The OSCAR PUBLISHING Services
International Journal Of Literature And Languages

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue03 2026
PAGE NO. 273-278
DOI 10.37547/ijll/Volume06Issue03-57

Developing Students' Lexical Competence in A Foreign Language Through The "Concept Analysis" Method

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Received: 12 February 2026; **Accepted:** 09 March 2026; **Published:** 31 March 2026

Abstract: The development of lexical competence remains one of the central problems of foreign language education because vocabulary knowledge directly conditions comprehension, oral interaction, written production, and the precision of meaning-making. In contemporary language pedagogy, lexical competence is no longer interpreted as the mere accumulation of isolated words; rather, it is understood as the ability to select, relate, control, and use vocabulary in context. This article examines the didactic potential of the "concept analysis" method for developing students' lexical competence in a foreign language. In this study, the concept analysis method is treated as an umbrella instructional approach that includes concept mapping, semantic mapping, and semantic feature analysis, since these techniques organize lexical units through category, feature, hierarchy, and semantic relations. The article based on an integrative review of official Council of Europe documents and peer-reviewed studies published between 2001 and 2025. The analysis shows that concept-oriented vocabulary work strengthens both the breadth and the depth of lexical knowledge, improves retention, supports transfer from receptive to productive use, and promotes more accurate lexical choice in speech and writing. At the same time, the effectiveness of the method depends on careful task design, sufficient duration, and the integration of conceptual work with communicative practice. The article argues that the concept analysis method should be viewed not as an auxiliary graphic activity, but as a didactic mechanism for restructuring lexical knowledge and transforming vocabulary learning from memorization into meaningful conceptual development.

Keywords: Lexical competence, foreign language education, concept analysis method, concept mapping, semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, vocabulary development, communicative competence.

Introduction: In foreign language education, lexical competence occupies a decisive place because learners cannot participate fully in communication if they lack the vocabulary needed to formulate meaning with adequate range and control. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages defines lexical competence as knowledge of and ability to use the vocabulary of a language, while the CEFR Companion Volume treats vocabulary range as the breadth and variety of words and expressions a learner can use across contexts. These documents also make clear that vocabulary development is not peripheral: size, range, and control of vocabulary are major parameters in language acquisition, assessment, and curriculum design. In other words, lexical growth is not simply an enrichment of word stock; it is a structural expansion of communicative potential.

Recent second language research supports this broader view. Vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be multidimensional, involving not only size or breadth, but also depth, that is, the quality of lexical knowledge, including associations, semantic relations, collocational behavior, and contextual appropriateness. In a study of English as a foreign language learners, vocabulary size and depth jointly contributed to the prediction of speaking proficiency, while productive vocabulary

knowledge predicted fluency and coherence. Such findings confirm that lexical competence is inseparable from actual language performance and that vocabulary teaching must go beyond translation and short-term memorization.

This requirement explains the growing interest in concept-oriented vocabulary instruction. In many classrooms, students remember single-word equivalents for a short time but struggle to differentiate near-synonyms, select appropriate collocations, interpret words in new contexts, or connect new lexical items with previously learned knowledge. The “concept analysis” method addresses this difficulty by organizing words around conceptual categories, defining features, semantic oppositions, and hierarchical relations. In the international literature, closely related labels include concept mapping, semantic mapping, mind mapping, knowledge mapping, and semantic feature analysis. Although the exact term “concept analysis method” is not uniformly used, the shared pedagogical core is clear: vocabulary is taught as a network of meaning rather than as an isolated list of forms.

The purpose of this article is to determine the didactic possibilities of the concept analysis method for developing students’ lexical competence in a foreign language. The article asks three interrelated questions: how lexical competence should be understood in concept-based teaching, what empirical evidence exists for concept-oriented vocabulary instruction, and under what classroom conditions the method is most effective. On this basis, the study seeks to provide a theoretically grounded and pedagogically applicable model for foreign language teachers.

This article employs an integrative review design within the IMRAD framework. The material for analysis consisted of eleven sources published between 2001 and 2025. The corpus included two official Council of Europe documents on language competence and vocabulary range, one meta-analysis on concept mapping in second language learning, one systematic review on vocabulary instruction, and a set of empirical studies devoted to semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, vocabulary breadth and depth, and long-term retention in L2 settings. The sources were selected because they provided either a definitional framework for lexical competence or measurable evidence about the instructional effects of concept-based vocabulary work.

The selection criteria were direct relevance to one of the following areas: the definition and components of lexical competence, the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language performance, the instructional logic of concept mapping or semantic feature analysis, and the empirical effects of such approaches in second or foreign language contexts. Preference was given to official documents, peer-reviewed journals, and sources that reported concrete outcomes rather than general methodological opinion. The analysis proceeded by coding the material into four interpretive domains: conceptualization of lexical competence, pedagogical mechanism of the concept analysis method, empirical learning outcomes, and implementation conditions affecting effectiveness.

The review did not aim to produce a statistical re-analysis of all available studies. Instead, it synthesized key patterns across the selected literature in order to formulate a coherent pedagogical interpretation of how concept-based instruction can support lexical development. For this reason, the emphasis in the Results section falls on recurring relationships between method and outcome, not on a purely bibliographic summary.

The first major result of the review concerns the definition of lexical competence itself. Across the official and research literature, lexical competence appears as a broader construct than simple vocabulary knowledge. The CEFR defines it as the ability to use the vocabulary of the language, including both lexical and grammatical elements, while the Companion Volume frames vocabulary range as the breadth and variety of words and expressions used in communication. In empirical vocabulary studies, this broader construct is further differentiated into size and depth. Size refers to how many words the learner knows, whereas depth concerns the quality of that knowledge, including associations, connotations, collocations, and semantic precision. Together, these dimensions show that lexical competence includes recognition, selection, combination, and context-sensitive use.

The second result concerns the pedagogical meaning of the concept analysis method. The reviewed literature indicates that in L2 research, concept mapping has

become a broad integrative term encompassing several related mapping techniques, including semantic mapping and other visually organized forms of conceptual structuring. At the same time, semantic feature analysis is described as a set of vocabulary development activities that helps learners categorize words and compare related ideas through defining features. From a didactic perspective, both approaches function in a similar way: they require learners to locate a lexical item within a system of meaning relations, rather than to treat it as a detachable form with a one-word translation. This shift from isolated naming to conceptual structuring is the core of the concept analysis method as understood in this article.

The third result is empirical and concerns direct vocabulary gains. Earlier classroom research already suggested that semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis outperform more traditional contextual or definition-based instruction for general vocabulary acquisition. In Toms-Bronowski's study, both semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis were more effective than a contextual approach, and semantic feature analysis performed especially strongly on the comprehensive test of target words. Anders likewise reported that semantic feature analysis improved content-related vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension by helping students categorize words and compare related concepts. These findings are important because they show that concept-based techniques do not merely decorate instruction; they change the structure of lexical processing.

More recent foreign language studies confirm the same tendency. Zahedi and Abdi found that semantic mapping produced a significant difference in vocabulary learning when compared with direct translation among Iranian EFL learners. Dilek and Yürük, working with pre-intermediate learners, reported that semantic mapping was more effective than traditional vocabulary teaching and that learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning strategies were connected to their preferences for such techniques. In another study, instruction in semantic feature analysis of words supported reading comprehension, indicating that concept-based lexical work contributes not only to word learning but also to higher-order language processing. Taken together, these studies suggest that the method is effective across different proficiency levels and instructional settings when lexical items are systematically grouped and analyzed.

The strongest quantitative support comes from the 2025 meta-analysis of concept mapping in second language learning. Based on 68 studies and 139 effect sizes, the overall effect of concept mapping on L2 learning outcomes was large, with Hedges' g = 1.047. The same meta-analysis reported stronger effects in language institutes, secondary, and tertiary settings than in primary or graduate settings. It also found that paper-based concept maps outperformed computerized ones, that productive skills benefited more than receptive skills, and that longer duration positively moderated outcomes. These results are particularly relevant for lexical competence because they indicate that concept-oriented instruction supports not only vocabulary recognition, but also production, transfer, and sustained development over time.

Another recurrent pattern in the reviewed studies is the effect of concept-based work on retention. In a 2024 CLIL study with Spanish schoolchildren, concept maps enhanced long-term memory and significantly reduced forgetfulness by integrating new information with prior knowledge through structured visual representation. This finding aligns with the logic of meaningful learning: students remember words better when they understand how they are conceptually related. Retention, in this sense, is not a passive after-effect of repetition but the result of reorganized mental structure.

A final result concerns the theoretical grounding of the method. The systematic review of vocabulary instruction for English learners shows that concept mapping is closely associated with schema and psycholinguistic theories. These frameworks assume that comprehension occurs when new information finds a place in existing mental structures and that vocabulary development depends on association, categorization, and context-guided meaning construction. In practical terms, concept analysis works because it activates prior knowledge while simultaneously expanding and refining it.

The results indicate that the concept analysis method has substantial didactic value for developing lexical competence in a foreign language, but the reason lies

deeper than the visual attractiveness of maps or tables. Its real strength is cognitive restructuring. When students group words by superordinate concept, identify defining features, distinguish related items, and trace semantic links, they are not simply reviewing vocabulary; they are reorganizing their lexical knowledge into a more accessible and meaningful system. This is consistent with schema-based explanations of vocabulary learning, according to which new lexical material becomes more usable when it is connected to existing mental frameworks.

From a didactic standpoint, the method strengthens both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Breadth develops because students encounter words not one by one, but as members of larger thematic or semantic fields. A unit on “travel,” for example, can expand beyond isolated items such as ticket, journey, or luggage into a network that includes roles, actions, locations, problems, and collocations. Depth develops because learners must identify what distinguishes one word from another, how meanings overlap, where they diverge, and which lexical choices fit specific communicative situations. This directly supports the CEFR emphasis on vocabulary range and control, and it responds to empirical findings showing that richer vocabulary knowledge contributes to oral fluency and lexical resource.

The method is especially useful in moving learners from receptive familiarity to productive control. The 2025 meta-analysis found that concept mapping had a larger effect on productive than on receptive skills. This is pedagogically significant. Many learners can recognize vocabulary in texts but cannot use it appropriately in speaking or writing. Concept analysis narrows this gap because it makes lexical selection an explicit part of learning. When students compare synonyms, mark stylistic restrictions, connect nouns to verbs and adjectives, and arrange collocations within a conceptual field, they rehearse the decisions that actual communication requires. Productive lexical competence emerges not from exposure alone, but from repeated conceptual discrimination.

Another didactic advantage lies in the method’s compatibility with communicative teaching. There is sometimes a mistaken assumption that concept-oriented work is too analytical and therefore detached from communication. The reviewed literature suggests the opposite. Because concept mapping and semantic feature analysis foreground meaning relations, they create better conditions for contextualized speaking, reading, and writing. A student who has conceptually differentiated look, see, watch, and stare is more likely to select the right verb in conversation or composition than a student who has memorized all four as rough equivalents. In this sense, concept analysis does not replace communication; it makes communication lexically more precise.

The findings also suggest how the method should be implemented. Effective concept analysis begins with a lexical field, not with a random list. The teacher identifies a central concept, elicits associated vocabulary, then guides learners to classify items by category, feature, function, opposition, or collocation. After this conceptual phase, students need contextual practice in reading, speaking, and writing so that conceptual understanding turns into communicative use. Without this second stage, mapping may remain an isolated cognitive exercise. The reviewed evidence therefore supports a twofold principle: conceptual organization first, communicative deployment next.

At the same time, the literature warns against oversimplification. Not every activity that looks like a map automatically develops lexical competence. The 2025 meta-analysis showed that implementation conditions matter: paper-based mapping often outperformed computerized mapping, and duration significantly influenced outcomes. This means that conceptual depth cannot be reduced to a quick, decorative brainstorming task. Likewise, the positive findings of the EFL intervention studies were obtained in structured instructional designs with clear pre-test/post-test comparison, not in incidental word association exercises. The teacher’s role remains crucial in choosing lexical fields, prompting distinctions, and ensuring that the relations on the map are semantically meaningful rather than arbitrary.

A further point concerns terminology. In many local pedagogical traditions, “concept analysis” may be treated as a distinct method, whereas in the international literature the nearest equivalents are concept mapping, semantic mapping, and semantic feature analysis. The present review suggests that this terminological variation should not be seen as a weakness. On the contrary, it shows that the same

didactic principle has been realized through multiple formats. For foreign language pedagogy, the important point is not the label itself, but the operational principle: lexical units are analyzed through conceptual relations. Recognizing this helps align local methodology with broader international research while preserving pedagogical flexibility.

Overall, the concept analysis method appears especially promising for foreign language classrooms that aim to develop not only vocabulary size but also lexical intelligence: the ability to infer, distinguish, organize, and use words with semantic precision. In such classrooms, lexical competence is not measured by how many items students can reproduce on demand, but by how effectively they can mobilize lexical knowledge across tasks and situations. This interpretation is fully consistent with CEFR-oriented pedagogy and with recent vocabulary research emphasizing conceptual connection over mechanical accumulation.

The analysis carried out in this article shows that the concept analysis method has strong didactic potential for developing students' lexical competence in a foreign language. Its value lies in transforming vocabulary from a list of isolated forms into a structured semantic system organized by category, feature, relation, and context. The reviewed literature demonstrates that concept-oriented approaches such as concept mapping, semantic mapping, and semantic feature analysis improve vocabulary acquisition, deepen lexical knowledge, support retention, and facilitate transfer to productive language use. The method is particularly effective when it is systematically integrated into communicative practice, sustained over time, and guided by clear semantic logic. For this reason, concept analysis should be treated not as a supplementary visualization technique, but as a substantive pedagogical approach to lexical development in modern foreign language education.

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