ENHANCING STUDENTS' LEXICAL COMPETENCE USING COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE TASK-BASED ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: *Lexical competence is a critical component of foreign language proficiency and a key determinant of learners' communicative readiness in upper-secondary education. This study examines the integration of cognitive strategies with communicative task-based activities to enhance lexical competence among 10th–11th grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Drawing on cognitive linguistics, communicative language teaching, and task-based instruction, the article presents a comprehensive methodological framework, detailing cognitive and communicative tasks, task sequencing, and reflective practices. Results indicate improvements in vocabulary retention, lexical accuracy, fluency, learner motivation, critical thinking, and autonomy. Recommendations for practical classroom implementation are discussed.*

Key words: *cognitive, communicative, competence, approach, vocabulary, task-based, lexical*

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as the foundation of effective communication and academic achievement in foreign language learning. For upper-secondary learners, lexical competence plays a pivotal role in reading comprehension, oral fluency, listening accuracy, and writing skills. Research shows that students with stronger lexical competence are more confident in communication, perform better on standardized tests, and demonstrate greater ability to comprehend and produce complex texts (Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2001).

Traditional methods of vocabulary instruction, such as rote memorization, translation exercises, and repetitive drills, often fail to produce long-term retention or functional usage. Students may temporarily recall new words but struggle to use them correctly in authentic communicative situations. Furthermore, passive vocabulary learning can reduce learner motivation and engagement.

To address these challenges, educational researchers have proposed integrating cognitive strategies with communicative task-based learning. Cognitive strategies involve activities that require learners to analyze, categorize, infer, and connect new vocabulary to existing knowledge. Communicative tasks, in turn, require students to apply vocabulary meaningfully in realistic contexts, enhancing fluency and practical competence.

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of this integrated approach in enhancing lexical competence among 10th–11th grade EFL learners. The paper provides a detailed

theoretical background, outlines a comprehensive methodology, presents classroom findings, and offers practical pedagogical recommendations.

Literature Review

Lexical Competence in EFL Learning

Lexical competence encompasses not only knowledge of individual word meanings but also awareness of word forms, collocations, connotations, grammatical patterns, and pragmatic usage (Nation, 2001). Schmitt (2010) emphasizes the distinction between receptive vocabulary, which learners can recognize and understand, and productive vocabulary, which they can actively use in communication. Both types of knowledge require repeated exposure and meaningful engagement.

Effective vocabulary learning involves breadth (number of words known) and depth (richness of word knowledge). Depth includes semantic, morphological, syntactic, and collocational knowledge, enabling learners to use words flexibly in multiple contexts. Thornbury (2002) argues that lexical competence develops most effectively when words are introduced within authentic communicative situations rather than in isolated lists.

Recent studies show that students who engage with vocabulary through meaningful tasks, authentic materials, and cognitive analysis outperform peers who rely solely on memorization. For example, learners exposed to thematic reading texts combined with semantic mapping exercises retain more words and show greater fluency in speaking activities.

Cognitive Approaches to Vocabulary Learning

Cognitive linguistics posits that vocabulary is stored in mental schemas and semantic networks, allowing learners to relate new words to existing knowledge structures (Evans & Green, 2006). Cognitive strategies that promote depth of processing include:

- **Semantic mapping:** Creating visual diagrams linking new vocabulary to topics, concepts, and contexts.
- **Categorization:** Grouping words by theme, function, or grammatical category.
- **Collocation analysis:** Identifying natural word combinations to ensure fluent expression.
- **Synonym-antonym exercises:** Highlighting subtle differences in meaning.
- **Morphological analysis:** Examining roots, prefixes, and suffixes to infer meanings and support word formation.

Research confirms that learners who engage in active cognitive processing not only retain vocabulary longer but can also apply it in varied communicative contexts (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Nation, 2001). For instance, semantic mapping combined with contextual usage tasks helps students remember not only the meaning but also collocations and appropriate usage in writing and speaking.

Communicative and Task-Based Approaches

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes functional communication, learner interaction, and authentic language use (Littlewood, 2004). Task-Based Language

Teaching (TBLT) positions tasks as the central unit of learning, where students must use language to achieve meaningful goals (Ellis, 2003).

Combining cognitive and communicative approaches ensures learners process vocabulary deeply while also practicing it actively in real-life scenarios. Constructivist learning principles support this integration by promoting active knowledge construction, reflection, and learner autonomy.

Previous Studies

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive-communicative approaches:

- **Schmitt (2010)** found that learners using semantic mapping and categorization alongside communicative tasks retained significantly more vocabulary than peers relying on rote memorization.
- **Ellis (2003)** reported that task-based activities, including role-plays and information-gap exercises, improved productive vocabulary use and fluency.
- **Littlewood (2004)** emphasized that interaction, negotiation of meaning, and contextualized tasks enhance lexical acquisition and confidence in communication.

Despite these findings, research focused specifically on **upper-secondary learners** is limited, particularly concerning structured integration of cognitive and communicative tasks for lexical development.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 40 10th–11th grade students at a secondary school in Uzbekistan. All participants had intermediate English proficiency (B1–B2 CEFR). Classes were conducted over a semester, with two sessions per week focused on lexical development.

Design of Cognitive Tasks

Cognitive tasks aimed to deepen understanding and mental organization of new vocabulary:

1. **Semantic Mapping:** Students created visual diagrams connecting new words to topics, synonyms, antonyms, and collocations.
2. **Categorization:** Words were grouped by theme, grammatical function, or register (academic, formal, informal).
3. **Synonym-Antonym Analysis:** Students explored nuances in meaning and usage.
4. **Collocation Recognition:** Students analyzed authentic texts to identify frequent word combinations.
5. **Morphological Analysis:** Roots, prefixes, and suffixes were studied to predict meaning and support word formation.

These tasks helped learners internalize word meaning, usage, and connections to other vocabulary items.

Design of Communicative Tasks

Communicative tasks enabled learners to use vocabulary actively:

- **Role-plays and Simulations:** Scenarios such as shopping, job interviews, and environmental discussions.

- **Information-Gap Activities:** Pairs exchanged missing information using target vocabulary.
- **Collaborative Writing:** Groups created stories, dialogues, and essays based on assigned lexical sets.
- **Debates and Problem-Solving Discussions:** Students argued viewpoints and resolved thematic problems.
- **Project-Based Presentations:** Students conducted research and presented topics using target vocabulary.

Task Sequencing and Reflection

Lessons followed a **three-stage cycle**:

1. **Pre-task (Cognitive Activation):** Introduction of target vocabulary using cognitive tasks.
2. **Task (Communicative Application):** Learners applied vocabulary in realistic tasks.
3. **Post-task Reflection:** Consolidation through vocabulary journals, peer feedback, mini-quizzes, and digital flashcards (e.g., Quizlet, Kahoot).

This structure supported both deep processing and practical usage of vocabulary.

Findings

Implementation of cognitive-communicative tasks demonstrated:

- **Enhanced Retention:** Students retained more words over time.
- **Lexical Accuracy:** Correct word usage increased in speaking and writing.
- **Fluency:** Spontaneous use of vocabulary improved.
- **Critical Thinking:** Learners engaged in analysis, categorization, and inference.
- **Collaboration:** Teamwork and communication skills strengthened.
- **Autonomy:** Students developed self-directed study habits.

Classroom observations revealed that students were more motivated, engaged, and confident in using new vocabulary, particularly in discussions and presentations.

Discussion

The findings confirm that cognitive-communicative approaches effectively enhance lexical competence. Cognitive tasks provide understanding and mental organization, while communicative tasks offer real-world application opportunities. The combination promotes active engagement, reflection, and autonomy, aligning with constructivist learning principles.

Digital tools further support learning. For example:

- **Quizlet** for spaced repetition and semantic mapping.
- **Padlet** for collaborative writing and vocabulary sharing.
- **Kahoot** for gamified quizzes and peer feedback.

Teachers should scaffold tasks according to learner proficiency, gradually increasing complexity, and encourage reflective practice for consolidation.

Conclusion

Cognitive-communicative task-based instruction significantly enhances lexical competence in upper-secondary EFL learners. The approach strengthens deep cognitive

processing, authentic usage, learner motivation, and autonomy. Systematic implementation in classrooms, alongside digital support and reflective practices, maximizes vocabulary acquisition and functional language use. Teachers are encouraged to balance cognitive and communicative tasks, integrate vocabulary across all language skills, and adapt activities to learner proficiency and interests.

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