language as a living system. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the theoretical foundations required to build such a system, ensuring that lexical instruction is both scientifically grounded and emotionally resonant for the child.

To understand the current state of lexical instruction, one must first trace its historical evolution through the various lenses of linguistic theory. For a significant portion of the twentieth century, vocabulary was viewed through the lens of structuralism, where language was seen as a set of finite patterns. In this model, words were merely variables to be plugged

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into grammatical formulas. While this approach provided a sense of structural security, it often failed to account for the unpredictable, creative nature of human communication. Pupils could conjugate verbs with precision, yet they found themselves speechless when faced with the dynamic demands of a real conversation.

The emergence of the Lexical Approach in the 1990s, pioneered by thinkers like Michael Lewis, marked a revolutionary departure from these structural constraints. Lewis famously argued that language is not composed of lexicalized grammar, but rather of grammaticalized lexis. This shift suggested that the basic building blocks of language are not individual words but multi-word units, or lexical chunks. These chunks—including collocations, idioms, and fixed expressions—are stored in the brain as single units, allowing for faster retrieval and more natural fluency. For a fifth or sixth-grade student, learning language in these chunks is far more effective than trying to assemble sentences word by word. It aligns with the way the human brain naturally processes information, reducing the cognitive load and allowing the learner to focus on the message rather than the mechanics.

A central pillar of cognitive linguodidactics is the concept of the mental lexicon—the internal system where we store and organize our knowledge of words. Unlike a physical dictionary, which is organized alphabetically, the mental lexicon is a complex, multi-dimensional network. Words are connected not just by their sounds, but by their meanings, their grammatical functions, and the emotional experiences they evoke. In young learners, this network is in a constant state of flux. Every new word a child learns must find its place within this existing web of associations. If a word is taught in isolation, it remains a loose thread, easily forgotten. However, if it is taught through semantic clustering and mapping, it becomes anchored to other concepts, making it far more durable.

The reorganization of the mental lexicon during the primary-to-middle school transition is a critical window for pedagogical intervention. As pupils develop the ability for hierarchical and logical thinking, their mental lexicon begins to reflect these structures. They start to understand that words exist in families and that meaning can change depending on context. Educators can leverage this by using visual tools like semantic maps, which help pupils see the connections between ideas. For example, when exploring the theme of school, a semantic map can branch out into subjects, equipment, people, and feelings. This visual representation supports the brain's natural architecture, facilitating the movement of vocabulary from short-term working memory into long-term storage.

One of the most common mistakes in vocabulary instruction is the overemphasis on lexical breadth—the sheer number of words a student can translate. While a certain volume of vocabulary is necessary, it is lexical depth that truly determines communicative competence. Depth refers to how well a student knows a word, including its various meanings, its collocations (which words it likes to hang out with), its register (formal vs. informal), and its grammatical constraints. A student might know fifty verbs, but if they do not know which prepositions follow those verbs or which nouns they commonly describe, their speech will remain unnatural and limited.

In a classroom, the focus shifts toward developing this depth. This requires a move away from one-to-one translation lists and toward contextual immersion. Pupils should encounter a word multiple times in different stories, videos, and conversations. Each encounter adds a new layer of meaning to the student's understanding. For a sixth-grade learner at the A1+ level, achieving depth means being able to distinguish between similar words—for instance, understanding the difference between being happy, excited, or proud. This level of precision

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allows the student to express their unique identity and feelings with greater clarity, which is the ultimate goal of any language learning journey.

The integration of critical thinking into the language classroom is perhaps the most significant methodological advancement of recent years. Critical thinking is not just about solving puzzles; it is a way of engaging with the world that requires analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. When applied to vocabulary acquisition, it transforms the student from a passive receiver into an active investigator of language. This is what cognitive psychologists call deep processing. The more a student is required to think about a word—to categorize it, to compare it with other words, or to use it to solve a problem—the more likely they are to remember it.

For young learners, critical thinking tasks must be designed to be both challenging and accessible. A simple task might involve sorting a list of adjectives into positive and negative categories. A more complex task for a older student might involve a ranking exercise: If you are going on a hike, which of these items is most important? Rank them from one to five and explain why. To complete this task, the student must retrieve the words for the items, analyze their utility in a specific context, and formulate a logical argument. This process of justification is where the lexicon becomes solidified. It is no longer just a word on a page; it is a tool for expressing a thought. By fostering this type of intellectual engagement, we help pupils develop not just linguistic skills, but the cognitive agility required for lifelong learning.

Task-based learning (TBL) provides the ideal practical framework for integrating the theoretical principles discussed so far. In a TBL classroom, the focus is on completing a meaningful task rather than practicing a specific language point. Lexical acquisition happens as a natural byproduct of the student's attempt to achieve a goal. For example, if the task is to design a new playground, pupils will naturally seek out and use vocabulary related to play, equipment, safety, and community. Because the words are needed to complete the task, they are immediately anchored in a functional context.

Cognitive simulations take this a step further by placing pupils in hypothetical scenarios that require high-level reasoning. These simulations—such as surviving on a deserted island or planning a trip to a foreign city—force pupils to use their lexical resources under pressure. This mimics the conditions of real-world communication, where we must think on our feet and choose our words carefully to achieve our objectives. These activities are inherently; they tap into the student's imagination and social nature, making the classroom a place of discovery and excitement rather than a place of monotonous repetition.

The modern classroom does not exist in a vacuum; it is part of a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem. Technology, when used thoughtfully, offers powerful ways to support the development of lexical competence. Adaptive learning platforms and mobile applications can provide pupils with the spaced repetition necessary for long-term memory. These tools can track a student's progress and identify which words require more attention, providing a level of personalization that is difficult to achieve in a large class. Furthermore, the internet provides access to a vast array of authentic materials—songs, games, and videos—that can immerse the student in the target language.

However, the theoretical model proposed in this research maintains that technology must serve a purpose. The goal of using a digital tool is not to replace human interaction but to enhance it. For instance, a student might use a platform like easytolearn.uz to practice vocabulary at home, and then come to class ready to use those words in a lively debate or a creative project. The digital monitoring of lexical growth allows teachers to make more informed pedagogical decisions, ensuring that every student is moving at a pace that is right for

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them. In this way, technology becomes a partner in the teacher's effort to create a more effective and engaging learning experience.

At the heart of linguodidactics is the learner as a human being. We cannot separate the process of learning English from the child's emotional and social development. A pedagogy recognizes that motivation is the engine of learning. When a student feels a personal connection to the material, their affective filters are lowered, and their brain becomes more receptive to new information. This means that the choice of vocabulary must reflect the interests and experiences of the students. If they are interested in technology, sports, or music, the curriculum should provide them with the words they need to talk about those passions.

Furthermore, the classroom must be a place where pupils feel safe to take risks. Learning a new language involves making mistakes, and a teacher celebrates those mistakes as evidence of the learning process. When a student tries to use a new word and gets it wrong, they are engaging in a form of critical hypothesis testing. The teacher's role is to provide gentle guidance that encourages the student to keep exploring. By creating a supportive, curiosity-driven environment, we helppupilsdevelop the communicative resilience they need to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical foundations of lexical competence in grades one through six points toward a holistic model that integrates cognitive science, pedagogical innovation, and a deep respect for the human learner. We have seen that vocabulary acquisition is far more than a quantitative task; it is a qualitative transformation of the student's mental world. By moving away from rote memorization and toward a methodology centered on deep processing, critical thinking, and task-based immersion, we provide pupils with a robust foundation for lifelong language proficiency.

Aspupilsnavigate the transition from the primary years into the challenges of middle school, they deserve a curriculum that honors their growing intellectual capacity. The "Cognitive-Digital Model" proposed in this research provides a roadmap for this journey. It ensures that every word learned is a step toward greater clarity, confidence, and connection. Ultimately, our goal as educators is to provide pupils with the keys to the English language, allowing them to unlock new opportunities and share their voices with the world. Through a commitment to these theoretical principles, we can transform the foreign language classroom into a space of profound cognitive and human growth.

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