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Assessing Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary and Developing Lexical Competence in Language Education

Ariremako Afolabi Innocent[1], Oladele Jiboku[2], Gladys N. Kefas[3]
[1]Department of Linguistics and Languages, Federal University, Oye Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria
[2]English Unit, Federal University of Technology, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria
[3]English Department, National Open University Nigeria
Email: afolabiariremako@fuoye.edu.ng, ebenezer.ogunrinde@fuoye.edu.ng, oladele.jiboku@fedpolyilaro. edu.ng, gkefas989@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study investigates the role of vocabulary in language teaching syllabus through the lenses of Cognitive Linguistics, Sociocultural Theory, and Usage-Based Linguistics. Vocabulary is central to language acquisition, yet limited lexical knowledge often leads to learner frustration and demotivation. Despite vocabulary's centrality to language acquisition, it is often underemphasized in curricula, leaving educators with limited guidance on effective instruction (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Using a qualitative approach, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and curriculum analysis, the research explores how vocabulary is addressed in instructional practices and identifies challenges such as pedagogical inconsistency and teacher uncertainty. Grounded in theories that emphasize mental representation, social interaction, and meaningful use, the study reveals a gap between theoretical models and classroom implementation. Findings underscore the need for professional development and curriculum reform that elevate vocabulary instruction as a core component of language education.

Keywords:

teaching; language; vocabulary; competence; learning

I. Introduction

Vocabulary teaching aims to help learners develop their lexical knowledge—the mental lexicon or internal dictionary of words they understand and use. Despite its fundamental role in language acquisition, vocabulary instruction has historically received less attention than areas such as grammatical competence, contrastive analysis, reading, and writing, which have been more extensively explored by scholars and educators. This relative neglect can be attributed to prevailing trends in linguistic theory, where vocabulary gained recognition as a subject worthy of serious theoretical exploration and model development (Leech, 1974; Anthony, 1975).

This study focuses on the role of vocabulary within the language teaching syllabus, examining it through the lens of both theoretical and applied linguistics. By exploring the dimensions of lexical competence, the paper provides a framework for setting objectives in vocabulary instruction and for evaluating teaching techniques intended to achieve these goals.

The theoretical concerns of linguists and others who study language are pertinent to syllabus design in two ways. First, since such disciplines have as their goal explanation of the nature of language, understanding of how language is acquired, and description of how language is used to carry out pragmatic functions in the real world, we can look to such disciplines as Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, or Sociolinguistics for a more informed understanding of such questions as: What does it mean to know a word? How are words

remembered? What are the social dimensions of word usage? Inevitably such information will turn out to be vastly more complex than we might intuitively have supposed yet will be tentative and inconclusive because of changes in knowledge and theory. Such information cannot be translated directly into teaching procedures.

It may, however, suggest in a general way the type of knowledge we expect of a learner, and by implication raise questions as to how such knowledge can be acquired through a teaching program. The development of teaching materials may also take place without direct application of a theoretical model, by reference to such factors as classroom effectiveness, learner interest, age of the learners. The model most desirable from a theoretical standpoint may turn out to be the least effective in (actual use, because of the role of extralinguistic factors. So, for example, although note memorization may not be a justifiable strategy on theoretical grounds, there may be learners who enjoy and succeed in learning material through memorization.

A second level of application is in the evaluation or interpretation of results obtained. When problems or failures arise we may have to refer to a model or theory to see if it can offer explanation. Alternatively the results we obtain through practical application of a theory may lead to revision of the theory itself. A consideration of recent work in theoretical or applied linguistics does not necessarily lead to the discovery of new and exciting ways to teach vocabulary. Rather it provides background information that can help us determine the status of vocabulary teaching within the syllabus.

II. Review of Literature

A strong vocabulary is fundamental to effective language use, supporting communicative competence, learner confidence, and reading comprehension. Matthews (2018) and Schmitt and McCarthy (2020) emphasize that a robust vocabulary must be both broad and precise to meet diverse communicative demands. Contemporary cognitive linguistics conceptualizes vocabulary as a dynamic, interconnected mental lexicon, where words are linked through form–meaning mappings and semantic networks. Baxter et al. (2021) highlight that understanding these connections can inform more effective vocabulary instruction by targeting key lexical items that form dense semantic networks. Recent psycholinguistic research has refined this model, showing that lexical integration and semantic priming for second language (L2) words can occur rapidly after exposure (Kida, Barcroft, & Sommers, 2022; Pérez-Serrano, Nogueroles-López, & Duñabeitia, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of repeated, context-rich encounters with new vocabulary to promote integration into the learner's mental lexicon.

The role of extensive reading as a means of incidental vocabulary acquisition, originally emphasized by Coady (1997), remains highly relevant. However, task-based models such as the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001) and Technique Feature Analysis (Nation & Webb, 2011) provide more nuanced explanations of how different learning tasks influence vocabulary retention. These frameworks highlight that deeper processing, task engagement, and exposure to semantically clustered vocabulary enhance acquisition outcomes.

Cepeda et al.'s (2006), study provides valuable insights into the spacing effect in learning and its implications for optimizing retention. The findings suggest that learners can

improve their retention by spacing out their study sessions, and that the optimal spacing interval depends on the duration of the retention interval.

Webb's (2007), study, "The effects of repetition on vocabulary knowledge," investigates the impact of repetition on vocabulary learning and retention. The study emphasizes the need for vocabulary instruction to prioritize meaningful repetition and spaced review to promote long-term retention. Richards and Schmidt's (2010), Concur that "vocabulary is a set of Lexemes, including single words, compound words, and idioms". For their parts, Kamil and Herbert (2005), express that "General vocabulary is the knowledge of meanings of words Baracroft, Sunderman, and Schmitt (2011), asserted that lexis has been used interchangeably to mean vocabulary". Jackson and Amvela (2000), suggest that vocabulary, lexis, and lexicon are synonymous.

The idea is supported by Larsen Freeman and Decarrico (2010), when they write the vocabulary/ lexis include "…not only Syntax and Morphology but also Phonetics, Phonology Semantics and Lexis (that is, vocabulary). Nonetheless, the above approaches and distinctions will proactively help teachers gain awareness of the multilayered nature of vocabulary and lexis taking advantage of it to equip learners with the elements required to develop the competence.

Vocabulary plays a foundational role in language learning, supporting learners' communicative effectiveness, confidence, and comprehension. The literature reviewed underscores the multifaceted nature of vocabulary acquisition, highlighting key factors such as semantic processing, extensive reading, repetition, and strategic instruction. Studies by scholars such as Collins and Loftus (1975), Coady (1997), Gu (2003), and Webb (2007) reveal the cognitive, contextual, and methodological dimensions essential for effective vocabulary development. Furthermore, the interchangeable use of terms such as vocabulary, lexis, and lexicon—as noted by Richards and Schmidt (2010), Barcroft et al. (2011), and Jackson and Amvela (2000)—emphasizes the complex and layered understanding required in both theory and practice. Recognizing this complexity enables educators to adopt informed, research-based strategies that address lexical development holistically. Ultimately, raising teacher awareness of the principles and practices that support vocabulary acquisition is crucial to equipping learners with the tools they need for language competence and fluency.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws from Cognitive Linguistics, Sociocultural Theory of Language Learning, and Usage-Based Linguistics to examine vocabulary instruction in language education. Cognitive Linguistics emphasizes the role of mental representation, conceptualization, and categorization in language processing and acquisition. It views vocabulary not as isolated items but as conceptually structured and contextually meaningful units. From this perspective, learners acquire vocabulary more effectively when words are taught through meaningful contexts and cognitive associations, allowing for deeper mental encoding and retrieval.

Vocabulary development is seen as a socially constructed process, facilitated through dialogue, scaffolding, and engagement with more knowledgeable others. This theory supports the idea that language is acquired not only through exposure but through participation in communicative activities that are culturally and contextually situated. Usage-Based Linguistics further reinforces this dynamic by suggesting that language competence emerges from frequent and meaningful use in authentic contexts. It highlights the importance of lexical patterns, collocations, and constructions that are acquired through repetition and use over

time. Together, these perspectives provide a robust framework for understanding the cognitive, social, and usage-driven dimensions of vocabulary acquisition and pedagogy.

III. Results and Discussion

In developing an effective language teaching syllabus, it is crucial to consider underlying assumptions about language acquisition and competence. These assumptions inform not only the theoretical framework but also the practical decisions related to curriculum development and instructional methods. The following assumptions explore key aspects of lexical competence, which directly impact syllabus design and the strategies used to enhance vocabulary learning.

3.1 Assumption 1

First assumption is that native speakers of a language continue to expand their vocabulary throughout adulthood, while there is relatively little development of syntax in later life. This assumption suggests that lexical growth remains an ongoing process well into adulthood, contrasting with the more stable nature of syntactic development beyond early years. This insight has significant implications for syllabus design, emphasizing the need for continued vocabulary development in learners of all ages.

A great deal of research has been carried out in recent years in the area of syntactic and semantic development in child language. Less attention has been given to vocabulary development, though this was extensively studied until the 1950s. Whereas in syntax the period of maximum development appears to be from age 2 to age 12, with only minor changes according to social role and mode of discourses taking place in adulthood, in vocabulary there is continued development beyond the childhood years, with adults constantly adding new words to their vocabulary through reading, occupation, and other activities. The primary period for conceptual development, however, is early childhood.

When we try to translate this information into statistical figures we cannot be precise, since measurement of vocabulary knowledge is difficult and only approximate. Watts suggests that the average child enters elementary school with a recognition vocabulary of 2,000 words, that at age 7 this has reached some 7,000 words, and by 14 the child should be able to recognize 14,000 words (Watts 1944). The vocabulary of adults has been variously estimated at between 10,000 for a nonacademic adult to over 150,000 for a professional scientist. University students are estimated to understand some 60,000 to 100,000 words (Mackey 1965).

3.2 Assumption 2

> *Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words we also 'know' the sort of words most likely to be associated with the words*

The speaker of a language recognizes that some words are common and familiar whereas other words are rare, unfamiliar, or even totally un- known to him or her. Our knowledge of the general probability of occurrence of a word means we recognize that a word like *book* is more frequent than *manual* or *directory*, and yet both these words strike us as more frequent than *thesaurus*. Given a list of words, with the exception of concrete nouns, a native

speaker can classify them into "frequent," "moderately frequent," "not frequent," to a degree of accuracy reasonably close to their actual frequencies (Noble 1953, Richards 1974).

The speaker of a language recognizes not only the general probability of occurrence of a word but also the probability of words being associated together with other words. Knowledge of collocation means that on encountering the word *fruit* we can expect the words ripe, green: not ripe), *sweet*: *bitter*; and that for *meat* we might expect *tender*, *tough*.

3.3 Assumption 3

Knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behavior associated with that word.

Our knowledge of a word is not stored only as a concept; we also associate specific structural and grammatical properties with words. The traditional division between *vocabulary* and *structure* is in fact a tenuous one, a fact that is recognized in our use of the term *structural words* for a number of frequent words in the vocabulary. Important information about the structural properties of words, which includes the types of grammatical relations they may enter into, is acquired by the learner as part of vocabulary learning. Accounts of language like those proposed by C. J. Fillmore (1968) relate the structural behavior of words to their semantic structure as reflected in case relations. A sentence in language is defined by a verb together with a number of cases, drawn from a limited set. The cases that are required in a particular sentence are determined by the verb of that sentence. The verb *break*, for example, as Nilsen illustrates, contains the features (O) (I) (A). (O) means the verb requires an object; (I) and (A) indicate that it may take instrumental and agent case in addition. If there is an agent, the agent becomes the subject. If there is no agent, but there is an instrumental case, the instrument is the subject. When there is neither an agent nor an instrument, the object becomes the subject. This is illustrated by Nilsen with the following examples.

1. Taiwo broke the bicycle with a rock.	+OIA
2. A rock broke the bicycle.	+OI
3. The bicycle broke.	+O

(Nilsen 1971)

Case grammar tells us that for a certain verb, there is a range of associated syntactic units required to realize the cases associated with the verb. In some instances case relations enable us to predict the syntactic properties of words.

3.4 Assumption 4

Knowing a word entails knowledge of the underlying form of that word and the derivation that can be made from it

When we learn a word we also learn the rules that enable us to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word. With regular derivations, such as those for tense and person, the problems are not great. Walked, walking, walks are readily recognized as derived from walk. According to some linguists (Chomsky and Halle 1968), we also derive *solidity*, *solidify*, *solidly*, *solidness*, *consolidate* from the underlying form *solid*. The semantic relationship to the underlying form is preserved by the English spelling system; so for example, despite the differences in pronunciation between the first two syllables of *photograph*, *photographer*, *photographic*, the first two syllables are spelled identically in each word. If the spelling system of English were to be revised to 'more closely approximate the spoken

language, these links between underlying forms and derived forms world be lost. Learning to be able to make such links is especially important in learning Malay, Indonesian, and many of the languages of the Philippines. The learner will less frequently encounter the base form of the word than one of its many derivations, and some training is required to be able to identify the base form, particularly when attempting to locate the meaning of the word in a dictionary. Hence when learning Indonesian, the learner would have to look in the dictionary under *Bunga* (flower) for *Berbunga*, *Membunga*, *Memperbungakan*, and *Pembungaan*.

3.5 Assumption 5

Knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language

Words do not exist in isolation. Their meanings are defined through their relations to other words, and it is through understanding these connections that we arrive at our understanding of words. Some of these relations are seen in word association tests; there is a great deal of uniformity among typical responses:

Stimulus	**Typical**
Accident	*car*
Alive	*dead*
Baby	*mother*
Born	*die*
Cabbage	*vegetable*
Table	*chair*
Careless	*careful*

(Deese 1965)

Responses

Such responses suggest a number of different ways in which associative links between words are organized. For example:

by contrast or antonym	*wet-dry*
by similarity or synonym	*blossom-flower*
by subordinative classification	*animal-dog*
by coordinate classification	*apple-peach*
by superordinate classification	*spinach-vegetable*

(cf.Slobin 1971)

The same word can of course be seen as linked to many different words through different associative networks. *Giving* is linked both to *receiving* and to *taking*. *Old* is linked to *new* and to *young*; *good* to *bad* and to *poor*.

The responses to free association tests hence give much information about the psychological structuring of vocabulary in an individual and offer a way of investigating the syntactic and semantic relationships among words. Presumably, knowledge of this kind is inherent in language use, in helping us choose a word and in finding the right word for the context.

> *Word meanings do not exist in isolation in the reader's mind like so many entries in a dictionary. What a word means to the reader depends upon what he is reading and what he expects to read, the phrase, clause or sentence in which the words appear. The meaning of a word, that is to say, depends upon the thought that it is being used to express and the*

context of its expression. Whether one reads unionize as a verb in chemistry or a verb in labor relations depends upon many things other than its spelling and its symbol-sound relations. Indeed, a very large number of words in a dictionary have multiple meanings, and for some words the definitions are contradictory. For example scan means to glance at quick and to read in detail, and cleave to join and to separate. The reader, clearly, must construct a representation of what he is reading about if he is to appreciate the meaning of what he is reading. (quoted by Eskey 1973).

3.6 Assumption 6

Knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of a word.

One way of analyzing meaning is to break words down and categorize them according to a basic set of minimal semantic features, different combinations of which produce different words. Examples of such features would be *animate*, *living*, *human*, *nonhuman*, *and inanimate*. A word like *man* contains the semantic features + *human* +*male*. The word *table* is+ *inanimate*+ *nonhuman*. These features impose restrictions on word usage. We can say *the table was damaged but not the table was hurt*, since *hurt* is associated only with animate subjects.

The semantic value of many words can be determined by placing them on weighted semantic scales. The semantic- differential technique investigates meaning in this way using sets of polar on opposites. For example, the word *father* could be evaluated on a set of terms in this way:

Happy ……. …… …..X…. ..... ……. …….. …… sad
Hard …….. …….X….. …… …….. ……. …….. …….. soft
Slow …… …… …….. ……. ……X……. ……. ……fast

In this way information both about the subjective values of an individual and the semantic structure of the lexicon can be studied.

3.7 Assumption 7

Knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with the word

The assumptions so far discussed suggest that meaning is a much richer concept than we often assume, and this is reflected in the fact that dictionary entries for words usually list a great variety of different or related meanings for each word, showing how the word takes its meaning from the context in which it is used.

This emphasizes that words are not simply labels for things but represent "processes by which the species deals cognitively with the environment" (Lenneberg 1967:334). The dictionary entries for a word try to capture the most frequent ways in which a word realizes a particular concept; however, since this is always an active process of reconstruction, much of the way in which a particular meaning is formed cannot be recorded in the dictionary.

3.8 Implications

Let us now look at the assumptions that have been proposed and consider their implications for vocabulary teaching. Below is a brief outline of the seven assumptions:

1. Native speakers of a language continue to expand their vocabulary in adult- hood, whereas there is comparatively little development of syntax in adult life.

2. Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words we also know the sort of words most likely to be found associated with the word.
3. Knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behaviour associated with the word.
4. Knowing a word entails knowledge of the underlying form of a word and the derivations that can be made from it.
5. Knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language.
6. Knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of a word.
7. Knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with a word.

The implication is that vocabulary teaching in second-language instruction must go beyond incidental or indirect exposure and instead include structured, direct vocabulary instruction, especially at higher levels of learning.

Considering just these assumptions about *word knowledge* we get a picture of the complex learning task that is required in acquiring *vocabulary*. To what degree can teaching strategies accommodate these assumptions?

Assumptions 1 and 7 suggest that beyond the elementary levels of instruction, a major feature of a second-language program should be a component of massive vocabulary expansion. Though we cannot specify precisely the number of words a learner at a specific level should be able to recognize and use, it is clear that learners who are constantly adding to their vocabulary knowledge are better prepared both for productive and receptive language skills. Many language programs, however, assume that vocabulary expansion will be covered by the reading program. We can call this *indirect vocabulary teaching*, where vocabulary is acquired incidentally through the practice of other language skills. Mackey in his *Language Teaching Analysis* (1965) and *Rivers in Teaching Foreign-Language Skills* (*1968*) deal with vocabulary teaching only as it affects reading. An exception to this approach is taken by Bright and McGregor, who have a detailed chapter on direct vocabulary teaching in their *Teaching English as a Second Language (1970).* It is direct vocabulary teaching that is the focus here.

The need for a rapid increase in the learner's recognition vocabulary, as implied by assumptions 1 and 7, is the motivation behind Barnard's Advanced English Vocabulary (1971), which teaches a 3,000-word vocabulary taken from a frequency analysis of university texts. The words are carefully defined and explained in simple English, with several of their important meanings given; they are then encountered in exercises and reading passages.

The implications of assumption 2 is dealt with in a number of exercises in Barnard (1971), and the rationale for collocation teaching is discussed in detail in Brown D. F. (1974), who analyzes exercises that can be used to give practice in the most frequent collocation groups of particular fields of writing, emphasizing, for example, that intense is likely to occur with reference to *heat, light, energy, or pressure.*

Assumption 3 deals with the syntactic properties of words. Nilsen has proposed that case grammar has important applications in language teaching and suggest that case grammar allows the teacher to point out the common case relationships across languages. He illustrates that particular semantic categories (such as verbs of motion) require basically the same case frame: agent, source, path, goal, and with transitive verbs, agent, source, path, goal and object.

Tina flew from Port Harcourt to Abuja via Lagos
A S G P

Has the same case frame as

Yemi bussed *the football players from Surulere to Abuja via Ilorin*
A O SG P?

This example is intended to illustrate that verbs of motion (fly and bus) have the same case framework except that the transitive verb requires objects. The case frame (hence the syntax) of particular verbs is determined by their semantic categories (Nilsen 1971).

Farsi (1974), however, points out that the grammatical capacities of verbs cannot always be determined by their case relations. There is a great deal of lexical idiosyncrasy. For example,

We can compare the following parts of semantically similar words with different syntactic properties:

Head
The wound healed.
The medicine healed the wound.

Calm down
He calmed down.
It calmed him down.
Cure
The patient cured.
The medicine cured the patient.

Soothe
He Soothed.
It soothed him

Although the insights of case grammar are useful, we do not as yet have a pedagogic grammar of English based on this approach. An understanding of case relationships and their consequent implications for syntax may, however, help the teacher interprets and more adequately explain certain errors, but there are many exceptions that even case grammar does not adequately deal with.

Assumption 4 is dealt with through direct teaching aimed at recognizing the basic forms of words they are combined with different in - flexional and derivational suffixes. Paninskas (1972) found that words derived from liberal had a frequency of 46 occurrences across 5 A different types of writing in the university texts she examined. In addition to the form liberal, she found liberalism, liberalize, liberalization, liberate, liberator, liberally. Rapid identification of the base form of words is needed as part of an overall attempt to teach students how to infer meaning from words. A considerable portion of Croft's Reading and Word Study (1960) is devoted to this; and familiarity with the Latinate and Greek inflections of scientific terminology (cf. Flood 1960) should be dealt with in courses of scientific English.

Assumption 5 suggests that words are stored or come to mind according to associative bonds and that learning may be facilitated when such bonds are established. In a specific study of how second-language learners store vocabulary in short-term memory, Henning found that in the earlier stages of learning, words may be stored according to acoustics links (i.e., words that sound similar are stored together), whereas later learners used a semantic basis for storing words, storing according to meaning links of the type discussed under 5. Henning notes:

The implications of the teaching of vocabulary are that strategies of encoding vocabulary in memory appear to charge as a function of language proficiency. Low-proficiency language learners, although a test indicated they understood the meanings of the stimulus recognition items, appeared to encode them in memory on the basis of acoustics and orthographic similarities rather they by association of meaning. Therefore it would appear that they would benefit from selective listening, aural discrimination, songs, rhymes, affix drills and other exercises that point our similarities and differences of sound and spelling of words. For example, it might prove more helpful for learners at that level to discover the distinction between whether and weather than the distinction between weather and if. But learners at a high level appear to encode vocabulary in memory primarily on the basis of meanings. At that level learners might benefit more from synonyms and antonyms games and exercises, paired-associate compositions in which lists of related words are given the learner from which he is to prepare written or oral compositions. It is hoped that through continual drilling and exercises of this nature that language learner will begin to recognize not only a larger inventory of lexical items encountered, but be able to identify the acoustic and semantic families from which they come, and thus more efficiently progress in language proficiency. (Henning 1973).

Some of the implications of assumption 6 are discussed by Bright and McGregor:

In our first language we pick up strong emotional association within the home. But second language is normally learnt in the less passionate atmosphere of the classroom; where physical violence, for example, about whether this is mine or yours does not normally arise. The result is a lack of emotional involvement in the language and hence great difficulty in seeing any meaning other than plain sense. Obstinate is understood to mean no more than determined - the writer's attitude of disapproval is missed. (Bright and McGregor 1970: 30) Vocabulary teaching thus involves showing how a word can take on emotional connotation in a particular context. Perhaps one of the most useful exercises to deal globally with many of the aspects of word knowledge implied in the assumptions discussed here is the cloze exercise Students fill in blanks to a passage from which words have been deleted. Subsequent classroom discussion of the words offered allows the learner to acquire words in context and in relation to other words in the text and to the overall content of the passage (cf. Plaister 1973)

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study does not aim to propose a rigid classification system for vocabulary teaching exercises. Rather, it emphasizes the necessity of adopting a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of vocabulary in teaching practices. Effective vocabulary instruction should move beyond superficial word lists to incorporate deeper elements of lexical knowledge, such as word associations, syntactic behavior, contextual usage, and morphological structure.

The seven assumptions explored throughout this paper underscore the complex nature of vocabulary acquisition and the challenges it poses for both learners and educators. They highlight the need for explicit, systematic instruction that prioritizes vocabulary development as a central component of the language syllabus. Despite its critical role in language learning, vocabulary has often been marginalized in favor of grammar or reading-focused instruction, leaving a gap in pedagogical effectiveness.

Effective vocabulary teaching requires a clear grasp of the subject matter, which has frequently been overlooked in language instruction. Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in language learning, serving as a strong indicator of intellectual ability and a reliable predictor of academic success. Research in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context continues to affirm the vital role of vocabulary knowledge and lexical competence in learners' communicative and academic performance.

Therefore, a focused and informed approach to vocabulary development should be a primary objective in language instruction. Enhancing learners' lexical competence not only accelerates their overall language proficiency but also equips them with the tools needed to engage confidently and effectively in both academic and real-world communication.

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