

Stages In Developing Lexical Competence Of 5th-6th Grade Pupils With The Help Of Critical Thinking Activities

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Abstract: This article examines the stages of developing lexical competence in 5th-6th grade pupils through the integration of critical thinking activities. The research highlights the importance of lexical competence as a fundamental component of communicative competence in foreign language learning. The article also discusses how critical thinking strategies enhance vocabulary acquisition, retention, and usage by promoting learners' analytical, reflective, and problem-solving abilities. Practical recommendations for teachers are provided, with a focus on step-by-step implementation in the classroom.

Keywords: Lexical competence, critical thinking, vocabulary development, middle school pupils, communicative approach.

Introduction: In the context of modern foreign language education, the formation of lexical competence in pupils of the 5th-6th grades is considered one of the key objectives of teaching English as a foreign language. Lexical competence, which includes the knowledge of vocabulary, its semantic, grammatical, and stylistic characteristics, as well as the ability to use words accurately and appropriately in various communicative situations, is the foundation for developing communicative competence [1]. Without a well-developed lexical base, pupils are unable to fully comprehend authentic texts, produce coherent oral and written discourse, or participate in interactive communication effectively.

At the middle school level, learners are at a developmental stage where they begin to expand their cognitive abilities and show readiness for critical and analytical engagement with language material. According to pedagogical research, traditional vocabulary teaching methods that rely mainly on mechanical memorization and translation fail to ensure deep understanding, long-term retention, and active usage of new lexical units [2]. Therefore, modern methodology requires a shift towards competence-based and learner-centered approaches that integrate critical thinking strategies into the process of vocabulary instruction.

Critical thinking is widely defined as the ability to

analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and creatively apply information in problem-solving contexts [3]. In the language classroom, critical thinking activities encourage learners to explore lexical units not only at the level of recognition but also through deeper reflection and contextual application. For example, tasks such as semantic mapping, classification of words, problem-solving dialogues, debates, and reflection journals allow pupils to actively engage with vocabulary. Such activities foster both receptive and productive vocabulary development, enabling learners to use newly acquired lexical items flexibly and meaningfully.

Furthermore, the introduction of critical thinking strategies in the teaching of vocabulary corresponds with global educational trends and national reforms in Uzbekistan. The State Educational Standards for foreign languages (2020) emphasize the importance of learner autonomy, communicative competence, and higher-order thinking skills in the classroom. By incorporating critical thinking into vocabulary teaching, teachers provide opportunities for pupils to not only learn words but also to develop skills of reasoning, comparison, and evaluation. This approach enhances pupils' motivation, cognitive activity, and ability to transfer vocabulary knowledge to real-life contexts.

Thus, the development of lexical competence among 5th-6th grade pupils with the help of critical thinking

activities can be conceptualized as a staged process. It includes awareness of new lexical items, comprehension of their meanings and functions, controlled practice, integration into speech and writing, and reflective evaluation. Each of these stages may be effectively enriched with critical thinking strategies to ensure sustainable vocabulary growth. The systematic implementation of such an approach helps bridge the gap between passive knowledge of words and their active communicative use.

The relevance of this study lies in the need to provide a scientifically grounded methodology for combining lexical development with critical thinking pedagogy. While a number of studies have addressed vocabulary teaching [1; 2], and others have analyzed the role of critical thinking in language education, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on the integration of critical thinking activities into the stages of developing lexical competence in middle school learners. This paper seeks to address this gap by analyzing theoretical perspectives, pedagogical frameworks, and practical recommendations for teaching vocabulary to 5th–6th graders through critical thinking–based methods.

Literature Review

The development of lexical competence has been widely researched in the fields of applied linguistics and pedagogy. Lexical competence is often viewed as a central component of communicative competence, encompassing not only the ability to recognize and recall words but also to use them appropriately in different contexts. Richards and Renandya [4] emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is not simply the mastery of word lists but involves an understanding of word meanings, collocations, and pragmatic usage. Similarly, Nation [5] highlights that lexical competence requires both breadth (the number of words known) and depth (the quality of word knowledge, including semantic, morphological, and collocational aspects).

Scholars agree that vocabulary learning is a gradual process that involves multiple encounters with words across different contexts. Schmitt [6] proposes that vocabulary acquisition moves through several stages, starting from recognition, followed by comprehension, and culminating in productive usage. Therefore, the systematic development of lexical competence in middle school pupils must include staged instruction that addresses both receptive and productive aspects of vocabulary.

Another important dimension of vocabulary learning is its relationship to cognitive and critical thinking skills. According to Paul and Elder [4], critical thinking develops when learners engage in higher-order

processes such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. In language learning, these processes allow pupils to interact with vocabulary at a deeper cognitive level rather than relying solely on rote memorization. For example, semantic mapping and categorization tasks promote logical connections between words, while debates and problem-solving discussions encourage creative and flexible application of vocabulary.

Educational researchers also underline that critical thinking–based activities make vocabulary learning more meaningful. Halpern [5] notes that critical thinking strategies improve learners' ability to retain and transfer knowledge to new situations. In the context of EFL instruction, this means that pupils who engage in problem-solving or reflective vocabulary tasks are more likely to recall and apply new lexical items in real communicative situations.

In Uzbekistan, the integration of critical thinking into English language teaching is aligned with the State Educational Standards (2020), which emphasize the competence-based approach [6]. Several local researchers (Karimova, 2021; Tursunov, 2022) argue that vocabulary development in grades 5–6 should not be limited to memorization but should involve interactive, analytical, and reflective practices. This ensures that pupils acquire lexical competence as a tool for communication, creativity, and lifelong learning.

Overall, the literature suggests that lexical competence is best developed through a combination of staged vocabulary instruction and critical thinking strategies. While many international studies provide insights into vocabulary teaching techniques, there remains a need for context-specific research focusing on middle school learners in Uzbekistan. The present study builds upon existing theoretical frameworks while addressing the gap in localized methodologies for developing lexical competence through critical thinking activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the staged development of lexical competence in 5th–6th grade pupils with the help of critical thinking activities has revealed several key findings. First, the integration of critical thinking strategies into vocabulary instruction significantly improves pupils' ability to retain, comprehend, and actively use new lexical units. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods, which rely largely on repetition and translation, often lead to superficial learning and passive word recognition. In contrast, activities that require analysis, categorization, and reflection enable pupils to internalize words more deeply and apply them in communicative contexts.

Table 1. Stages of Developing Lexical Competence with Critical Thinking Activities

Stage	Focus	Critical Thinking Activities	Expected Outcomes
Awareness	Introduction of new vocabulary	Prediction tasks, concept questions, word categorization	Pupils recognize new words, connect them with prior knowledge
Comprehension	Understanding meaning and usage	Semantic mapping, comparison of synonyms/antonyms, grouping	Pupils grasp semantic nuances, develop associations between words
Application	Controlled practice of vocabulary	Problem-solving dialogues, debates, sentence transformations	Pupils practice words in guided communicative tasks
Integration	Contextual use in speech and writing	Story completion, role-plays, cause–effect discussions	Pupils use vocabulary actively and creatively in extended contexts
Reflection & Evaluation	Self-assessment and metacognitive awareness	Peer review, reflection journals, self-checklists	Pupils monitor progress, evaluate usage, and build autonomy

The results of classroom-based implementation demonstrated that pupils who engaged in semantic mapping, classification tasks, and problem-solving discussions not only remembered lexical items longer but also showed better skills in combining them with previously learned words. For example, when pupils were asked to create mind maps on the topic of “Environment,” they were able to link new vocabulary such as pollution, recycling, conservation, and renewable energy with familiar words like water, clean, and forest. This indicates that critical thinking tasks provide a meaningful framework for organizing lexical knowledge and building semantic networks.

Another important finding is that the staged approach to vocabulary development—awareness, comprehension, application, integration, and reflection—proved to be effective in supporting gradual progress. At the awareness stage, pupils were motivated to explore new vocabulary when it was presented through prediction activities or short problem-based scenarios. During the comprehension stage, tasks such as comparing synonyms and antonyms encouraged deeper understanding of semantic nuances. At the application stage, controlled practice through role-plays and debates allowed pupils to test their knowledge in guided contexts. The integration stage facilitated the transfer of vocabulary into authentic speech and writing, particularly through story completion and cause-effect discussions. Finally, the reflection stage supported metacognitive growth, as pupils were able to self-assess and monitor their lexical usage.

The discussion also highlights that the use of critical thinking activities fosters learner autonomy and increases motivation. Pupils reported greater interest in vocabulary learning when tasks involved creativity, problem-solving, and peer collaboration. Teachers observed that learners became more willing to take risks with new words, attempting to use them in original sentences rather than relying on memorized phrases. This aligns with Halpern’s [1] assertion that critical thinking promotes transferable skills and long-term retention.

Moreover, the findings suggest that critical thinking activities help bridge the gap between receptive and productive vocabulary. While many learners traditionally accumulate large numbers of passive words, they often struggle to use them actively. The inclusion of reflection journals, peer feedback, and group discussions encouraged pupils to move from recognition to active usage, thereby enhancing communicative competence.

Finally, the results confirm that the integration of lexical and critical thinking development corresponds with the goals of the Uzbekistan State Educational Standards (2020) [2], which emphasize learner-centered, competence-based, and communicative approaches. This indicates that the proposed methodology is not only theoretically grounded but also practically relevant for the local educational context.

In summary, the results demonstrate that combining staged vocabulary instruction with critical thinking activities contributes to sustainable lexical competence

development. The discussion shows that such an approach enables pupils to acquire vocabulary more effectively, apply it creatively, and develop essential cognitive skills that are valuable beyond the language classroom.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indicate that the development of lexical competence in 5th-6th grade pupils can be effectively achieved through a staged approach combined with critical thinking activities. Lexical competence involves not only memorizing new words but also understanding their semantic, grammatical, and stylistic features and applying them appropriately in different communicative situations.

The proposed five-stage model (awareness, comprehension, application, integration, and reflection) ensures gradual progress in vocabulary acquisition. It enables pupils to expand their lexical repertoire, use new words actively in communication, and develop self-monitoring strategies. Each stage, when enriched with critical thinking activities—such as semantic mapping, classification tasks, problem-based dialogues, debates, and reflection journals—encourages deeper cognitive engagement with vocabulary.

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