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CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ENHANCING LEXICAL COMPETENCE IN 11–12-YEAR-OLD LEARNERS

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Abstract
The development of lexical competence is an essential component of foreign language learning, particularly among young adolescents aged 11–12. At this stage, learners gradually develop more advanced cognitive abilities, become increasingly capable of understanding relationships between words and meanings, and begin to use vocabulary in a wider range of communicative situations. However, learning isolated words and memorising bilingual word lists do not always enable learners to use vocabulary appropriately in real communication. This article examines contextual frameworks for enhancing lexical competence in 11–12-year-old learners of English. It explores the theoretical foundations of contextual vocabulary learning and identifies the pedagogical value of meaningful input, semantic associations, communicative tasks, collaborative learning, and repeated vocabulary encounters. A practical instructional framework is proposed to integrate contextual presentation, guided discovery, meaningful practice, productive use, and formative assessment. The article argues that context-based vocabulary instruction can support learners in developing not only knowledge of word meanings but also the ability to select and use lexical items appropriately in different communicative situations.

Keywords: lexical competence, contextual learning, vocabulary acquisition, young adolescent learners, English language teaching, semantic relationships, communicative competence, vocabulary instruction.

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1. Introduction

Lexical competence is a fundamental element of communicative competence because vocabulary provides learners with the linguistic resources necessary to express ideas, understand messages, participate in conversations, and interpret written texts. Without sufficient lexical knowledge, learners may experience difficulties even when they understand basic grammatical structures. Therefore, vocabulary development should be regarded as a central component of English language teaching rather than an isolated activity focused on memorising word meanings.

The teaching of English vocabulary to learners aged 11–12 requires particular pedagogical consideration. Learners at this age are developing their capacity for abstract thinking, categorisation, independent learning, and more complex social interaction. They are also increasingly interested in topics connected with their personal experiences, friendships, school activities, hobbies, technology, and the surrounding world. These characteristics create favourable conditions for vocabulary instruction that connects new lexical items with meaningful contexts.

Traditional vocabulary teaching frequently relies on translation, repetition, and memorisation. Although these techniques can contribute to initial word recognition, they may not sufficiently develop learners' ability to use vocabulary independently. A learner may remember the translation of a word but remain uncertain about its collocations, grammatical patterns, connotations, or appropriate use in a sentence.

Contextual vocabulary instruction addresses this limitation by presenting words in meaningful situations, texts, dialogues, and communicative activities. Learners encounter lexical items as elements of language in use and gradually establish connections between word forms, meanings, and communicative functions.

The purpose of this article is to examine contextual frameworks for enhancing lexical competence in 11–12-year-old learners and to propose a practical instructional model that can be adapted to English lessons in general secondary education.

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2. Theoretical Foundations of Lexical Competence

Lexical competence refers to the knowledge and skills required to understand and use vocabulary appropriately in communication. It extends beyond knowing a word's basic definition and includes several interconnected dimensions.

First, learners need form knowledge, including the pronunciation, spelling, and morphological structure of a word. Second, they need meaning knowledge, which involves understanding a word's central meaning and, where appropriate, its different senses. Third, learners require use knowledge, including collocations, grammatical patterns, register, and the communicative situations in which a word is appropriate.

Nation (2001, 2013) emphasises that vocabulary knowledge involves multiple aspects of form, meaning, and use. This perspective suggests that vocabulary instruction should provide learners with opportunities to encounter, understand, retrieve, and apply lexical items in varied contexts.

Schmitt (2000) similarly highlights the complexity of vocabulary acquisition and the importance of combining different learning strategies. Learning a new word is not necessarily a single event; rather, it involves gradual development through repeated encounters and opportunities for use.

Context also plays an important role in vocabulary learning. When learners meet an unfamiliar word in a sentence or text, surrounding linguistic information and the broader situation can help them infer its possible meaning. Nevertheless, context does not always provide a clear answer. Effective instruction should therefore combine contextual inference with teacher guidance, dictionary use, explanation, and confirmation of meaning.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the importance of social interaction and guided learning in cognitive development. Applied to vocabulary instruction, this perspective supports the use of collaborative tasks, teacher modelling, peer discussion, and scaffolded activities through which learners gradually become more independent.

Thus, contextual vocabulary instruction can be understood as an integrated pedagogical approach that connects lexical knowledge with meaningful input, cognitive engagement, social interaction, and communicative practice.

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3. The Importance of Contextual Learning for Learners Aged 11–12

Learners aged 11–12 benefit from vocabulary activities that are meaningful, engaging, developmentally appropriate, and connected with familiar experiences. At this age, the relationship between new information and existing knowledge can help learners interpret and retain unfamiliar words.

For example, teaching the word exhausted through a translation alone provides only limited information. Presenting it in a short situation—"After running for thirty minutes, Daniel felt exhausted and sat down to rest"—offers additional clues about its meaning. Learners can connect the word with physical effort, tiredness, and the need for rest.

Contextual learning can support lexical development in several ways.

Meaningful association. New words are connected with familiar situations, objects, actions, and experiences. These associations help learners understand words as meaningful elements of communication.

Semantic organisation. Words can be grouped into categories and networks, such as emotions (happy, worried, disappointed, excited), environmental vocabulary (forest, river, pollution, wildlife), or school-related expressions (assignment, timetable, examination, achievement).

Repeated encounters. Meeting a word in different sentences, stories, dialogues, and tasks gives learners further opportunities to consolidate their knowledge. Repetition becomes more meaningful when the word appears in varied contexts rather than in identical drills alone.

Communicative application. Learners use newly acquired vocabulary to describe experiences, exchange opinions, solve problems, and create short texts. Such activities encourage the transition from recognition to productive use.

Learner engagement. Age-appropriate stories, illustrations, role-plays, games, and collaborative projects can make vocabulary learning more engaging and purposeful.

Contextual learning should not, however, be interpreted as learning through context alone. Direct explanations, translation when appropriate, pronunciation practice, and deliberate retrieval remain useful components of a balanced vocabulary programme.

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4. Contextual Frameworks for Enhancing Lexical Competence

An effective contextual approach can combine several complementary instructional frameworks.

4.1. Text-Based Vocabulary Learning

Text-based learning introduces vocabulary through short, level-appropriate texts, including stories, descriptions, dialogues, and informational passages. Instead of presenting a list of disconnected words, the teacher selects a text in which target lexical items contribute to a meaningful message.

For instance, a short text about environmental protection may introduce words such as recycle, waste, pollution, reusable, and protect. Learners first identify the general topic, then examine unfamiliar vocabulary and use textual clues to infer meaning.

The teacher can guide learners through three stages:

Pre-reading: Activate prior knowledge and introduce the topic through pictures, questions, or predictions.

During reading: Identify target words, examine their surrounding sentences, and infer possible meanings.

Post-reading: Use the vocabulary in summaries, discussions, written descriptions, or problem-solving tasks.

This framework promotes the integration of reading comprehension and vocabulary development. It also allows learners to observe how lexical items function in connected discourse.

4.2. Semantic and Lexical Network Framework

The semantic network framework organises vocabulary according to relationships between words. These relationships may include synonyms, antonyms, categories, word families, collocations, and associations based on meaning.

For example, the word weather can be linked to sunny, cloudy, windy, stormy, and foggy. Learners can then construct sentences such as “It is windy today” or “The weather became stormy in the afternoon.”

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Teachers may use word maps, mind maps, vocabulary notebooks, and classification activities to help learners visualise relationships between lexical items. Such activities encourage learners to organise vocabulary systematically rather than memorise isolated items.

Semantic networks are particularly useful when introducing thematic vocabulary. They can also support the development of more precise language use by helping learners distinguish between related words, such as look, watch, and see.

4.3. Task-Based and Communicative Vocabulary Learning

Task-based vocabulary instruction places lexical learning within activities that require learners to achieve a communicative outcome. Instead of practising vocabulary exclusively for its own sake, learners use words to complete a meaningful task.

For example, learners may work in pairs to plan a weekend trip. They need vocabulary related to transport, destinations, activities, weather, and time. The task encourages them to retrieve and apply relevant words while negotiating decisions with a partner.

Possible classroom tasks include:

planning a class event;
describing a picture and identifying differences;
conducting a short interview;
designing a healthy daily routine;
recommending a book or film;
preparing a poster about environmental protection.

Such tasks create opportunities for both receptive and productive vocabulary practice. They also demonstrate that lexical competence involves selecting appropriate words in response to a communicative purpose.

4.4. Collaborative and Dialogic Learning

Collaborative learning allows learners to explore vocabulary through interaction. In small groups, learners can discuss possible meanings, compare examples, explain their reasoning, and jointly complete a language task.

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For instance, each group may receive a short text containing several unfamiliar words. Learners use contextual clues to suggest meanings, identify evidence in the text, and present their conclusions to the class. The teacher then confirms or corrects their interpretations.

This process can encourage active participation and develop learners' ability to explain lexical choices. It is particularly useful when activities are structured so that all learners have an opportunity to contribute.

Collaborative vocabulary activities should include clear roles and instructions. Without adequate guidance, stronger learners may dominate the discussion while others remain passive. Teachers can address this issue by assigning roles such as reader, vocabulary detective, note-taker, and presenter.

4.5. Digital and Multimodal Contextual Learning

Digital resources can provide additional contexts for vocabulary learning through images, audio recordings, videos, interactive exercises, and electronic dictionaries. Multimodal materials can be particularly useful when a word is difficult to explain verbally or when learners need to connect pronunciation with spelling and meaning.

For example, a short video about a visit to a zoo can introduce vocabulary related to animals, habitats, movement, and behaviour. Learners can identify key words, match them with images, complete sentences, and subsequently describe what they observed.

Digital activities may also support individual practice and immediate feedback. However, technology should serve a clearly defined learning objective. An interactive game that rewards rapid clicking without requiring meaningful understanding may offer less educational value than an activity that asks learners to select, explain, and use words accurately.

Teachers should also consider learners' access to devices, digital literacy, and the suitability of online materials for their age and language level.

5. A Practical Contextual Framework for Classroom Implementation

Based on the theoretical discussion, a five-stage instructional framework can be proposed for enhancing lexical competence in 11–12-year-old learners.

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Stage 1. Contextual Activation

The teacher introduces a familiar or interesting topic through a picture, short video, question, story, or real-life situation. The purpose is to activate prior knowledge and prepare learners to understand new vocabulary.

For a lesson on healthy lifestyles, the teacher might ask: "What do you do to stay healthy?" Learners may mention food, exercise, sleep, and daily routines. These responses create a foundation for introducing additional lexical items.

Stage 2. Presentation and Discovery

The teacher presents target words in meaningful sentences or a short text. Learners examine the context and suggest possible meanings. Visuals, gestures, examples, and brief explanations are used when necessary.

For example:

"Emma usually eats a balanced diet. She includes vegetables, fruit, and protein in her meals."

Learners can infer that balanced diet refers to eating different types of food in appropriate proportions. The teacher confirms the meaning and provides additional examples.

Stage 3. Guided Lexical Practice

Learners complete activities designed to reinforce the relationship between word form, meaning, and use. These activities may include matching words with definitions, categorising vocabulary, completing sentences, identifying collocations, and selecting appropriate words for a given situation.

At this stage, practice should move beyond simple recognition. Learners can compare similar words, identify common word combinations, and explain why a particular lexical item fits a sentence.

Stage 4. Productive Communicative Use

Learners apply the target vocabulary in speaking or writing tasks. They may create a dialogue, describe an experience, write a short paragraph, conduct an interview, or solve a problem in pairs.

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For example, after learning vocabulary related to healthy lifestyles, learners can prepare a short presentation entitled "Five Ways to Stay Healthy." This task requires them to retrieve vocabulary and organise it into meaningful statements.

Stage 5. Assessment and Reinforcement

The teacher assesses learners' understanding and use of the target vocabulary. Assessment may involve a short oral task, a written paragraph, a vocabulary quiz, a peer-assessment checklist, or an exit ticket.

Previously learned vocabulary should also be revisited in later lessons. Spaced retrieval activities, cumulative vocabulary notebooks, and short review tasks can help learners consolidate their knowledge over time.

The five stages are intended to be flexible rather than strictly linear. Teachers may return to earlier stages when learners need additional support or encounter difficulties.

6. Illustrative Lesson Framework

The following example demonstrates how the proposed framework can be applied to a lesson for learners aged 11–12.

Topic: Environmental Protection

Target vocabulary: recycle, pollution, waste, reusable, protect, environment, reduce, reuse

Learning objectives: By the end of the lesson, learners should be able to identify the target words in context, explain their meanings, use selected words in sentences, and participate in a short discussion about environmental protection.

Lesson stageClassroom activity Expected learning outcome

Contextual activation Learners examine pictures of clean and polluted environments. They activate prior knowledge and predict the lesson topic.

Presentation Learners read a short text about reducing plastic waste. They encounter target vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Guided practice Learners match words with definitions and complete contextual sentences. They strengthen recognition and understanding of word meanings.

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Communicative use Groups design a poster entitled "Protect Our Environment." They use target vocabulary for a meaningful purpose.
Assessment Learners explain two recommendations and write an exit-ticket sentence. The teacher evaluates comprehension and productive use.
The framework can be adapted to other topics, including school life, travel, hobbies, health, food, emotions, and technology. The selection of vocabulary should correspond to learners' proficiency levels, curriculum requirements, and communicative needs.

7. Assessment of Lexical Competence

The assessment of lexical competence should consider more than the number of words a learner can translate or recognise. A comprehensive approach should examine whether learners understand and use vocabulary accurately and appropriately.
Four dimensions can be considered:
Recognition: Can learners identify the target word in a sentence or text?
Meaning: Can they explain the word or select an appropriate definition?
Contextual appropriateness: Can they determine whether the word fits a particular communicative situation?
Productive use: Can they use the word correctly in their own speech or writing?
Formative assessment is particularly useful because it allows teachers to identify difficulties while learning is taking place. Short vocabulary checks, observation during pair work, oral questioning, learner self-assessment, and written tasks can provide information about progress.
Teachers may use a simple rubric to evaluate productive vocabulary use:
Criterion Developing Satisfactory Strong
Meaning Understands some target words with support. Understands most target words. Understands target words and distinguishes related meanings.
Accuracy Makes frequent errors in word use. Uses most words appropriately, with occasional errors. Uses words accurately in relevant contexts.
RangeUses a limited number of target words. Uses several target words independently. Uses a varied range of target words.

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Communicative effectiveness Needs substantial support to express ideas. Communicates the main message clearly. Communicates ideas clearly and selects vocabulary purposefully.

This rubric is illustrative and should be adapted to the learners' proficiency level and the objectives of each lesson. Assessment should also recognise progress, effort, and increasing independence rather than focus exclusively on errors.

8. Discussion

The proposed contextual framework reflects the view that lexical competence develops through the interaction of meaningful exposure, deliberate learning, repeated retrieval, and communicative use. Each component addresses a different aspect of vocabulary acquisition.

Text-based activities expose learners to words in connected discourse. Semantic networks help organise lexical knowledge. Communicative tasks encourage learners to use words to achieve real purposes, while collaboration provides opportunities for explanation and negotiation of meaning. Digital and multimodal resources can further enrich these experiences when they are selected in accordance with clear pedagogical objectives.

Nevertheless, contextual instruction also presents challenges. Some contexts may not provide enough information to infer an unfamiliar word accurately. Learners may focus on understanding the general text without noticing important lexical items. In addition, a word encountered once may be recognised temporarily but not retained for later use.

These challenges indicate that context should be combined with explicit teaching, planned repetition, and retrieval practice. Teachers need to select target words carefully, provide accessible texts, monitor comprehension, and ensure that vocabulary introduced in one lesson is revisited in subsequent activities.

Another important consideration is learner diversity. Students of the same age may differ in reading ability, prior vocabulary knowledge, motivation, and exposure to English outside school. Differentiated tasks, visual support, sentence frames, peer collaboration, and optional extension activities can help accommodate these differences.

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The framework presented in this article is a pedagogical proposal derived from relevant theoretical perspectives. Its effectiveness for a particular group of learners should be established through classroom implementation and systematic evaluation, including baseline and follow-up assessments, observation, and analysis of learners' spoken and written work.

9. Conclusion

Enhancing lexical competence in 11–12-year-old learners requires an instructional approach that connects vocabulary knowledge with meaningful communication. Learning words through isolated translation and memorisation may contribute to initial recognition, but learners also need opportunities to understand relationships between words, interpret meaning in context, and apply vocabulary independently.

Contextual frameworks provide a practical means of integrating these objectives. Text-based learning, semantic organisation, communicative tasks, collaborative activities, and digital resources can create varied opportunities for learners to encounter and use lexical items. The proposed five-stage framework—contextual activation, presentation and discovery, guided practice, productive communicative use, and assessment and reinforcement—offers teachers a flexible structure for planning vocabulary lessons.

The central pedagogical implication is that vocabulary should be taught not merely as a collection of separate words but as a system of meaningful linguistic resources used for communication. By combining contextual exposure with explicit explanation, repeated retrieval, and purposeful practice, teachers can create conditions that support the gradual development of learners' lexical competence. Further classroom-based research is needed to determine the framework's effects on vocabulary retention, contextual appropriateness, and productive language use among learners aged 11–12.

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