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## STAGES OF VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT IN FIRST VS. SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

**Abstract.** *Vocabulary development is a central component of language acquisition and communication. This study explores and compares the stages of vocabulary development in first language (L1) and second language (L2) learners. The research emphasizes developmental stages, cognitive factors, instructional strategies, and the impact of age and environment. L1 vocabulary is typically acquired unconsciously through immersion, while L2 vocabulary acquisition often requires intentional learning, strategy use, and structured input. The comparison reveals pedagogical implications for differentiated instruction in multilingual settings, supporting more effective language teaching methods tailored to learners' linguistic backgrounds and developmental needs.*

**Keywords:** *Vocabulary acquisition, L1, L2, immersion, instruction, cognitive development, age, strategies, bilingualism, pedagogy, language learning, curriculum.*

### BIRINCHI VA IKKINCHI TIL O'RGANUVCHILARIDA LUG'AT BOYLLIGINI RIVOJLANTIRISH BOSQICHLARI

**Annotatsiya.** *Lug'at boylligini rivojlantirish til o'zlashtirish va muloqotning asosiy tarkibiy qismi hisoblanadi. Ushbu tadqiqot birinchi til (L1) va ikkinchi til (L2) o'rganuvchilarida lug'at rivojlanish bosqichlarini o'rganadi va taqqoslaydi. Tadqiqotda rivojlanish bosqichlari, kognitiv omillar, o'qitish strategiyalari hamda yosh va muhit ta'siri alohida ta'kidlanadi. L1 lug'ati odatda tabiiy ravishda, ya'ni to'liq muhitga sho'ng'ish orqali o'zlashtirilsa, L2 lug'atini o'rganish ko'pincha ongli ta'lim, strategiyalardan foydalanish va tuzilgan axborot asosida amalga oshadi. Ushbu taqqoslash ko'p tilli muhitlarda farqlangan ta'limning ahamiyatini ko'rsatadi va o'quvchilarning tilga oid tajriba va rivojlanish ehtiyojlariga moslashtirilgan samaraliroq o'qitish metodlarini ishlab chiqishga xizmat qiladi.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *Lug'at o'zlashtirish, L1, L2, muhitga sho'ng'ish, o'qitish, kognitiv rivojlanish, yosh, strategiyalar, bilingvalizm, pedagogika, til o'rganish, o'quv dasturi.*

### ЭТАПЫ РАЗВИТИЯ СЛОВАРНОГО ЗАПАСА У ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ ПЕРВЫЙ И ВТОРОЙ ЯЗЫК

**Аннотация.** *Развитие словарного запаса является ключевым компонентом овладения языком и общения. В данном исследовании рассматриваются и сравниваются этапы развития словарного запаса у носителей первого языка (L1) и изучающих второй язык (L2). Внимание уделяется стадиям развития, когнитивным факторам, учебным стратегиям, а также влиянию возраста и окружающей среды. Словарный запас L1, как правило, осваивается бессознательно через погружение в языковую среду, тогда как овладение лексикой L2 требует осознанного обучения, использования стратегий и структурированного материала. Сравнение выявляет педагогические последствия для дифференцированного обучения в многоязычной среде, способствуя более эффективным методам преподавания, адаптированным к языковому фону и потребностям учащихся.*

**Ключевые слова:** *овладение словарным запасом, L1, L2, погружение, обучение, когнитивное развитие, возраст, стратегии, билингвизм, педагогика, изучение языка, учебная программа.*

**Introduction.** Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language learning and usage. Without a sufficient and functional vocabulary, language learners cannot effectively express themselves or understand others, regardless of their grammatical proficiency. A robust vocabulary is essential for fluency, comprehension, reading development, and academic success. It forms the foundation for all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and is therefore central to communication. While vocabulary acquisition is important for all learners, the process through which it occurs varies significantly between first language (L1) learners and second language (L2) learners.

In the case of L1 learners, vocabulary development begins from infancy and occurs naturally through interaction with caregivers and exposure to the environment. Children acquire words effortlessly as they develop cognitively and socially. This process is largely subconscious, shaped by emotional connections, environmental input, and developmental readiness. The stages of vocabulary acquisition in L1 learners—from babbling to complex sentences—are closely tied to age-related cognitive growth and linguistic input. In contrast, L2 vocabulary development often begins later in life and is influenced by factors such as the learner's age, first language background, motivation, exposure, and learning environment. Unlike the spontaneous and intuitive process in L1 learners, L2 learners often rely on structured instruction, conscious learning strategies, and repeated practice. They may also experience interference from their native language, face challenges in pronunciation, and struggle with polysemy and idiomatic usage.

Understanding the differences between L1 and L2 vocabulary development is essential for language educators and linguists. It helps in designing effective curricula, choosing appropriate teaching strategies, and supporting learners at various stages of development. This study aims to compare the stages of vocabulary acquisition in L1 and L2 learners and analyze the influencing cognitive, contextual, and pedagogical factors. By identifying both the similarities and differences in how vocabulary is acquired, this research offers valuable insights for improving language teaching practices, especially in multilingual and multicultural educational contexts where both types of learners coexist.

**Materials and Methods.** This research adopts a qualitative comparative methodology to examine the vocabulary development stages in L1 and L2 learners. It involves an in-depth literature review, synthesis of empirical findings, and analysis of theoretical frameworks from the fields of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition.

No primary data collection was conducted; rather, the study is grounded in secondary data and scholarly interpretations that provide a comprehensive understanding of vocabulary learning processes.

The materials used include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, case studies, and observation reports. Among the key frameworks applied are Bloom's stages of early language development, which outline the natural acquisition path of vocabulary in L1 learners; the Involvement Load Hypothesis by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), which explains how task design affects L2 vocabulary retention; and the Lexical Quality Hypothesis by Perfetti (2007), which emphasizes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The study also draws upon Nation's categorization of vocabulary learning strategies—both incidental and intentional—as well as Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition depends on the availability of comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current level. By comparing how these theories apply to L1 and L2 learners, the study reveals contrasts in vocabulary growth, memory retention, and contextual learning.

Additionally, developmental data from early childhood language acquisition studies were examined to identify the sequence and pace of vocabulary expansion in native speakers. For second language learners, classroom-based studies from ESL and EFL contexts were reviewed to observe instructional methods, learner behavior, and outcomes across different proficiency levels. Factors such as learner motivation, age, exposure to language input, frequency of vocabulary use, and types of reinforcement were evaluated.

The methodological process involved organizing the vocabulary acquisition journey into stages for both L1 and L2 learners. Each stage was analyzed for its defining characteristics, associated cognitive demands, and environmental or instructional influences. By contrasting these findings, the study presents a nuanced view of vocabulary development and suggests how language teaching can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners.

**Results and Discussion.** The findings of this study show that vocabulary development in L1 and L2 learners follows distinct trajectories shaped by cognitive development, exposure, and the learning environment. Although both groups experience stages of lexical growth, the underlying processes, strategies, and challenges differ significantly.

In L1 learners, vocabulary acquisition begins with the pre-linguistic stage (0–12 months), during which infants babble and mimic sounds without attaching meaning. This is followed by the holophrastic stage (12–18 months), where single words are used to express whole ideas, such as saying “milk” to mean “I want milk.” By the two-word stage (18–24 months), toddlers begin to combine words into basic syntactic structures, e.g., “mama come” or “go park.” The telegraphic stage (2–3 years) includes short, content-heavy expressions that omit auxiliary and function words, like “want toy now.” From ages three to six, children experience rapid vocabulary expansion, often acquiring hundreds of new words each month through interaction, storytelling, and observation. By age twelve, most children have a vocabulary capable of supporting academic language and abstract reasoning.

In contrast, L2 learners, especially those beginning post-childhood, follow a different path. The silent period often marks the beginning, during which learners absorb language passively and avoid speaking. This phase can last weeks or months depending on the learner’s personality, confidence, and prior exposure. In the early production stage, learners start producing limited vocabulary, mainly memorized chunks, formulaic expressions, and yes/no responses. The speech emergence stage introduces more creative language use, though vocabulary is still basic and prone to errors. At the intermediate fluency stage, learners demonstrate improved vocabulary depth, begin to self-correct, and can engage in meaningful conversations. Finally, the advanced fluency stage enables learners to understand and produce complex language, including idioms, metaphors, and technical terms, approaching native-like proficiency.

The most significant differences between L1 and L2 vocabulary development lie in the role of instruction and learning consciousness. While L1 learners acquire vocabulary implicitly through immersion and necessity, L2 learners must often rely on explicit learning strategies, such as rote memorization, translation, semantic mapping, and spaced repetition. Metacognitive strategies like goal setting, monitoring progress, and employing mnemonic devices are more prominent in L2 vocabulary learning.

Moreover, affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, and cultural attitudes significantly affect L2 vocabulary acquisition. Learners who feel confident and supported tend to retain more vocabulary and take more risks in communication. Meanwhile, transfer from the L1 can be both a help and a hindrance, as it enables analogical reasoning but may also lead to false cognates or overgeneralization. Instructionally, L2 vocabulary development benefits from contextualized, meaningful tasks that simulate real-life communication. Repetition, personalization, and multimodal input enhance retention. Educators should incorporate activities that address the form, meaning, and use of new words, with opportunities for output and corrective feedback. In contrast, supporting L1 learners often involves creating a language-rich environment with varied input sources and opportunities for interaction, play, and narration.

In summary, while both L1 and L2 vocabulary learners pass through developmental stages, L2 acquisition is more variable and sensitive to external factors. Recognizing these differences helps educators create supportive learning environments tailored to the specific needs of each learner group.

**Conclusion.** Vocabulary acquisition is an essential part of language development, and its processes differ substantially between first and second language learners. L1 vocabulary growth is largely intuitive, guided by natural exposure and developmental milestones. Children acquire

their first words in a social context, supported by caregivers, and gradually develop a large and functional vocabulary without formal instruction. This naturalistic process is consistent and relatively universal across cultures and languages.

On the other hand, L2 learners—especially those acquiring a second language after childhood—encounter a more complex and effortful process. Their vocabulary development depends on multiple variables, including age of acquisition, learning strategies, exposure to the target language, and emotional factors such as motivation and confidence. Instructional methods and learning materials play a pivotal role in supporting their progress, and learners must often consciously work to acquire, retain, and use new vocabulary effectively.

Understanding the distinctions between these two types of learners allows educators to better tailor their teaching methods, ensuring that L2 learners receive the structured, supportive, and context-rich instruction they need to succeed. Meanwhile, promoting language-rich environments for L1 learners can further enhance their natural development. In increasingly multilingual classrooms, awareness of these developmental differences is critical to creating inclusive, effective, and linguistically responsive teaching practices. Future research should continue to investigate how digital tools, bilingual teaching strategies, and learner-centered pedagogy can bridge the gap between L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition, fostering more equitable and successful language learning outcomes.

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