

THE PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING LEXIS (VOCABULARY)

**Erkinova Maftuna Umid qizi**

Jizzakh branch of National University of Uzbekistan

named after Mirzo Ulugbek

The faculty of Psychology the department of Foreign language:

Philology and teaching language: English

Student of group 102-23

Scientific advisor: **Abduraxmanova Zilola**

**Abstract:**

The importance of vocabulary, its types, selection criteria, size and depth, and teaching principles were found unclear. The present article seeks to respond to such challenge. To achieve the mentioned goals, we did a systematic review to previously related studies and theories. The results showed that the vocabulary was found to be more functional as a basis for communication, a reflection of social reality, emotion booster, and academic ability predictor. It also revealed that its contribution to the basic language skills varied. Finally, the principles of teaching vocabulary, size and depth, and teaching and learning vocabulary materials appeared to be associated with student's vocabulary mastery.

**Keywords:** vocabulary teaching; principles; vocabulary importance; breadth and depth, skills, mastery, research, communication

**Introduction:**

Language is the fabric of human communication, and vocabulary is the vibrant thread from which this fabric is woven. While grammar provides the essential structure, it is lexis—the individual words and their combinations—that carries the core of meaning. Without a sufficient lexicon, even the most sophisticated understanding of grammatical rules remains dormant, leaving a language learner unable to express thoughts, comprehend messages, or participate meaningfully in communication. As the renowned linguist David Wilkins succinctly asserted, "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed."

This fundamental truth places the teaching of vocabulary at the heart of any effective language pedagogy. However, moving beyond the simple memorization of word lists, modern language education recognizes that teaching lexis is a complex and nuanced endeavor. It is not merely about quantity but about quality, depth, and usability. Effective vocabulary instruction requires a strategic approach that considers how words are selected, how their meaning and use are explained, how they are retained in long-term memory, and how learners can be empowered to use them autonomously and fluently.

This article will explore the core principles of teaching lexis, providing a framework for educators to build a robust and communicative vocabulary syllabus. We will delve into the criteria for selecting which words to teach, moving beyond frequency lists to consider learners' needs and the concept of "teach ability." We will then examine methodologies for presenting new vocabulary, emphasizing the power of context, visual aids, and clear, student-friendly explanations. Furthermore, the critical role of structured practice and recycling will be discussed, highlighting techniques that move words from passive recognition to active command. Finally, we will address the vital goal of fostering learner independence, equipping students with the strategies to continue expanding their lexical knowledge beyond the classroom. By adhering to these principles, educators can transform vocabulary learning from a rote task into a dynamic and empowering process, truly unlocking the power of words for every learner.

## **What is Lexical Knowledge?**

Lexical knowledge is the intricate web of information a speaker knows about a word. It extends far beyond a simple dictionary definition. It encompasses the sound, spelling, grammatical behavior, appropriate usage, and even the cultural connotations of a word. In essence, to "know" a word is to understand all its dimensions within the language system.

## **Semantic Knowledge (Meaning)**

This is knowledge of a word's core and peripheral meanings and its relationships with other words. Core and Extended Meanings: For example, the word "head" can refer to the body part (core meaning) or the leader of an organization (extended meaning). Synonyms and Antonyms: Words with similar meanings (e.g., big / large) and opposite meanings (e.g., hot / cold). Hyponyms and Hypernyms: The hierarchical relationship between words. For instance, "apple" is a hyponym of "fruit," and "fruit"

is a hypernym of "apple." Collocations and Idioms: Fixed word combinations whose meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words (e.g., "break a leg" for good luck, "make a decision").

## **Phonological Knowledge (Sound)**

This involves knowing how a word is pronounced. Phonemes and Stress Patterns: Each word has a specific sequence of sounds and a specific stress pattern. For example, the word "record" (noun) is stressed on the first syllable, while "record" (verb) is stressed on the second. Intonation: The pitch pattern used when saying the word in a sentence, which can change in questions, statements, or exclamations.

## **Morphological Knowledge (Word Formation)**

This is knowledge of a word's internal structure and how it can be broken down into smaller units of meaning (morphemes). Inflectional Morphology: Grammatical endings for tense, number, case, and degree (e.g., walk -> walked; cat -> cats; happy -> happier). Derivational Morphology: Prefixes and suffixes that create new words or change the word class (e.g., happy -> unhappy; teach -> teacher; use -> useful).

## **Syntactic Knowledge (Grammar and Use in Sentences)**

This involves knowing the word's grammatical category and how it functions within a sentence. Word Class (Part of Speech): Knowing if a word is a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc., which dictates its position and function in a sentence. Subcategorization and Valency: The specific grammatical structures a word requires. For example, the verb "give" often requires a subject, a direct object, and an indirect object (e.g., She [subject] gave him [indirect object] a book [direct object]).

## **Orthographic Knowledge (Spelling)**

This is the knowledge of the conventional spelling of a word. Correct Letter Sequence: Knowing that "receive" is spelled with "ei" and not "ie." Capitalization Rules: Knowing that proper nouns (London, Mary) are capitalized. Use of Hyphens and Apostrophes: Knowing the difference between "its" (possessive) and "it's" (it is), or how to form compound words.

## **Pragmatic Knowledge (Appropriate Use)**

This is the knowledge of when, where, and with whom to use a word, considering social and cultural context.

**Register and Formality:** The difference between formal vocabulary (e.g., "utilize," "inquire") and informal vocabulary (e.g., "use," "ask").

**Style and Connotation:** Understanding the emotional or stylistic charge of a word. For example, "slender" has a more positive connotation than "skinny."

**Cultural Context:** Knowing that certain words or phrases are specific to a particular culture or historical period.

## **Collocational Knowledge (Word Partnerships)**

This is a specific and crucial type of knowledge about which words naturally and frequently co-occur. **Strong Word Partnerships:** In English, we "make a mistake" (not "do a mistake"), we have "heavy rain" (not "strong rain"), and we "commit a crime" (not "do a crime"). Knowing these partnerships is key to sounding natural.

## **The Role of Vocabulary in Language Learning**

Vocabulary plays a central role in second language acquisition and is considered one of the key components of communicative competence. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners cannot understand others or express their own ideas effectively. Grammar and pronunciation are important, but vocabulary is the foundation that enables meaningful communication. Vocabulary is essential for conveying meaning. Even without perfect grammar, learners can communicate basic ideas if they know the necessary words. For example, a learner who says "I want food" communicates successfully despite grammatical simplicity. This shows that vocabulary is the primary tool for expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings.

## **Vocabulary and Language Skills**

**a. Reading :** A strong vocabulary is directly connected to reading comprehension. Learners with larger vocabularies read faster, understand texts more easily, and infer meaning from context. Vocabulary knowledge also supports academic reading, where texts contain technical terms and abstract concepts.

**b. Writing :** Vocabulary affects writing accuracy, variety, and clarity. Learners need a wide range of words to avoid repetition, express precise meanings, and create more sophisticated sentences. Improved vocabulary also reduces reliance on simple structures.

**c. Listening** : Understanding spoken language depends heavily on knowing the words used by speakers. Without adequate vocabulary, even clear pronunciation is difficult to understand.

**d. Speaking** : Vocabulary is crucial for fluency and confidence. Learners can speak more naturally when they can quickly retrieve the right words. A strong vocabulary also improves pragmatic competence, helping learners choose words appropriate to the situation.

## Principles of Teaching Vocabulary

As for principles of teaching vocabulary, an account for what vocabulary forms need to teach and the principles of how they are taught is crucial. Firstly, apart from the vocabulary teaching which in line with its objectives and students' need, it is certain to consider the vocabulary aspects to teach.

Secondly, the principles of teaching vocabulary. There are many theories about teaching vocabulary guidelines and principles. Amongst of them, two writers are thought to be plausible.

To Nation (2005), six principles in the teaching vocabulary are keeping teaching simple and clear without any complicated explanations, relating present teaching to past knowledge by showing a pattern or analogies, using both oral and written presentation, giving most attention to words that are already partly known, telling learners if it is a high frequency word that is worth noting for future attention, and not bringing in other unknown or poorly known related words like near synonyms, opposites, or members of the same lexical set. Lastly, according to Graves (2006), providing rich and varied language experiences, teaching individual words, teaching word-learning strategies, and building consciousness in readers.

## Common Challenges in Learning and Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the bedrock of language proficiency. However, both learners and teachers often face significant hurdles in the process of acquiring and imparting new lexical items. Understanding these challenges is the first step toward developing more effective learning and teaching strategies. **Common Difficulties for Learners.** Learners struggle with the multi-faceted nature of lexical knowledge, often focusing only on meaning while neglecting other crucial aspects. **Semantic Challenges (Meaning).** Multiple Meanings and Polysemy: Words often have more than one meaning (e.g., "bank" of a river vs. a financial "bank"). Learners might know one

meaning but be confused when encountering another. Synonyms and Nuance: While words like "big," "large," "huge," and "enormous" are synonyms, they are not always interchangeable. Learners struggle with the subtle differences in connotation and intensity. False Friends (False Cognates): Words that look similar in the learner's native language and the target language but have different meanings can cause significant errors (e.g., Spanish "embarazada" means "pregnant," not "embarrassed").

The process of learning and teaching vocabulary is far more complex than simply pairing a word with its translation. It involves navigating a maze of meaning, form, grammar, and culture. By recognizing these common difficulties, teachers can move beyond mere word lists and develop a more strategic, multi-dimensional approach. Similarly, learners who understand these challenges can become more conscious and effective in their vocabulary acquisition strategies, ultimately leading to greater fluency and confidence.

## **Approaches to Vocabulary Teaching**

Explicit vocabulary teaching is a conscious process of mastering the vocabulary. There has to be a direct and systematic procedure and awareness toward the objectives of vocabulary learning. It also requires the learners to understand the process it has, predict answers of the problem, evaluate and reflect a result. This is more likely to be accomplished by cognitive strategies, note-taking, dictionary, and some other associational learning methods, such as semantic approach and mnemonic method (Dakun, 2000). The explicit vocabulary teaching, according to the natural entity of language, including form, meaning, and use contains three additional techniques, that appears to be functional in learning. They are form-based explicit teaching, meaning-based explicit teaching, and rule-based explicit teaching. The form-based explicit teaching refers to the process by which forms of the vocabulary, like its free morphemes, bound morphemes, and spelling are directly taught to the students. The meaningbased explicit teaching is understood as a procedure where the meaning of an intended vocabulary is taught. Finally, the rule-based explicit teaching is related to a teaching of vocabulary based on the rules of the vocabulary being learned. Yet knowing a better technique in teaching vocabulary is another interesting topic for many scholars. Wang's (2014) work showed that the meaning-based implicit teaching is more beneficial for meaning-based language features, and the rule-based explicit teaching is more beneficial for form-based language features. Such finding means that the vocabulary teaching through the implicit teaching allows the language learners to better understand the meaning of vocabulary. It also indicates that the teaching of the use and

rules of vocabulary explicitly is more likely to improve the learners' ability to master ways to spell and to understand parts of the vocabulary, like root, base, suffix, infix, prefix, and many more.

## Conclusion:

In summary, the journey of teaching and learning vocabulary is a complex yet rewarding endeavor that moves far beyond the simple memorization of word lists. The principles of teaching lexis, when viewed holistically, provide a powerful framework for transforming vocabulary instruction from a passive activity into a dynamic and integral part of language acquisition. The core takeaway is that effective lexical instruction is multi-dimensional. It must acknowledge that knowing a word involves a deep understanding of its form, meaning, and use. Ultimately, the role of the teacher evolves from being a mere transmitter of information to a facilitator, a guide who creates an environment rich in lexical input and output opportunities. By adhering to these principles—contextualization, chunking, strategic training, active discovery, and systematic recycling—educators can empower their students not just to know words, but to use them with confidence, accuracy, and fluency. In doing so, we provide them with the essential building blocks for genuine communication and lasting language proficiency.

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