

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF LEXICAL COMPETENCE FORMATION IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract. *This article examines the psychological and linguistic dimensions of lexical competence development in preschool-aged children during second language acquisition, with particular focus on English language learning. The study explores cognitive mechanisms, developmental stages, and pedagogical implications for effective vocabulary acquisition in early childhood. Drawing on contemporary research in developmental psychology and applied linguistics, this paper analyzes how children's cognitive maturation intersects with linguistic input to facilitate lexical competence formation.*

Keywords: *preschool psychology, lexical competence, second language acquisition, vocabulary development, early childhood education, cognitive development*

INTRODUCTION

The preschool period (ages 3-6) represents a critical window for language acquisition, characterized by remarkable neuroplasticity and cognitive flexibility. During this developmental stage, children demonstrate exceptional capacity for lexical learning, acquiring new words at an estimated rate of 5-10 words per day in their native language (Bloom, 2000). Understanding the psychological and linguistic mechanisms underlying this process is essential for developing effective pedagogical approaches to second language instruction.

Lexical competence, defined as the ability to recognize, comprehend, and appropriately use vocabulary items in context, constitutes a foundational component of communicative competence. For preschool learners, the development of lexical competence in a second language occurs within a complex interplay of cognitive, social, and linguistic factors that distinguish it from adult language learning processes.

Cognitive Development and Language Acquisition. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development positions preschool children in the preoperational stage (2-7 years), characterized by symbolic thinking, egocentrism, and developing mental representations. This cognitive architecture significantly influences how children process and store lexical information. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further emphasizes the role of social interaction and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in facilitating language acquisition, suggesting that lexical learning is fundamentally embedded in meaningful communicative contexts.

Critical Period Hypothesis. The Critical Period Hypothesis, as articulated by Lenneberg (1967) and refined by subsequent researchers, posits that early childhood

represents an optimal period for language acquisition. Neurological evidence demonstrates that preschool-aged children exhibit greater bilateral hemisphere activation during language processing, facilitating more flexible lexical encoding compared to older learners whose language functions become increasingly lateralized.

Psychological Aspects of Lexical Competence Formation. Preschool children's lexical development relies heavily on implicit learning mechanisms. Unlike older learners who may employ explicit memorization strategies, young children acquire vocabulary through repeated exposure and contextual association. The phonological loop component of working memory plays a crucial role in processing new lexical items, while long-term semantic memory gradually organizes vocabulary into conceptual networks.

Research indicates that preschool children demonstrate superior phonological memory capacity relative to their limited executive function abilities. This profile supports incidental vocabulary learning through songs, rhymes, and repetitive language play, which leverage phonological encoding without demanding sustained attention or metacognitive awareness.

Emotional and Motivational Factors. Affective variables significantly influence lexical acquisition in preschool learners. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence modulate language input processing. Preschool children typically exhibit lower affective filters in classroom settings characterized by play-based learning, positive reinforcement, and supportive teacher-child relationships.

Intrinsic motivation in this age group often stems from curiosity, social interaction, and the inherent pleasure of language play rather than extrinsic rewards. Effective lexical instruction capitalizes on children's natural inclination toward imaginative play, storytelling, and sensorimotor exploration.

Attention and Executive Function. While preschool children demonstrate limited sustained attention spans (typically 10-15 minutes for focused activities), their capacity for selective attention develops rapidly during this period. Lexical learning benefits from multisensory input and varied activities that accommodate these attention patterns. The gradual maturation of inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility supports children's ability to distinguish between similar lexical items and flexibly apply vocabulary in diverse contexts.

Linguistic Aspects of Lexical Competence. Word Learning Mechanisms

Fast mapping, the ability to acquire initial word-referent associations after minimal exposure, represents a hallmark of preschool vocabulary acquisition. Children demonstrate remarkable efficiency in linking new phonological forms to conceptual categories, though initial mappings may be overgeneralized or underextended. Extended mapping, the gradual refinement of word meanings through repeated encounters, completes the lexical acquisition process.

Cross-linguistic research reveals that preschool children learning English as a second language transfer phonological processing strategies from their first language. For Uzbek-speaking children, differences in phonemic inventory and syllable structure between Uzbek and English may facilitate or impede specific aspects of English lexical acquisition.

Semantic Development. Preschool children's semantic networks exhibit characteristic features including overextension (applying words too broadly), underextension (limiting word application), and taxonomic organization based on perceptual similarity rather than abstract categories. Vocabulary instruction should acknowledge these developmental patterns, introducing concrete, high-frequency nouns before abstract concepts or complex verbs.

The semantic feature hypothesis suggests that children gradually acquire definitional components of words through cumulative exposure. Initial lexical representations may include only prototypical features, with peripheral semantic elements added progressively. This explains why preschoolers may correctly identify "dog" for prototypical breeds while excluding less typical exemplars.

Phonological and Morphological Processing. English phonology presents specific challenges for Uzbek-speaking preschoolers, including interdental fricatives, distinction between short and long vowels, and consonant clusters absent in Uzbek. However, young children's superior phonological discrimination abilities facilitate native-like pronunciation acquisition when supported by appropriate input.

Morphological awareness develops gradually during the preschool years. While children may initially treat inflected forms as separate lexical items, exposure to systematic morphological patterns facilitates the extraction of productive rules. English morphology, with its relatively limited inflectional system, may be more accessible to preschool learners than languages with richer morphological complexity.

Pedagogical Implications. Input Characteristics. Lexical input for preschool learners should be comprehensible, frequent, and contextualized. Child-directed speech (CDS), characterized by simplified syntax, exaggerated prosody, and concrete vocabulary, facilitates lexical processing by highlighting word boundaries and semantic relationships. Storybook reading, with its combination of visual support, narrative context, and repeated exposure to target vocabulary, represents an empirically validated approach to lexical instruction.

Multisensory and Play-Based Learning. Total Physical Response (TPR) and multisensory activities capitalize on preschool children's sensorimotor development and embodied cognition. Pairing vocabulary with gestures, actions, and tactile experiences strengthens encoding and retrieval processes. Dramatic play scenarios provide authentic communicative contexts for vocabulary use while supporting social-emotional development.

Assessment Considerations. Assessing lexical competence in preschool learners requires developmentally appropriate methods that minimize linguistic demands while capturing productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge. Picture-based assessments, naturalistic observation, and interactive games provide valid indicators of lexical development without inducing performance anxiety or cognitive overload.

Challenges and Future Directions. Several challenges persist in optimizing lexical instruction for preschool English learners. Individual variation in cognitive development, linguistic aptitude, and home language support necessitates differentiated instructional approaches. Limited research specifically addresses optimal vocabulary selection criteria for

preschool second language curricula, particularly for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of preschool lexical instruction on subsequent academic language development, the role of bilingual lexical organization in young children, and culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks for diverse learner populations. Longitudinal studies tracking lexical development from preschool through primary education would illuminate developmental trajectories and critical transition points requiring targeted intervention.

Conclusion. The formation of lexical competence in preschool-aged second language learners reflects a complex integration of psychological and linguistic processes. Children's cognitive capacities, including memory systems, attention mechanisms, and emotional regulation, interact with linguistic input characteristics to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Effective pedagogical approaches recognize developmental constraints while leveraging young children's exceptional phonological processing abilities, implicit learning capacities, and intrinsic motivation.

For educators working with Uzbek-speaking preschoolers learning English, understanding these psychological and linguistic dimensions enables the design of developmentally appropriate, engaging, and effective vocabulary instruction. By aligning teaching practices with children's cognitive and linguistic capabilities, educators can optimize this critical period for establishing strong lexical foundations that support subsequent language development and academic achievement.

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