METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING LEARNERS' LEXICAL SKILLS THROUGH VISUAL AIDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Shakhzoda Ruzimova
Ruzimovash23@gmail.com
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Abstract. This article examines the methodological foundations of developing learners' lexical skills through visual aids in English language teaching. The study is based on the premise that vocabulary development should extend beyond recognition of isolated word meanings and should support the progressive development of form–meaning connections, contextual understanding, retrieval, and communicative use. A theoretical-methodological research design was employed, drawing on contemporary vocabulary-instruction research, multimodal and dual-coding perspectives, studies of digital flashcards and captioned audiovisual input, and established models of vocabulary knowledge. Through literature analysis, comparative analysis, synthesis, systematization, and pedagogical modelling, a six-stage methodological sequence is proposed: selecting target lexical units and visual support; establishing form–meaning connections; contextualizing lexical items; organizing active retrieval; transferring vocabulary into communicative use; and assessing and recycling lexical knowledge. Criteria for selecting visual aids are also specified, including semantic transparency, relevance, age and proficiency appropriateness, cognitive simplicity, contextual value, and pedagogical purpose. The methodology developed in this article treats visual aids not as decorative classroom elements but as structured pedagogical resources that support the transition from initial word recognition to meaningful and productive lexical use. The framework provides a basis for subsequent empirical validation within English language teaching methodology.

Keywords: English language teaching, vocabulary instruction, lexical skills, visual aids, visual literacy, multimodal learning, retrieval practice, communicative use.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of second and foreign language development because learners require lexical knowledge to understand input and to express meanings in speaking and writing. Nevertheless, vocabulary teaching can become methodologically limited when new words are presented as isolated translation equivalents and learning is evaluated only through short-term recognition. Contemporary vocabulary pedagogy increasingly treats lexical knowledge as multidimensional and developmental.

Nation (2022) explains that knowing a word involves multiple aspects, including spoken and written form, word parts, the form–meaning connection, concepts and referents, associations, grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. This perspective implies that a learner who can identify the translation of a word may still be unable to recognize it in connected speech, combine it appropriately with other words, or use it productively in context.

Visual aids can support lexical learning by connecting verbal information with meaningful visual representations. Pictures, real objects, diagrams, flashcards, illustrated contexts, infographics, and audiovisual resources may make lexical meaning more accessible and memorable. However, the presence of an image does not automatically produce learning. Visual information must be relevant to the target word, sufficiently clear, cognitively manageable, and integrated into purposeful language activity.

Research on multimedia and dual-coding approaches provides a theoretical rationale for combining verbal and visual information in vocabulary learning. Studies of captioned and subtitled video have also shown that multimodal input can support vocabulary acquisition, while recent reviews of digital flashcards highlight the value of retrieval practice, spaced repetition, learner autonomy, and engagement. At the same time, current systematic reviews emphasize that vocabulary instruction should be adapted to learners' developmental needs and should be connected to theoretically grounded instructional practices.

The methodological problem addressed in this article is therefore not whether visual aids should be used, but how they should be organized so that learners progress from seeing and recognizing a lexical item to retrieving and using it meaningfully. The purpose of the study is to identify methodological principles for visual vocabulary instruction and to propose a structured sequence for developing learners' lexical skills through visual aids in English language teaching.

Vocabulary instruction has been examined through cognitive, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and instructional perspectives. A 2025 systematic review of vocabulary instruction for English learners analyzed 43 studies published between 2013 and 2024 and found that instructional practices were most frequently associated with schema and psycholinguistic theories, followed by social constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. The review also emphasized the importance of adapting vocabulary instruction to learners' developmental needs (Simonnet et al., 2025).

Nation's model of vocabulary knowledge offers an important basis for determining what lexical development should include. Word knowledge is not a single all-or-nothing state. Learners develop receptive and productive knowledge across form, meaning, and use. Accordingly, visual instruction should not end once a learner can match a picture to a word. It should contribute to deeper lexical knowledge by supporting recognition, recall, contextual interpretation, and productive use.

Dual Coding Theory and the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning provide a complementary explanation for the pedagogical potential of visual support. When relevant verbal and visual representations are meaningfully connected, learners can build richer mental representations. However, multimedia research also cautions against unnecessary information: visual elements should support the instructional message rather than compete with it.

Research on captioned and subtitled video illustrates the potential of multimodal input. A scoping review and meta-analysis of vocabulary acquisition through captioned and subtitled video identified positive effects on vocabulary learning and highlighted the role of combined textual, auditory, and visual input. Such findings suggest that visual vocabulary instruction can extend beyond static pictures to contextualized audiovisual representations.

Digital flashcards represent another important form of visual vocabulary support. Teymouri's (2024) review notes that mobile-assisted vocabulary learning, particularly digital

flashcards, can support engagement, learner autonomy, long-term retention, spaced repetition, and retrieval practice. Yet the same literature points to a continuing need to investigate productive vocabulary use rather than limiting evaluation to recognition and retention.

Taken together, these findings suggest a methodological gap between visual presentation and productive lexical development. Visual aids are often effective at making meaning accessible, but learners need subsequent retrieval, contextualization, and communicative use if the target vocabulary is to become functional. This gap forms the basis for the sequence proposed in the present study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a theoretical-methodological design and did not claim experimental outcomes. The source base included established work on vocabulary knowledge and recent research and reviews addressing vocabulary instruction, visual and multimedia support, captioned audiovisual input, and digital flashcards in English or foreign language learning.

Five methods were used. Scientific literature analysis identified theoretical and empirical principles relevant to visual vocabulary teaching. Comparative analysis was used to distinguish functions of different visual resources and to compare recognition-oriented and productive vocabulary practices. Synthesis and systematization were applied to organize recurring instructional principles. Pedagogical modelling was then used to construct a staged methodology. Finally, criterion-based analysis was used to formulate requirements for selecting and evaluating visual aids.

The central analytical unit was the learner's movement from initial lexical encounter toward functional use. Therefore, the methodology was designed around a progression from visual-semantic access to contextualization, active retrieval, communicative production, and recycling. The framework is deliberately independent of a single digital platform or age group so that it can be adapted to different English teaching contexts.

RESULTS

The analysis led to a six-stage methodology for developing lexical skills through visual aids. Each stage performs a distinct pedagogical function, and the sequence is designed to move learners beyond passive picture–word matching toward increasingly independent lexical use.

Stage	Teacher/learner activity	Primary lexical function
1. Select target words and visual support	Choose high-value lexical items and visuals that represent meaning clearly and appropriately.	Prepare focused, interpretable input.
2. Establish form–meaning connections	Link image/object with spoken and written forms; model pronunciation and meaning.	Build initial recognition and form–meaning association.
3. Contextualize the lexical item	Place words in short phrases, sentences, scenes, stories, diagrams, or audiovisual situations.	Develop contextual and conceptual knowledge.

Stage	Teacher/learner activity	Primary lexical function
4. Organize active retrieval	Use picture recall, matching without visible labels, sorting, guessing, spaced flashcards, or quick retrieval tasks.	Strengthen recall and retention.
5. Transfer to communicative use	Require learners to describe, choose, compare, ask, answer, role-play, or create messages using target words.	Develop productive and functional lexical use.
6. Assess, recycle, and expand	Check recognition, recall, contextual choice, and productive use; revisit words in later tasks and new contexts.	Consolidate knowledge and support long-term lexical development.

Table 1. Six-stage methodology for developing lexical skills through visual aids.

Stage 1: Selecting target lexical items and visual support. Visual instruction should begin with lexical priorities rather than with attractive images. The teacher first determines which words are pedagogically important for the lesson and what aspect of each word requires support. Concrete nouns may be represented effectively through pictures or realia, whereas actions, relations, adjectives, or abstract meanings may require sequences, contrasting images, diagrams, gestures, or contextual scenes.

Stage 2: Establishing form–meaning connections. The visual resource is connected to the spoken and written form of the target item. Learners hear the word, notice its pronunciation, see its written form where appropriate, and connect these forms to a clear representation of meaning. At this stage, visual support reduces dependence on lengthy translation and creates an initial semantic anchor.

Stage 3: Contextualizing the lexical item. Isolated picture–word association is expanded into context. The target word appears in a phrase, sentence, mini-dialogue, picture scene, short story, infographic, or audiovisual episode. Context helps learners understand how meaning changes or becomes more precise through grammatical and lexical surroundings.

Stage 4: Organizing active retrieval. The visual aid should gradually stop functioning as a permanent answer cue. Learners need opportunities to retrieve the lexical item from memory. The teacher may remove written labels, present pictures for rapid naming, ask learners to reconstruct sets, use spaced digital or paper flashcards, or require matching from memory. Retrieval changes the learner's role from recognizing information to actively accessing it.

Stage 5: Transferring vocabulary into communicative use. Target words are used to achieve a communicative purpose. Learners may describe a visual scene, compare two pictures, choose and justify an option, ask and answer questions, complete information-gap activities, role-play a situation, or create a short oral or written message. At this stage, the visual becomes a stimulus for language production rather than merely a representation of meaning.

Stage 6: Assessing, recycling, and expanding lexical knowledge. Assessment should distinguish different levels of lexical knowledge. A learner may recognize a word but fail to

recall or use it. Teachers should therefore check picture–word recognition, meaning recall, contextual selection, and productive use. Target vocabulary should subsequently reappear in new visual and communicative contexts so that knowledge becomes more stable and flexible.

The six stages form a pedagogical cycle: TARGET WORD SELECTION → VISUAL–SEMANTIC CONNECTION → CONTEXTUALIZATION → ACTIVE RETRIEVAL → COMMUNICATIVE USE → ASSESSMENT AND RECYCLING. Recycling can lead to a new cycle in which the same lexical items are encountered with richer meanings, collocations, grammatical patterns, or contexts.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING VISUAL AIDS

The analysis also resulted in six practical criteria for selecting visual resources. These criteria are necessary because an aesthetically attractive image may still be pedagogically weak.

Criterion	Guiding question
Semantic transparency	Does the visual communicate the intended meaning clearly and avoid ambiguity?
Pedagogical relevance	Does the visual directly support the target lexical objective?
Age and proficiency appropriateness	Is the content understandable and suitable for the learners' developmental and language level?
Cognitive simplicity	Does the visual avoid distracting or unnecessary detail?
Contextual value	Can the visual support phrases, sentences, situations, or communicative activity rather than isolated naming only?
Potential for retrieval and production	Can the same resource be used to prompt recall and meaningful language production?

DISCUSSION

The methodology developed in this article is consistent with contemporary vocabulary research while emphasizing a distinction that is sometimes blurred in classroom practice: visual exposure is not equivalent to lexical mastery. Nation's multidimensional account of word knowledge demonstrates why picture recognition represents only part of lexical development. The proposed stages therefore extend visual presentation toward context, retrieval, and use.

The methodology also aligns with dual-coding and multimedia perspectives because it deliberately combines verbal and visual representations. However, the selection criteria prevent an overly simplistic interpretation of multimedia learning. More visual information is not necessarily better. The pedagogical value of a visual depends on its relevance, clarity, and integration with a learning task.

Findings from captioned-video research support the contextualization stage. Audiovisual input can combine spoken language, written captions, and visual context, thereby providing multiple cues to meaning. Yet productive vocabulary knowledge still requires learners to retrieve and use words rather than merely encounter them. For this reason, contextualized

visual input is followed by active retrieval and communicative production in the proposed model.

The retrieval stage is also supported by research on digital flashcards. Spaced repetition and active recall can strengthen retention, while mobile tools can increase learner autonomy. Nevertheless, flashcards should not become the endpoint of instruction. If vocabulary remains confined to decontextualized recognition or recall, learners may have difficulty using it in communication. The fifth stage therefore requires transfer into meaningful speaking or writing.

A further contribution of the framework is the integration of assessment with recycling. Vocabulary assessment should reflect different degrees of knowing. Recognition, recall, contextual appropriateness, and productive use should not be treated as identical outcomes. Recycling allows partially known words to develop progressively and helps teachers connect visual vocabulary work with broader language skills.

This study is theoretical and has limitations. The six-stage methodology and selection criteria require empirical validation with defined learner populations. Future studies may compare conventional visual presentation with the complete staged sequence, examine delayed retention and productive vocabulary use, and investigate how age, proficiency, visual type, and digital versus non-digital formats influence outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Visual aids have substantial pedagogical potential in English vocabulary instruction, but their effectiveness depends on how they are integrated into a structured learning process. The central methodological principle proposed in this article is that visual resources should support progression from initial form–meaning connection to contextual understanding, active retrieval, communicative use, and continued recycling.

The study proposes a six-stage methodology: selecting target lexical items and appropriate visual support; establishing form–meaning connections; contextualizing vocabulary; organizing active retrieval; transferring lexical items into communicative use; and assessing, recycling, and expanding knowledge. It also identifies six criteria for visual-resource selection: semantic transparency, pedagogical relevance, age and proficiency appropriateness, cognitive simplicity, contextual value, and potential for retrieval and production.

For English language teaching methodology, this approach reframes visual aids from supplementary decoration into purposeful instructional resources. Teachers should therefore evaluate visual materials not primarily by attractiveness but by their contribution to lexical understanding, recall, contextualization, and productive language use. Subsequent empirical research within specialty 13.00.02 can operationalize the framework through measurable criteria and test its effectiveness across different learner groups and instructional settings.

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