

**LEXICAL COMPETENCE: DISTINGUISHING COMPETENCE FROM SKILLS IN
LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Scientific advisor: PhD, **Muxtorov M.M.**
Abdulxayev Farxodbek Maxmudjon Ugli
The 1st year Master's degree student
Department of Foreign language and literature
Uzbekistan State World Language University
farhodbekabdulhayev@gmail.com
+998 (94) 613-71-17

Abstract: This essay explains lexical competence and the difference between lexical competence and language skills. Competence refers to internal, generally unconscious knowledge of words, while skills are the active application of that knowledge in communication. The essay highlights the significance of lexical competence in achieving fluency, comprehension, and communicative efficiency. It also considers pedagogical approaches like context-based learning, repeated exposure, and active vocabulary use to promote competence in addition to skill acquisition. Balanced pedagogy in language instruction is promoted in order to achieve effective and meaningful learning.

Key words: Lexical competence, vocabulary, language skills, communicative competence, receptive vocabulary, productive vocabulary, fluency, word formation, contextual learning, language teaching, lexical knowledge, vocabulary development

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada leksik kompetensiya tushunchasi va uni til ko'nikmalaridan farqi yoritib beriladi. Kompetensiya ichki, ko'pincha ong osti darajasidagi so'z boyligi haqidagi bilimni anglatadi, ko'nikma bu bilimni amaliy aloqa jarayonida qo'llash qobiliyatidir. Maqolada leksik kompetensiyaning ravon so'zlashish, tushunish va samarali muloqotda tutgan o'rni ta'kidlanadi. Shuningdek, kontekst asosida o'rgatish, takroriy uchratish va faol foydalanish kabi pedagogik usullar muhokama qilinadi. Maqola til o'qitish jarayonida kompetensiya va ko'nikmani uyg'un rivojlantirish zarurligini asoslaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: Leksik kompetensiya, so'z boyligi, til ko'nikmalari, kommunikativ kompetensiya, reseptiv so'z boyligi, produktiv so'z boyligi, ravon so'zlashuv, so'z yasalishi, kontekstda o'rganish, til o'qitish, leksik bilim, so'z boyligini rivojlantirish

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматривается понятие лексической компетенции и её отличие от языковых навыков. Компетенция означает внутреннее, часто неосознанное знание словарного запаса, тогда как навыки связаны с активным использованием этих знаний в процессе общения. Особое внимание уделяется важности лексической компетенции для достижения беглости, понимания и успешной коммуникации. Также обсуждаются педагогические подходы, включая обучение в контексте, многократное повторение и активное применение слов. Подчеркивается необходимость сбалансированного подхода в обучении языку для обеспечения глубокого и эффективного усвоения.

Ключевые слова: Лексическая компетенция, словарный запас, языковые навыки, коммуникативная компетенция, рецептивный словарь, продуктивный словарь, беглость речи, словообразование, контекстное обучение, преподавание языка, лексические знания, развитие словаря

Introduction: In language teaching and learning, vocabulary holds a key position in facilitating effective communication. Without sufficient lexical knowledge, even grammatically accurate

sentence might lose its conveyed meaning. Therefore, the concept of lexical competence—a speaker's ability to understand and use words—has gained significance among linguists, educators, and language learners. But the concept is most generally confused with other, similar terms such as skills or language ability, which are more precisely speaking about using knowledge as opposed to the knowledge itself. The difference between skill and competence lies at the heart of an understanding of how learners acquire and use language. Competence refers to the underlying knowledge of linguistic structures, while skills are the day-to-day ability to use that knowledge in interaction. Being conscious of the distinction is crucial in the development of effective language instruction that encourages lexical consciousness and communicative competence.

This article examines the idea of lexical competence at great length and illustrates how it differs from language capabilities. By doing so, it attempts to provide instructors and learners with a better road map to acquire words and learn languages.

1). Understanding Lexical Competence: Lexical competence is the ability of the learner to recognize, understand, and employ words correctly in various linguistic and situational contexts. Lexical competence does not amount to the memorization of discrete words but a deeper, hierarchical understanding of the functioning of words in real communication. As one of the elements of communicative competence, lexical competence is also vital to successful language use, especially in word-heavy domains such as academic or professional communication.¹

Vocabulary Size (Breadth): This is the number of words a student knows at a basic recognition level. A student must know about 8,000–9,000 word families to be able to read unsimplified texts with ease. Vocabulary breadth is the foundation for reading and participating in ordinary conversation or comprehension.

Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge: Apart from meaning awareness of a word, depth involves awareness of features such as collocations (pairs of words), connotations (cultural or emotional), and register (formal or informal, slang). For example, awareness of "make a decision" over "do a decision" falls under awareness of collocations.

Word Formation (Morphology and Derivation): A lexically proficient student can recognize and use derived forms of words (e.g., nation, national, international) and understand how affixes alter meaning or function. Such morphological knowledge expands vocabulary exponentially and makes it easier to comprehend.

Idioms and Phrasal Verbs: Language competence also requires the understanding of fixed expressions like idioms (e.g., kick the bucket) and phrasal verbs (e.g., give up, run into), which are generally non-literal and culturally specific. These elements pose difficulty even to proficient learners but cannot be avoided in order to sound natural.²

Lexical competence theory finds its roots in Noam Chomsky's linguistic competence theory, developed during the 1960s. Chomsky characterized linguistic competence as idealized, internalized grammatical knowledge a native speaker possesses that differs from real use of language (performance). While his focus was on syntax, Chomsky's model laid the groundwork for later expansion of the term to include lexical competence as a technical component in models of more general communicative competence, e.g., those constructed by Canale and Swain in the 1980s.

¹ Coady J. & Huckin T. *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* – Cambridge University Press. 1997. P. 5.

² Schmitt N. *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* – Cambridge University Press. 2000. P. 79.

Lexical competence, therefore, is more than a vocabulary list. It entails awareness of form, meaning, usage, and sociolinguistic appropriateness—all of which are necessary to be effective in real communication.³

2). Competence vs. Skill: The Key Distinction: A clear distinction between skill and competence is required to account for how individuals acquire, store, and use language. Linguistic competence is a label applied to the internalized, often unconscious knowledge of the language structure by a speaker. This includes vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and syntax, irrespective of actual performance. It is the mental representation of language—what a speaker knows.

By contrast, skills embody the overt, practical ability to apply this knowledge to real communicative events—i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Language skills are developed over a period of time through practice and are more likely to be influenced by external factors such as confidence, cognitive load, or social context. To illustrate this distinction, consider the case of a second-language learner who has memorized thousands of words and rules of grammar. Despite this extensive lexical and grammatical competence, the learner may still be incapable of producing coherent spoken sentences in a face-to-face conversation. This illustrates a gap between competence (knowledge) and skill (use). Similarly, a learner may be able to read complex texts (reading skill) but not be able to write essays (productive skill), even using vocabulary they already know.⁴

This distinction was formalized in theoretical descriptions of language ability. Noam Chomsky, in his revolutionary *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), formulated the concept of linguistic competence versus performance. Competence, for Chomsky, is the idealized native speaker's capacity to generate an infinite variety of grammatical sentences, and performance is the execution of this capacity in actual, real-world conditions, which is typically imperfect due to distraction or memory limitations.⁵

Building on this, Dell Hymes faulted the notion of linguistic competence as restrictive to explain the deployment of language in social contexts. He proposed the concept of communicative competence that encompasses not only grammatical expertise but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competency—i.e., being aware of where, when, and how to use language in appropriate ways. In this expanded conception, lexical competence is one of the critical building blocks of communicative competence, since proper word choice depends on context, purpose, and audience.⁶

The instructional implications of this gap are significant. Teachers should be careful not to only add to students' knowledge of vocabulary (e.g., through vocabulary drills or word lists), but help students move such knowledge into functional skills through involving students in authentic communication, fluency practice, and functional use of language tasks.⁷

³ Chomsky N. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* – MIT Press. 1965. P. 4.

⁴ Bachman L.F. & Palmer A.S. *Language Testing in Practice* – Oxford University Press. 1996. P. 68.

⁵ Chomsky N. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* – MIT Press. 1965. PP. 4-5.

⁶ Hymes D. "On Communicative Competence." *Sociolinguistics* – Penguin Books. 1972. PP. 277-293.

⁷ Richards J.C. *Communicative Language Teaching Today* (pp. – Cambridge University Press. 2000. PP. 10-11.

3). Why Lexical Competence Matters: Lexical ability is central to language proficiency. Without a healthy vocabulary base, learners have grave limitations in hearing, producing, and applying the target language. Empirical data consistently confirm that good lexical skill fosters fluency, understanding, and communicative effectiveness as a whole when the learner listens, speaks, reads, or writes.

Maybe one of applied linguistics' most sensational findings is that knowledge of words is among the greatest predictors of second-language academic success. Those who have high vocabularies perform better in such activities as understanding academic readings, writing essays, or following lectures. As mandated by Nation (2001), to be able to read 98% of written texts without a dictionary, one must acquire at least 8,000–9,000 word families. For oral speech, 6,000–7,000 word families are sufficient for fluent understanding.⁸

Also, lexical competence is not just about the number of words one knows, but also about how well one knows them. That is where the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary comes in:

Receptive Vocabulary is vocabulary that a learner can recognize and understand when they are reading or listening. It is generally larger than productive vocabulary and is passive knowledge.

Productive Vocabulary is the name given to those words which the learner can actively remember and use correctly in speaking and writing. This requires more extensive lexical knowledge, including pronunciation, spelling, collocations, and appropriacy of use. For example, a learner might recognize the word "consequence" in reading an article yet fail to use it appropriately in speaking without being aware of its collocational patterns (e.g., serious consequences, face the consequences) and formal tone. This kind of discrepancy between receptive and productive ability is common in language learners and illustrates several different cognitive demands of recognition versus active use.⁹

Lexical competence also influences fluency, or the ability to produce speech in a smooth and effortless way. Students with dense and highly organized lexical knowledge hesitate less, use fewer fillers, and are more precise in choosing words that are relevant to their communicative intention. With these consequences, the acquisition of lexical competence must be a focal approach in language instruction. Effective vocabulary teaching must go beyond memorization and enhance rich exposure, active use, and contextual learning. Teachers must help learners to transfer words from receptive to productive use through practice, feedback, and repetition in various contexts.¹⁰

4). Pedagogical Implications: A successful language curriculum must deal with both lexical competence (knowledge) and lexical skill (practical use). Recognizing the gap between knowing words and using them well, teachers are encouraged to organize teaching that systematically builds vocabulary knowledge and provides the potential for meaningful, frequent practice in communication.

⁸ Nation I.S. Learning Vocabulary in Another Language – Cambridge University Press. 2001. P 16.

⁹ Schmitt N. Vocabulary in Language Teaching – Cambridge University Press. 2000. PP. 128-129.

¹⁰ Nation I.S. & Webb S. Researching and Analyzing Vocabulary – Heinle Cengage Learning. 2011. PP. 30-33.

Context-Based Vocabulary Acquisition: Learning words in context is one of the most effective methods of developing lexical competence. Contextualized vocabulary allows learners to acquire not just meanings but also how words are syntactically and semantically used in authentic contexts. Nation emphasizes that incidental learning—where learners are exposed to vocabulary through reading or listening - allows for deep processing and recall. For example, reading graded readers or listening to stories allows learners to learn vocabulary along with its usage, tone, and collocation.

Active Use in Speaking and Writing: To shift vocabulary from receptive to productive, students must actively use new words in speaking and writing activities. Swain's Output Hypothesis emphasizes how language production pushes learners to retrieve and use lexical information, storing it in memory and building fluency. Class activities like dialogues, role-plays, and personal writing tasks can foster such productive use. Output activities create a context where lexical gaps are noticed and corrected - at the heart of vocabulary acquisition.

Repeated Exposure: Vocabulary learning is a cumulative process and it requires multiple encounters with words. It is shown through research that a word must be encountered 8 to 10 times in varied contexts for long-term learning. Teachers should therefore plan for recycling vocabulary through spiraled curricula—where learned words are re-visited in readings, listening texts, speaking tasks, and writing prompts over time.¹¹

Conclusion: It is necessary for both language learners and teachers to be acquainted with the distinction between lexical competence and lexical skill. Lexical competence is internalized information about vocabulary—inclusive of meaning, usage, and association—while lexical skill is the capacity to enact the knowledge in the real-time flow of communication. Knowing the distinction allows more specific and effective teaching.

In my opinion, this distinction is often undervalued in traditional language instruction, where passive vocabulary lists or grammar rules are accorded priority. But from my own research and experience, I have seen that students only thrive when lexical knowledge and usage are developed simultaneously. Memorizing vocabulary does not render one proficient; it is the ability to remember and apply the knowledge in authentic contexts that instills confidence and communicative ability.

Therefore, instruction must move beyond simple memorization and decontextualized grammar practice. It must strive to balance internal lexical development with frequent and varied opportunities for meaningful use. A dual focus on both competence and skill leads to increased fluency, understanding, and overall communicative competence. By fostering context-embedded learning, multiple exposure, active vocabulary usage, and engaging practice, educators can empower learners not only to acquire words but also to use them effectively and with confidence in everyday situations.

THE LIST OF USED LITERATURE

1. Coady J. & Huckin T. Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition – Cambridge University Press. 1997.
2. Schmitt N. Vocabulary in Language Teaching – Cambridge University Press. 2000.
3. Chomsky N. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax – MIT Press. 1965.
4. Bachman L.F. & Palmer A.S. Language Testing in Practice – Oxford University Press. 1996.

¹¹ Schmitt N. Vocabulary in Language Teaching – Cambridge University Press. 2000. PP. 143-145.

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

SJIF 2019: 5.222 2020: 5.552 2021: 5.637 2022:5.479 2023:6.563 2024: 7,805

eISSN :2394-6334 <https://www.ijmrd.in/index.php/imjrd> Volume 12, Issue 05 (2025)

5. Chomsky N. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax – MIT Press. 1965.
6. Hymes D. “On Communicative Competence.” Sociolinguistics – Penguin Books. 1972.
7. Richards J.C. Communicative Language Teaching Today (pp. – Cambridge University Press. 2000.
8. Nation I.S. Learning Vocabulary in Another Language – Cambridge University Press. 2001.
9. Schmitt N. Vocabulary in Language Teaching – Cambridge University Press. 2000.
10. Nation I.S. & Webb S. Researching and Analyzing Vocabulary – Heinle Cengage Learning. 2011.
11. Schmitt N. Vocabulary in Language Teaching – Cambridge University Press. 2000.