

A Needs-Informed Pedagogical Framework for Theme-Based Vocabulary Expansion in Grade 3 Vietnamese Language Education

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Abstract

Vocabulary development in primary education requires more than increasing the number of words students recognize; learners also need to clarify word meanings, establish lexical relationships, and use vocabulary productively. This study identifies classroom needs in theme-based vocabulary instruction for Grade 3 students and develops a pedagogical framework grounded in lexical-semantic theory, curriculum requirements, textbook tasks, and empirical needs analysis. The study draws on data from 218 Grade 3 students and 15 teachers at three primary schools in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. Student performance was uneven, with 47.7% scoring below 7 on a 10-point vocabulary-expansion assessment. Teacher responses also indicated limited use of instructional supports specifically targeting lexical recognition, guided retrieval, and productive activation. In response, a four-component framework is proposed: lexical recognition, semantic clarification, lexical systematization, and lexical activation. Corresponding measures include guided reading and observation, semantic-feature comparison, associative and syntagmatic organization, and experience-based vocabulary use. Classroom illustrations show how these measures can be integrated into Grade 3 Vietnamese textbook tasks without altering curricular content. The framework offers a structured approach for moving vocabulary instruction from word accumulation toward meaningful lexical organization and communicative use.

Keywords: vocabulary expansion; vocabulary instruction; lexical-semantic relations; theme-based learning; Grade 3; Vietnamese language education

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a central resource for language comprehension, expression, and communication. In primary education, vocabulary growth supports reading comprehension, oral participation, and increasingly precise written expression. Yet vocabulary learning cannot be reduced to the accumulation of isolated word forms. Learners also need to understand meanings, distinguish related lexical items, recognize relationships within the lexical system, and retrieve appropriate words when communicating.

This broader conception is consistent with the competency orientation of Vietnam's 2018 General

Education Curriculum. The curriculum positions Vietnamese language education as a means of developing learners' capacity to use language effectively in learning and communication, with lexical knowledge integrated into reading, writing, speaking, and listening rather than treated as an autonomous body of information (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2018a, 2018b). For Grade 3 students, vocabulary by theme is an explicit component of Vietnamese language knowledge, creating a curricular basis for systematic work with lexical meaning, semantic relations, and productive use.

Vietnamese scholarship on primary vocabulary instruction has progressively moved in the same direction. Le Huu Tinh (2001) placed lexical competence at the center of exercise design; Phan Thieu and Le Huu Tinh (2003) treated vocabulary teaching as a process involving word acquisition, meaning comprehension, and practical use; and Le Phuong Nga (2013) argued that linguistic knowledge in primary Vietnamese should ultimately serve communicative competence. Vu Thi An (2015) further emphasized that vocabulary enrichment must be closely linked to meaning clarification and appropriate use. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that vocabulary expansion should be understood as a developmental process rather than as simple enlargement of a word list.

This issue is particularly relevant in Grade 3. Students at this stage can observe, compare, classify, and form associations, but their thinking remains strongly connected to concrete objects, familiar situations, and personal experience. Their lexical resources also vary according to family background, reading exposure, daily communication, and learning opportunities. Consequently, a thematic textbook task may provide a useful lexical domain without automatically enabling students to recognize relevant words, understand semantic distinctions, organize vocabulary meaningfully, or use new lexical items in speaking and writing.

The present study therefore develops a needs-informed pedagogical framework for theme-based vocabulary expansion in Grade 3 Vietnamese language education. Rather than proposing a new curriculum or replacing textbook tasks, the framework organizes instructional support around four lexical processes already established in the underlying thesis: recognition, semantic clarification, systematization, and activation. Two questions guide the article: (1) What classroom needs are indicated by Grade 3 student performance and teachers' reported practices in theme-based vocabulary instruction? and (2) How can lexical-semantic theory, learner characteristics, curriculum requirements, and these classroom needs be integrated into a coherent pedagogical framework?

2. Theoretical and Curricular Background

2.1. Vocabulary expansion as lexical development

An individual's vocabulary consists of lexical items accumulated through learning, communication, reading, and experience. For primary learners, this repertoire develops continuously as knowledge of the world and communicative experience expand. Vu Thi An (2015) characterizes children's lexical acquisition as a progression from simpler to more complex and from narrower to broader domains. Such development involves both quantitative expansion and qualitative refinement.

Accordingly, increasing the number of words a student can recognize is only one dimension of vocabulary expansion. Learners also need increasingly precise knowledge of word meaning and use. Words that are semantically related may differ in referents, evaluative meanings, collocational possibilities, or contextual appropriateness. Tran Thi Lan (2012) distinguishes among enriching, refining, and activating

vocabulary, a distinction that helps explain why knowing a word receptively is not equivalent to being able to use it accurately and naturally.

In this study, theme-based vocabulary expansion is therefore conceptualized as a process through which learners enlarge their lexical repertoire by recognizing additional lexical items, clarifying and refining their meanings, establishing relationships among them, and mobilizing them in speaking and writing. These dimensions are interdependent rather than mechanically sequential: a classification task may require recognition, semantic analysis, and organization at the same time, while sentence production may reveal whether meaning has been adequately understood.

2.2. Lexical-semantic relations as an organizing principle

The concept of the semantic field provides an important theoretical basis for theme-based vocabulary instruction. Do Huu Chau (1996) describes lexical fields as systems of words linked by semantic relations and distinguishes referential, conceptual, syntagmatic, and associative fields. This perspective is pedagogically relevant because it treats vocabulary as an organized network rather than as an arbitrary inventory of forms.

Referential and conceptual relations enable words to be grouped according to domains of reality and shared semantic features. Syntagmatic relations concern the ways words combine in acceptable phrases and sentences, while associative relations connect a central concept with words activated through experience, knowledge, and habitual co-occurrence. For young learners, these relations can be transformed into accessible classroom actions: grouping words, comparing meanings, generating associations, and testing plausible word combinations. Students do not need technical linguistic terminology; what matters is that instruction makes lexical relationships visible and usable.

This theoretical orientation supports a shift from isolated-word learning toward relational vocabulary learning. When learners connect new lexical items to semantic categories, associations, and combinational patterns, they are provided with multiple routes for retrieval and use. Theme-based vocabulary tasks are especially suitable for this purpose because the thematic center already offers an initial organizing domain.

2.3. A four-component view of vocabulary expansion

The underlying thesis identifies four closely related activities in vocabulary expansion: lexical recognition, understanding word meaning, vocabulary systematization, and vocabulary activation. Lexical recognition involves identifying or retrieving words associated with a theme, text, image, or communicative domain. Semantic clarification involves understanding what a word denotes, recognizing relevant meaning features, and distinguishing it from related items. Lexical systematization involves organizing words according to semantic, associative, or combinational relations. Lexical activation occurs when learners retrieve and use words in meaningful speaking or writing.

These four components provide the conceptual architecture of the framework proposed in this article. Their relationship is developmental rather than rigidly linear. In practice, classroom tasks may emphasize one component while drawing on others, and difficulty at a later component may reveal incomplete development at an earlier one.

2.4. Developmental considerations for Grade 3 learners

The psychological and linguistic characteristics of Grade 3 students have direct implications for vocabulary teaching. Visual and concrete information remains particularly supportive; pictures, objects, observable actions, and familiar situations can facilitate lexical recognition when accompanied by a clear purpose for observation. Attention is increasingly intentional but can still be disrupted when tasks contain too many undifferentiated demands. Similarly, visual memory remains important, while meaningful memory is developing; vocabulary is therefore more likely to be retained when words are linked through meaningful categories and revisited in use.

Grade 3 learners can also compare and classify, yet complex metalinguistic analysis remains inappropriate. Semantic reasoning should therefore be mediated through accessible questions, examples, familiar contexts, and simple contrasts. Their expanding imagination and experience also make association a productive resource, although teacher guidance may be needed to prevent retrieval from becoming diffuse or unrelated to the thematic task.

3. Method

3.1. Research design and participants

The study employed a descriptive needs-analysis design as the empirical basis for pedagogical development. Its purpose was to identify recurrent difficulties in Grade 3 vocabulary expansion and patterns in teachers' instructional practices, and then to connect these needs with the theoretical and curricular analysis. The survey involved 218 Grade 3 students from Tan Lap, Nha Trang, and Trung Vuong primary schools in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. Six classes participated: 34 and 35 students from two classes at Tan Lap Primary School, 38 and 38 students from two classes at Nha Trang Primary School, and 37 and 36 students from two classes at Trung Vuong Primary School. Fifteen Grade 3 Vietnamese teachers also participated in the teacher survey.

3.2. Instruments and analysis

Student vocabulary-expansion performance was assessed through a task sheet organized around four forms of lexical activity: identifying words, classifying or interpreting lexical items, expanding thematic word groups, and using vocabulary in sentence production. Student results were reported on a 10-point scale. The instrument was used descriptively within the original study and should not be interpreted as a standardized measure of vocabulary proficiency.

The teacher questionnaire examined perceived advantages and difficulties in vocabulary-expansion instruction and the reported frequency of selected instructional supports. These included the use of visual materials for lexical recognition, prompting questions for vocabulary retrieval, links to personal experience for lexical activation, and pair/group/game-based activities. The present article reproduces the descriptive frequencies and percentages from the thesis and introduces no additional empirical data.

4. Results: Classroom Needs in Theme-Based Vocabulary Instruction

4.1. Student performance

Student performance was uneven across the participating classes. Of the 218 students, 41 (18.8%) scored

below 5, 63 (28.9%) scored between 5 and 6, 73 (33.5%) scored between 7 and 8, and 41 (18.8%) scored between 9 and 10. Thus, 104 students, or 47.7% of the sample, scored below 7. Table 1 summarizes the distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of Grade 3 students' vocabulary-expansion scores (N = 218).

Score range	n	%
Below 5	41	18.8
5–6	63	28.9
7–8	73	33.5
9–10	41	18.8

School-level results also differed. At Tan Lap Primary School, 60.9% of students scored below 7 and only 8.7% reached 9–10. The proportion scoring below 7 was 44.7% at Nha Trang Primary School and 38.4% at Trung Vuong Primary School. These differences indicate that the participating students did not form a homogeneous group and reinforce the need for flexible instructional support.

The thesis interprets these results as evidence that many students experienced difficulty across the processes of lexical recognition, meaning understanding, vocabulary systematization, and activation. Pedagogically, the finding suggests that additional word exposure alone is unlikely to address the observed needs; students require scaffolds tailored to different lexical processes.

4.2. Teachers' reported practices

Teacher responses revealed a marked contrast between the frequent use of general participatory formats and the limited use of vocabulary-specific instructional supports. All 15 teachers reported frequently organizing pair work, group work, or games to help students find and use words. However, the use of visual supports, retrieval prompts, and experience-based activation was substantially less common (Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' reported use of instructional supports (N = 15).

Instructional practice	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
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Instructional practice	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Pictures/objects for lexical recognition	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (13.3)	13 (86.7)
Prompting questions for vocabulary retrieval	2 (13.3)	2 (13.3)	5 (33.3)	6 (40.0)
Experience-based support for lexical activation	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (33.3)	10 (66.7)
Pair/group work or games	15 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)

Visual support for lexical recognition was particularly uncommon: 86.7% of teachers reported never using pictures or objects for this purpose, and 13.3% reported doing so only rarely. Prompting questions designed to elicit additional vocabulary were also limited; 40.0% reported never using this approach and 33.3% reported using it rarely. Most strikingly, no teacher reported frequently or sometimes guiding students to connect vocabulary with personal experience for productive use; 66.7% selected never and 33.3% rarely.

The issue, therefore, was not the absence of active classroom organization. Pair work, group work, and games were already common. The more substantial pedagogical gap concerned the linguistic and cognitive guidance embedded within those formats. Interaction may increase engagement, but without visual cues, semantic prompts, retrieval pathways, or experience-based use, it does not necessarily support the specific processes through which vocabulary becomes organized and productive.

5. A Four-Component Pedagogical Framework

The theoretical and empirical analyses converge on four interconnected instructional functions: lexical recognition, semantic clarification, lexical systematization, and lexical activation. The framework is not intended as a fixed four-step lesson plan. Rather, it provides a way to diagnose the dominant lexical demand of a task and select instructional support accordingly.

5.1. Lexical recognition through guided reading and observation

The first component concerns students' ability to identify words relevant to a theme in texts, images, objects, or other learning materials. The corresponding pedagogical measure is guided reading and observation. Instead of supplying a ready-made list or asking students to inspect a visual source without direction, the teacher first clarifies what type of words must be found and where relevant evidence is likely to appear. In text-based tasks, students reread with attention to information linked to the lexical target; in picture-based tasks, observation proceeds from the whole image to relevant objects, parts, actions, or characteristics.

A textbook activity on objects illustrates this approach. When students are asked to identify words naming parts of illustrated objects, the teacher can establish the lexical target, guide students to inspect each object systematically, allow them to record candidate words individually, and then ask them to justify selections by pointing to the corresponding visual detail. The purpose is not merely to obtain the correct list but to develop a reusable recognition strategy: identify the target, locate evidence, observe selectively, label, and verify.

5.2. Semantic clarification through accessible feature comparison

Recognizing a word does not guarantee that the learner understands it sufficiently for classification or use. The second component therefore concerns semantic clarification. The proposed measure is the analysis and comparison of salient meaning features in language accessible to Grade 3 students. It is especially appropriate for textbook tasks that require words to be sorted into semantic categories.

A task on community vocabulary provides a clear example. Students may be asked to distinguish words referring to communities from words expressing community feelings or relationships. Before classification, the teacher clarifies the meaning criterion represented by each group and then helps students interpret selected words through familiar questions and contexts. Terms such as dòng họ (lineage) and thôn xóm (neighborhood community) can be examined in terms of the people they denote, whereas đùm bọc (support/protect one another) and tình nghĩa (affectionate, loyal relationship) can be examined in terms of interpersonal feeling and behavior. Students classify only after meanings have been made sufficiently explicit, and selected decisions are justified. The task thus becomes semantic reasoning rather than answer placement.

5.3. Lexical systematization through associative and syntagmatic relations

The third component addresses the organization of vocabulary into meaningful networks. The first route uses associative relations. A theme or central concept is divided into several directions for retrieval, such as people, activities, tools, qualities, feelings, or settings. Teacher questions then guide students to retrieve words along these pathways rather than search indiscriminately. For a theme involving household activities, for example, prompts can focus separately on tasks performed at home, tools used, and ways of carrying out those tasks. Retrieved words are subsequently compared and organized into thematic groups.

The second route uses syntagmatic relations. Students begin with a central word and identify lexical items that can combine with it in meaningful phrases. In a sports-related task from the thesis, Vietnamese verbs such as đánh, đấu, and đua function as central items. Students extend these into combinations such as đánh cầu lông, đánh bóng bàn, đấu võ, đấu kiếm, đua thuyền, and đua xe. The pedagogical value lies in helping students see that lexical knowledge includes patterns of combination as well as semantic membership.

5.4. Lexical activation through experience-based use

The final component concerns the transition from receptive or semi-active vocabulary to productive use. The proposed measure is to connect lexical choices with learners' experiences before sentence production. Conventional exercises may ask students to place a target word into a sentence immediately, which can result in formally correct but semantically artificial output. Experience-based activation reverses this order: students first identify something meaningful they want to express and then select vocabulary appropriate to that content.

A Grade 3 task asking students to make a sentence about a household activity they have performed illustrates the approach. Before sentence construction, the teacher prompts students to recall a concrete event: what they did, when they did it, whether they did it alone or with someone, and which action word best describes the activity. Students then formulate a sentence and review whether the selected word is appropriate in meaning and context. This measure responds closely to the teacher survey, in which no participant reported using experience-based vocabulary activation frequently or sometimes.

6. Integrating the Framework into Grade 3 Vietnamese Lessons

The four components should be treated as a flexible instructional architecture rather than as four compulsory stages in every lesson. A picture-based task may primarily target lexical recognition while still allowing students to compare meanings or use selected words in sentences. A classification task may focus on semantic clarification and systematization, yet students must first recognize the words involved. Sentence production primarily activates vocabulary but also provides evidence of whether meaning and combinational possibilities have been understood.

The framework can therefore be represented as a developmental cycle: recognize lexical items, clarify meaning, establish lexical relationships, and use vocabulary meaningfully. Feedback can also operate in the reverse direction. Difficulty using a word may reveal incomplete semantic understanding; incorrect classification may indicate that meaning needs to be revisited; and poor retrieval may suggest that associative links have not yet been established. This cyclical interpretation makes the framework compatible with the varied exercise types found in the Grade 3 *Cánh Diều* Vietnamese textbooks (Nguyen Minh Thuyet, 2022a, 2022b).

7. Discussion

The study contributes to theme-based vocabulary pedagogy by connecting lexical-semantic organization, learner development, and classroom instructional need. Its central argument is that vocabulary expansion should be conceptualized as a coordinated process of recognition, semantic clarification, systematization, and activation rather than as the simple accumulation of words associated with a topic.

This interpretation is consistent with earlier Vietnamese scholarship. Phan Thieu and Le Huu Tinh (2003) position meaning comprehension and word use within the broader task of vocabulary teaching; Vu Thi An (2015) emphasizes the relationship between vocabulary enrichment, semantic precision, and use; and Le Phuong Nga (2013) situates Vietnamese language knowledge within a communicative orientation. The framework developed here translates these positions into four pedagogical functions that can be applied to existing textbook tasks. Recognition addresses lexical availability, semantic clarification addresses depth of understanding, systematization addresses relational organization and retrieval, and activation addresses productive use.

The student results provide a practical rationale for this multidimensional approach. Nearly half of the participating students scored below 7 on the vocabulary-expansion assessment. Because the instrument was locally developed and the sample was limited to three schools, the result should not be generalized to Grade 3 students nationally. Nevertheless, within the participating context, the distribution demonstrates sufficiently uneven performance to justify targeted instructional support across several lexical processes rather than a single generalized intervention.

The teacher findings are equally important because they distinguish active classroom formats from vocabulary-specific scaffolding. All participating teachers reported frequent use of pair work, group work, or games, suggesting that student participation was already valued. Yet visual recognition support, guided retrieval, and experience-based activation were markedly less common. This contrast indicates that student-centered organization does not automatically produce linguistically responsive vocabulary instruction. A game can raise engagement while leaving semantic analysis implicit; group work can increase talk without helping learners establish lexical relationships. The framework therefore focuses less on grouping format than on the lexical cognitive work students are required to perform within that format.

Lexical-field theory provides a particularly useful bridge between linguistic knowledge and classroom activity. Semantic and associative relations need not be taught as abstract terminology. Instead, they can function as instructional principles that help students group, retrieve, compare, and combine words. This transformation is important for Grade 3 because it preserves theoretical integrity while matching learners' developmental level.

The framework also gives explicit attention to lexical activation. A word learned only for exercise completion may remain receptive. When students select vocabulary to express a remembered household activity, a familiar relationship, or another meaningful experience, the word begins to function as a communicative resource. From this perspective, activation is not simply the final stage of memorization; it is the point at which lexical knowledge becomes usable language competence.

8. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that teachers should diagnose the dominant lexical demand of a vocabulary task before selecting an instructional technique. If the challenge is recognition, focused reading or guided observation may be appropriate. If the challenge is semantic discrimination, students may need accessible comparison of meanings. If the task requires vocabulary expansion and organization, associative prompts or exploration of word combinations may be useful. If the goal is productive use, a concrete communicative or experiential context should precede sentence construction.

The framework also supports differentiation. Students with limited vocabulary can receive visual cues, sample items, narrower association categories, or more specific prompts, whereas students with stronger lexical competence can be asked to generate additional items, justify semantic distinctions, or use vocabulary in more varied contexts. Such adaptation can be implemented within existing textbook tasks and does not require altering curricular content.

More broadly, the framework suggests that the quality of vocabulary instruction depends not on the novelty of a teaching technique but on the extent to which that technique makes a relevant lexical process visible and manageable for learners.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The needs analysis involved 218 students and 15 teachers from three primary schools in one province, so the findings describe the participating context and should not be generalized to all Grade 3 classrooms in Vietnam. Student performance was derived from a task sheet developed within the original research rather than from a standardized vocabulary assessment. Teacher

data were self-reported and came from a relatively small sample.

The four-component framework is presented here as a theoretically and empirically grounded pedagogical proposal. Future research should evaluate its implementation across different themes, schools, and student populations; develop analytic measures for recognition, semantic clarification, systematization, and activation; and investigate how development in one component relates to the others. Classroom observation could also clarify how teachers adapt scaffolding to different lexical tasks and learner profiles.

10. Conclusion

Theme-based vocabulary expansion in Grade 3 should not be reduced to teaching additional words associated with a textbook topic. Effective lexical development requires students to recognize relevant items, develop sufficiently precise meanings, organize words through meaningful relationships, and retrieve them for communication.

The needs analysis reported in this study showed uneven student performance and a notable gap between teachers' frequent use of general participatory formats and their limited use of vocabulary-specific supports. Drawing on these findings, lexical-semantic theory, curriculum requirements, and Grade 3 learner characteristics, the study proposes a four-component framework consisting of lexical recognition, semantic clarification, lexical systematization, and lexical activation. Guided reading and observation, accessible semantic comparison, associative and syntagmatic organization, and experience-based use provide corresponding forms of scaffolding.

The framework does not prescribe a rigid lesson sequence. Instead, it offers a principled way to align instructional support with the lexical process demanded by a task. Its core pedagogical proposition is that vocabulary expansion becomes more meaningful when instruction helps learners move from encountering words to understanding them, from understanding them to organizing them, and from organizing them to using them as resources for communication.

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