THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract. Vocabulary is not a decorative accessory in foreign language learning; it is the working engine that allows grammar, pronunciation, and communicative strategies to actually function. This article examines why lexical knowledge predicts success across the four skills, how vocabulary breadth (how many words a learner knows) and depth (how well those words are known) interact, and which teaching practices most reliably convert exposure into usable language.

Keywords: vocabulary acquisition, lexical competence, breadth and depth, incidental learning, deliberate practice.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a central role in learning foreign languages because it is the primary carrier of meaning: grammar organizes messages, but words are what messages are made of. When learners lack vocabulary, they may "know" a grammar rule and still fail to understand a sentence, produce a response, or follow a conversation—like owning a toolbox but missing the tools. Lexical competence strongly predicts reading comprehension, listening success, speaking fluency, and writing quality, because each skill depends on rapid access to word forms, meanings, and appropriate usage. Studies on lexical coverage suggest that learners require a large amount of known vocabulary to process authentic texts comfortably, and that comprehension grows markedly as the proportion of familiar words increases [1]. Therefore, vocabulary is not a side topic to be squeezed into the last five minutes of a lesson; it is the infrastructure that supports everything else.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A useful way to understand vocabulary's role is to separate breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the number of words a learner knows at least minimally, while depth includes pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, collocations, grammatical behavior, register, and constraints on use [2]. Breadth helps learners decode input; depth helps them use words accurately and flexibly. For example, recognizing the word *run* in a text is breadth, but knowing *run a company*, *run out of time*, *a runny nose*, and the typical patterns that follow the verb is depth. Both dimensions matter, but they contribute differently across skills: reading and listening rely heavily on breadth (coverage), whereas writing and speaking demand depth (precision and naturalness). Research on reading indicates that limited lexical knowledge can block comprehension even when learners understand syntax, because unknown words interrupt processing and reduce inferencing accuracy [3]. This explains a common classroom paradox: students appear to understand grammar exercises but struggle with real texts. The implication is that vocabulary teaching should be staged—first ensuring sufficient high-frequency vocabulary for access, then deepening knowledge through repeated contextualized use. In practice, that means selecting targets strategically, revisiting them often, and building networks of related words rather than teaching isolated lists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocabulary growth happens through incidental and deliberate learning, and strong programs combine both instead of betting on only one. Incidental learning occurs when learners encounter words in listening/reading and infer meanings; it is efficient because it builds vocabulary through meaningful exposure, but it is slow and unreliable unless encounters are frequent and comprehension is high [1]. Deliberate learning includes intentional study: word cards, retrieval practice, spaced repetition, and focused exercises; it can produce faster gains but may remain “inert” unless learners meet the words in real contexts [4]. The most effective approach is to connect the two: teach priority words deliberately, then engineer repeated encounters in texts, tasks, discussions, and writing. This cycling builds form–meaning links, strengthens memory, and improves automatic access, which is essential for fluency. Instruction should also address multiword units—collocations, chunks, and formulaic sequences—because they reduce processing load and help learners sound natural [5]. Learners who know single words but not typical combinations often produce grammatically correct but awkward language (the linguistic equivalent of wearing a suit with hiking boots). Teaching chunks such as *take into account*, *as a result*, or *make a decision* supports speaking and writing, while also boosting comprehension when these sequences appear in texts.

A particularly important, often underestimated contributor to vocabulary development is morphological awareness—understanding prefixes, suffixes, and word families. When learners recognize that *predict*, *prediction*, *predictable*, and *unpredictability* share a core meaning, they can expand vocabulary efficiently and infer unfamiliar forms. Word-family knowledge improves reading because it increases coverage without requiring learners to memorize every derived form separately [1]. However, morphology must be taught carefully: learners need guidance on which affixes are productive and how meanings shift across derivations. Alongside morphology, recycling is crucial. A single exposure rarely produces durable knowledge; multiple spaced encounters across weeks are typically needed for stable acquisition [4]. Recycling should vary contexts: meeting a word in a story, then hearing it in a dialogue, using it in a role-play, and writing it in a short paragraph develops flexible knowledge. Assessment should also reflect this complexity. Simple recognition tests capture breadth, but teachers should also evaluate depth through collocation tasks, sentence completion, or short writing samples that require appropriate usage [2]. Finally, learner autonomy matters: successful learners use strategies—guessing from context, noting collocations, reviewing with spacing, and tracking personal vocabulary goals. Teachers can accelerate progress by explicitly training these strategies and by making vocabulary learning visible and measurable rather than vague and "motivational."

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is the core resource that enables foreign language learners to comprehend input, formulate output, and participate in communication with confidence. Its role is not limited to memorizing translations; it includes building a structured lexical system that connects form, meaning, and use across contexts. Evidence suggests that learners need substantial lexical coverage to access authentic materials [1], and that progress depends on purposeful instruction that balances deliberate study with rich, repeated contextual exposure.

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