

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR VOCABULARY TEACHING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO FOSTER COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN PUPILS FROM GRADES 1–4

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Abstract: This article investigates effective instructional strategies for teaching foreign-language (English) vocabulary to primary school pupils (grades 1–4), aiming to develop their communicative competence. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as communicative competence (Dell Hymes; Michael Canale & Merrill Swain), child-centered pedagogy, and empirical studies on methods like Total Physical Response (TPR), songs & rhymes, and lexical-based instruction, the article analyzes how vocabulary instruction can be designed to support interactive, meaningful language use rather than rote memorization. The article concludes that a combination of multimodal, interactive, context-rich, and developmentally appropriate strategies significantly enhances young learners' vocabulary acquisition, motivation, and communicative competence.

Key words: vocabulary teaching, communicative competence, young learners, primary school, foreign language instruction, TPR, songs and rhymes, lexical approach, child-centered pedagogy, English as a foreign language.

Teaching a foreign language to young learners — particularly children in grades 1–4 — is a special pedagogical challenge. At this early stage, learners are building foundational vocabulary, developing basic listening and speaking skills, and beginning to use the language communicatively. Traditional vocabulary teaching (lists of words + translation + writing) often fails to engage young learners or build the capacity to use words in real communication.

Instead, research in applied linguistics and language pedagogy argues that vocabulary instruction must do more: it must foster not just lexical knowledge, but communicative competence — the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. The concept of communicative competence, first formulated by Hymes (1972), emphasizes that knowing a language involves more than grammar and vocabulary; it also involves sociolinguistic, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic dimensions.

For young learners in primary school, vocabulary functions as the cornerstone of communicative competence. Without sufficient vocabulary (words, phrases, formulaic expressions), children cannot understand, respond, or express themselves meaningfully in the target language.

This article analyzes instructional strategies tailored for young learners (grades 1–4) to teach foreign-language vocabulary in ways that actively build communicative competence. Drawing on both classical theories and recent empirical studies, it argues for a multimodal, interactive, context-based, and child-centered approach.

The term “communicative competence” was introduced by Hymes (1972) as a critique and extension of the purely structural notion of linguistic competence advanced by Chomsky (1965). Hymes argued that knowing a language is not just about internalizing grammatical

rules; it also includes the ability to use language appropriately — in context, with suitable register, intentions, and social norms.

According to later models (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980), communicative competence comprises:

Linguistic competence — knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, phonology;

Sociolinguistic competence — knowledge of appropriate use in social contexts;

Discourse competence — ability to connect utterances coherently;

Strategic competence — ability to use communication strategies to overcome breakdowns or to compensate for limited knowledge.

For young learners (grades 1–4), building communicative competence implies not only memorizing vocabulary and grammar, but also developing listening comprehension, simple speaking, context-sensitive usage, and readiness to interact — all through age-appropriate, engaging methods.

Children aged roughly 6–10 (grades 1–4) have particular cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics relevant to language learning. Psycholinguistic and pedagogical research suggests that:

Young children learn more effectively through multisensory, action-based, and playful activities rather than abstract rule-based drills;

Their attention spans are shorter; memory benefits from repetition in entertaining contexts;

They respond well to rhythm, songs, movement, gestures, and visual stimuli — all of which support memory and motivation;

Early language learning should emphasize oral comprehension and production, not excessive emphasis on writing or grammar rules;

Therefore, vocabulary instruction for this age group should be contextualized, interactive, multisensory, and communicative.

Given the theoretical background, below are effective instructional strategies — supported by empirical research — for foreign-language (English) vocabulary teaching in grades 1–4.

TPR, developed by James J. Asher, is based on the observation of how children acquire their first language — by listening first, and responding physically to commands and stimuli long before they start speaking. In TPR, teaching begins with imperatives (commands), gestures, and movement; speech production emerges naturally when learners are ready.

This method has particular appeal for young learners because it lowers the affective filter (reduces stress), activates motor memory (kinesthetic learning), and pairs meaning directly with action, helping internalize vocabulary in a natural way.

Empirical studies show that TPR is highly effective in teaching vocabulary to children. For instance, a study reported that elementary school pupils exposed to TPR-based instruction demonstrated faster vocabulary acquisition, better retention, increased motivation, and stronger engagement compared to traditional rote learning.

Because TPR encourages comprehension before production, it helps build a foundation for communicative competence: children understand vocabulary in context and link words with meaningful actions, large parts of language get automated, and confidence builds before pressing them to speak.

Use simple, action-based vocabulary (verbs, commands, classroom language, basic nouns);

Combine teacher-led commands with body movements, gestures and realia;

Transition gradually to student-led commands and peer interaction (e.g., children instruct each other);

Repeat vocabulary in varied contexts (imperatives, commands, games, storytelling) to foster retention;

Avoid overloading with abstract vocabulary — for primary level, stick to concrete, actionable words first.

Songs, nursery rhymes, chants and rhythmic repetition are especially effective with children because they combine melody, rhythm, repetition, meaning, and enjoyment — all factors known to support memory, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and motivation.

In early language learning, songs provide a natural, playful context where vocabulary is repeated in predictable, meaningful patterns. They also offer exposure to prosody, intonation, rhythm, and connected speech.

A recent study found that using songs to teach English vocabulary to young learners significantly improved their vocabulary acquisition: post-test results showed higher vocabulary recognition and retention, and students reported increased enthusiasm and enjoyment for learning.

Similarly, research on nursery rhymes shows that they facilitate vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness, and basic grammar development in early learners. Choose simple, repetitive songs with concrete vocabulary (body parts, colors, everyday actions, classroom language, greetings, family, food, animals, etc.);

Use accompanying actions, gestures, or dance to reinforce meaning;

Encourage children to sing along, respond, and later produce related vocabulary in context;

Combine songs with other activities (drawing, storytelling, games) to reinforce and recycle vocabulary;

Use songs not only for vocabulary but also to develop listening, pronunciation, rhythm, and fluency.

Traditional grammar-focused language teaching has often been criticized for failing to prepare learners for real communication. A more modern emphasis, promoted by proponents of the Lexical Approach (e.g., Lewis, 1993), argues that language consists largely of lexical units (words and multi-word chunks) rather than isolated grammatical rules. In early instruction, learning common lexical chunks (collocations, formulaic expressions, set phrases) helps learners communicate more naturally and fluently.

For young learners, learning lexical chunks (e.g., “How are you?”, “What is this?”, “I like ___”, “I don’t have ___”, “Can I have ___?”) provides ready-made building blocks for real communication — easier than constructing sentences word by word.

Introduce vocabulary in **chunks and phrases** rather than isolated words — for example, teach “open your book,” “sit down,” “stand up,” “I don’t know,” “Thank you,” “Let’s play,” etc.;

Use these chunks repeatedly in class routines (greetings, commands, classroom instructions, games) so students internalize them as functional units;

Combine with TPR, songs, storytelling, and role-plays to provide meaningful context;

This approach helps pupils begin using English spontaneously in classroom communication and simple dialogues; it builds a repertoire of functional phrases that serve as a base for later grammar and vocabulary growth.



Children respond well to stories: stories engage imagination, provide context, introduce vocabulary naturally, and embed language in meaningful situations. Early childhood pedagogy and language teaching research emphasize the effectiveness of storytelling (or puppet-based stories) in building vocabulary, listening comprehension, and communicative readiness.

Context-based learning supports both comprehension and production: children understand vocabulary in meaningful contexts, then practice it through retelling, dramatization, role-play or drawing — reinforcing both vocabulary and communicative skills.

Games naturally provide motivation, interaction, repetition, challenge, and fun — elements that foster engagement, reduce anxiety, and encourage active production. For young learners, games turn vocabulary learning from a dry “memorize-and-repeat” task into a social, dynamic, and meaningful activity.

Action games using TPR commands (e.g., “Simon Says,” “Draw me a ...,” “Point to ...,” “Touch your head,” etc.)

Information-gap activities — children must use target vocabulary to complete tasks or solve problems (e.g., find hidden items, ask for items, describe pictures).

Role-plays and mini-dialogues — simple communication in pairs or small groups: greeting, asking questions, describing pictures, expressing likes/dislikes.

Project-based or task-based mini-tasks — e.g., create a class poster, draw a family tree, describe favorite toys, present a simple show — using target vocabulary in meaningful context.

These strategies encourage active use, repetition, peer interaction, and gradual building of communicative competence.

Vocabulary is more than a list of words; for young learners, it is the building block of communication. To foster communicative competence in pupils from grades 1–4, vocabulary instruction must go beyond memorization — it should be interactive, contextual, multisensory, repeated, meaningful, and communicative.

Instructional strategies such as Total Physical Response (TPR), songs and rhymes, lexical-chunk based teaching, story-based learning, and game-based interactive activities align well with young learners’ psychological and developmental needs, and empirical research supports their effectiveness in improving vocabulary acquisition, retention, motivation, and communication skills.

A well-designed vocabulary teaching program for grades 1–4, rooted in these strategies, can help children not only learn words — but begin to use them in real communication, build confidence, improve listening and speaking skills, and lay a solid foundation for future language learning. For teachers and curriculum designers, this implies a shift from traditional textbook-based lexical drills toward a more dynamic, pedagogically sound, child-centered approach.

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