

Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Level of Diploma Students from a Public University in Malaysia

Nor Ashikin AbManan, Noraziah Azizan, Nur Fatima Wahida Mohd Nasir

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

It has been established that ESL learners' vocabulary knowledge correlates highly to their general proficiency in English. The vocabulary size of ESL learners is seen as an essential aspect of readiness of first-year students to adapt to the university learning environment especially when English is used as the medium of instruction. Owing to this reason a study was conducted among 156 diploma level students from the faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying of a public university in Malaysia to determine their level of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in their first year of study at the university. Vocabulary Levels Test Version 1 at 2000, 3000, 5000-word and University Word levels as well as Vocabulary-size Test at 2000 and 3000-word levels were administered to seven groups of students (between 18-26 students per group) to measure their receptive and productive vocabulary respectively. The tests were chosen based on the estimates made by previous research that tertiary (advanced) level ESL learners need to have productive vocabulary knowledge of around 2000 to 3000-word families, and receptive vocabulary of around 3000 to 5000-word families in order to function effectively as university students.

KEYWORDS: Receptive Vocabulary, Productive Vocabulary, Vocabulary Level Test.

INTRODUCTION

In order to acquire a particular language, the knowledge of words in that language is very important. As stressed by [30], developing the second language (L2) learners' vocabulary is necessary to help them to listen, read, speak and write effectively. L2 learners' overall language proficiency is highly correlated to their vocabulary knowledge and as stressed by [43], insufficient vocabulary knowledge may affect L2 learning.

Study Background

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is one of the public universities in Malaysia which, uses English as a medium of instruction for both its undergraduate and graduate programmes. All courses (subjects) except for Islamic subjects are required to be conducted in English. Since undergraduates who enrol into various diploma programmes in UiTM possess different levels of English language proficiency, it is very challenging to develop an ESL programme which is effective in preparing them for general as well as academic proficiency in English. Currently, all diploma level students in UiTM, irrespective of their level of proficiency are required to take at least three proficiency level courses namely Integrated Language Skills: Listening, Integrated Language Skills: Reading and Integrated Language Skills: Writing during their first, second and third semester respectively.

Statement of the problem

Several research conducted among ESL learners from public and private universities in Malaysia concluded that Malaysian undergraduates on average have poor passive and active vocabulary knowledge [13, 27]. Due to this reason, many of them lack the linguistics competence to meet the academic demand of their studies.

Study Objective

The study was conducted to determine the level of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in their first year of study at the university to gauge their readiness to adapt to the university learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Knowledge

'Vocabulary' is defined as the body of words in a particular language and a person's vocabulary knowledge is considered as all the words known and used by him or her. ESL learners are required to have a large repertoire of English words to perform academic tasks at university level. They need sufficient vocabulary

knowledge to help them understand and digest the information they read in text books and other reference materials in order for them to use it effectively in their assignments. A large repertoire of receptive and productive vocabulary is essential when citing, summarizing, and paraphrasing complex ideas [6,12]. Productive vocabulary knowledge is also vital in performing academic tasks. The learners need to have sufficient control of productive vocabulary to explain complex ideas using abstract language, to produce clear and coherent written texts as anticipated by their faculty members [6, 12]. Thus, it can be said that vocabulary serves as fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge in university learning environment especially when English is used as the medium of instruction.

Vocabulary Development

According to [28], vocabulary for second language learners (L2) develops over time as vocabulary development goes through the process of storing information, meanings and pronunciation of words necessary for communication. Numerous studies on vocabulary development among ESL learners have been conducted. Among these studies are incidental vocabulary acquisition [3, 36], vocabulary intervention [4, 20], vocabulary learning strategies [2, 8], vocabulary assessment methods [38, 35, 39], vocabulary teaching [22] and many more. However, among the most researched topics regarding vocabulary development is receptive-productive vocabulary knowledge [34, 37, 42,44].

Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

'Receptive' and 'productive' are two categories which vocabulary knowledge has been classified into. In [34] receptive or passive vocabulary is defined as "the ability to recognize a word and recall its meaning when it is encountered". After the first encounter with a word, a learner will recognize the word receptively, then after several more encounters with the word, the learner will understand the meaning of the word and consequently, the word will be stored in his memory. Receptive vocabulary knowledge is acquired through the process of reading and listening.

On the other hand, productive (active) vocabulary knowledge is defined as the ability to retrieve a particular word from memory when required and to be able to use that particular word at suitable time and in suitable situations [34, 5]. It was clarified further in [30] that productive vocabulary involves the process of retrieving (receptive/passive knowledge) and producing the correct form of the word in written or spoken discourse. It encompasses the knowledge of pronunciation, correct written form, correct spelling and appropriate grammar rules. This process takes place while performing productive skills of writing or speaking.

In [42] the development of receptive and productive vocabulary is described as a movement along a continuum. Essentially, it is believed that more aspect of a certain word is understood as a learner proceeds along a continuum of development. Thus, it is believed that knowing a word receptively is a requirement for productively using that particular word. Furthermore, lexical knowledge is said to be incremental [29]. Research has shown that receptive vocabulary size of a learner grows incrementally and constantly over time [7]. In [40] another crucial component was added to vocabulary development as his research shows that automaticity and fluency also play a vital role in receptive and productive vocabulary.

Nonetheless, there are also a few researchers who disagree with the notion of 'a continuum'. According to [18], the main issue why some researchers have different opinions about the receptive-productive notion is that there is little agreement on the nature of its differences. There has been little consensus on whether there is dichotomic difference between receptive and productive knowledge or whether receptive-productive knowledge constitutes a continuum. For example, in [24] questions other researchers on how to decide the point at which the receptive knowledge becomes productive as he believes that the process shows an ambiguous connection between the two components. Hence, the researcher states that receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge is actually representatives of different types of knowledge and therefore cannot be a continuum.

According to [11], vocabulary knowledge can be divided into three parts which are partial to precise knowledge, shallow to deep knowledge and receptive to productive knowledge. Henriksen's three-dimension representation of vocabulary knowledge was formed and bridged from her own lexical knowledge description and Meara's two-dimension vocabulary knowledge research [11]. It was perceived as an effort to develop an integrated structure of vocabulary knowledge that is recognized by all. Despite the disagreements on receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, conclusions have been drawn that receptive vocabulary of a learner is developed before his or her productive vocabulary. Although the transferring process of receptive to productive knowledge is still vague, past research has concluded that a large repertoire of receptive vocabulary is needed to develop the productive knowledge which is vital for effective communication [25].

Vocabulary Level Test

For learners of English as a second language, gaining receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge is imperative in acquiring the language. To identify the level of vocabulary of an L2 learner, a Vocabulary Level Test should be conducted [31]. According to [16], the vocabulary size of second language learners is perceived

as an important aspect in evaluating their readiness to learn more of the English language especially for first year tertiary undergraduates. It has been determined that the appropriate level of vocabulary knowledge is the key to successful academic achievement.

The Vocabulary Level Test was first introduced in 1983 by [34]. Generally, it consists of five frequency levels: starting with 2,000 word level, progressing to 3,000 and 5,000 and subsequently to 10,000. Out of 1,000 words comprising each level, Nation chose a representative level of 60 words for the test which are based on academic word lists. Thus, the 60 words at each level are divided into 10 blocks of 6, each block containing words of the same class. 3 of the 6 words in each block are being tested which totals up to 30. Students are required to choose 3 words from the list of 6 on the left hand side that matches their paraphrase on the right hand side. The remaining 3 words are purposely included to serve as distractors [32]. As stated by [16], the Vocabulary Level Test can be regarded as a useful and trustworthy tool to determine the level of students' vocabulary knowledge. The task requires a passive recognition of words in which the meanings or definitions are not provided but also does not require the subject to know the distractors.

Vocabulary Level Test has been used in many studies among undergraduates. In [10] conducted a study among first year students of a university in Amsterdam and had found an estimated mean vocabulary size of 11,813 from the results of their university entry examination while towards the end of the year, the same students acquired 15,802 words. Apart from that is a research from [26] where they found out that semester one undergraduates from 3 universities in England showed a mean vocabulary size of 7,500 of non-native speakers, 9,833 of bilinguals and 10,091 of monolingual English speakers. Similar research was conducted by [23, 18, 41] with more or less similar results.

Vocabulary for Tertiary Level Studies

According to [38] a vocabulary knowledge of about 5,000 to 10,000 word families is the minimum requirement for ESL learners who are enrolled into university level programmes. It is estimated that university students need vocabulary knowledge of about 8,000 to 9,000 word families to comprehend written text without assistance and vocabulary of about 6,000 to 7,000 word families to understand spoken text, if 98% coverage of a text is required [33].

If this is considered a fair estimate, to function effectively in their studies Malaysian first year university students should acquire vocabulary knowledge which at least reaches the university word level of 5,000 word families.

Vocabulary Level of Undergraduates in Malaysia

The following is a brief review of related research conducted among tertiary level students in Malaysia. These studies were conducted by [21, 13, 27, 1, 14, 15, 9] among students of various fields from several public and public universities.

The first study [21] involved 441 students from the faculty of Engineering while the second study [13] involved 90 teacher trainees majoring in English as a Second Language. Both studies were conducted to measure the students' productive vocabulary knowledge to determine whether they were ready for tertiary level studies where academic performance was determined by how well they could express themselves productively in speaking and writing. It was found in both studies that the participants' vocabulary knowledge fell short of the university word level of 5,000 word families expected for tertiary studies. Surprisingly, even the under-training teachers who were majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language performed badly in the Vocabulary Level Test. The participants' scores in the test showed that their average productive vocabulary knowledge was 80% at 2,000 word level, 66% at 3,000 word level, 44% at 5,000 word level and 33% at 10,000 word level. The result is disturbing because these trainees are the future English language teachers in schools.

Another related study was conducted by [27] among 360 university students to determine the participants' receptive (passive) and productive (active) vocabulary growth over the period of one year. The study revealed that the growth rate of the participants' receptive vocabulary was 440 word families per year, while the growth rate for their productive vocabulary was 459 word families per year. The participants' average passive and active vocabulary knowledge in the third semester of their studies at the university was 1,968 and 2,154 respectively. This is definitely far from the estimate of 5,000-word families' requirement set by [33].

Likewise, in [1] conducted a study among 407 participants aimed at evaluating their mastery of vocabulary knowledge to determine their readiness in pursuing tertiary level studies. The results showed that nearly two-thirds of the participants did not reach the vocabulary level required for effective comprehension of the reading materials in English.

In a different study by [14] conducted among students of various language proficiency levels, it was found that the participants from 'high' proficiency group had an average vocabulary knowledge of only around 2,000-word families which suggested that they could probably deal with tasks requiring up to 3,000-word. Meanwhile, the participants from 'average' proficiency were found to possess an average of around 1,000-word which implies that they could probably cope with tasks which require only between 1,000 to 2,000-word. While, weak

ability learners' fell short of even reaching the 1,000-word level and could only cope with tasks which require very limited vocabulary knowledge of around 1,000-word. The results of the study among others revealed that the participants lack vocabulary knowledge, which is essential to effectively participate in the courses offered at the university. It is not surprising that many of these participants found the core subjects offered in their academic programmes as difficult and challenging.

The last two studies reviewed in this article were conducted by [15, 9]. The former was conducted among pre-degree students from a public university, while the latter was conducted among 120 first year undergraduates from three different academic programmes of a private university. In both studies, it was found that the learners' vocabulary level was only between 1,000 and 3,000-word families which were far below the minimum required for tertiary level studies. Almost all of the students did not reach the 5,000-word level as estimated by [33]. The majority of them had only passed the 2,000-word level, implicating that their vocabulary knowledge is insufficient to cope with academic reading at the university.

Based on this brief review of related studies in the past, it can be concluded that insufficient knowledge of vocabulary is one of the challenges faced by Malaysian undergraduates in pursuing tertiary level studies.

METHODOLOGY

The Participants

The participants of this study were the first year students from the Faculty of Architecture, Survey and Planning enrolled in the Integrated Language Skills: Reading course during the December 2015-March 2016 semester. Seven classes of between 18-26 students participated in this study. The participants were in the 18-20 age group during the study period and they had passed the English paper in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination with varying degree of success. They were all Malays and shared the same native language. In addition, all of them had had eleven years of formal English language instruction in schools before they enrol into the undergraduate programme at the university. The participants' general background information is represented in Table 1.

Table 1: General background information

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	68	43.59
Female	88	56.41
Total (N)	156	100
SPM Grade for English		
A	39	25
B	65	41.67
C	50	32.05
D	2	1.28
Total (N)	156	100

The Instruments

Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) Version 1 [34] was the instrument used in the study to measure receptive vocabulary knowledge, and Lexical Frequency Profile [19] was utilized to measure productive vocabulary knowledge or 'controlled productive ability'. The test has been validated and the evidence for the equivalence of both VLT versions can be found in [41].

The Vocabulary Level Test [34] involves matching of the words given to their definitions. The knowledge level of the test-takers is measured at: 2000, 3000, 5000, 10,000 and academic English-word levels. An example of the test item is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample of VLT items

1 accident	_____	loud deep sound
2 debt	_____	something you must pay
3 fortune	_____	having a high opinion of yourself
4 pride	_____	
5 roar		
6 thread		

The test-taker is considered to have acquired a certain level if he or she manages to score 24 over 30 (80%) as suggested by [41]. In this study, the students sat only for a 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 and academic-word level tests. The test-takers are given 60 words to match to 30 definitions at each level.

The productive vocabulary level was measured using Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP) [19]. This test focuses on productive vocabulary knowledge. The test is a completion-item type as shown in Table 3. At each of the 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, University Word List (UWL) and 10,000-word levels, the test samples 18 items [17].

Table 3: Sample of LFP item

Plants receive water from the soil through their roots.

In the study, the participants sat for 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 and academic-word level for receptive vocabulary level test. However, they only sat for 2,000 and 3,000-word levels for productive vocabulary level test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 shows the results for receptive vocabulary test, and Table 5 shows the result of productive vocabulary test at different word levels.

Table 4: Results for receptive vocabulary level

	2000-Word Level	3000-Word Level	5000-Word Level	Academic-Vocabulary
Total Score	4171	3644	3412	3499
Mean Score	26.73	23.43	21.91	22.49
% of known words	89.1	78.1	73.03	74.97
% of unknown words	10.9	21.9	26.97	25.03
Words Known	1782 (89%)	2329 (77.6%)	3652 (73%)	3749 (74.9%)

For the Receptive Vocabulary Level Test, the students have to score 80% and above to be considered as achieving a particular level. Based on Table 4, it can be seen that average number of known words at 2,000-word level is 1782 (89%) which means that the students have passed that level. However, for 3000-word level the average number of words acquired is 2329 (77%) which means that the students have not reached the 80% threshold. Similarly, for 5000-word and the academic vocabulary levels the students have acquired 73% and 79.4% of the words at those level respectively.

Table 5: Results for productive vocabulary level

	2000-Word Level	3000-Word Level
Total Score	2048	1103
Mean Score	13.41	7.07
% of known words	74	40
% of unknown words	25.47	59.63
Words Known	1459 (71.2%)	1189 (39.6%)

For the Productive Vocabulary Level Test, the students have to score 83% and above to be considered as achieving a particular level. Based on Table 5, it can be seen that on average the number of words known at 2,000-word level is only 1459 (71%) while the number of word known at 3,000-word level is 1189 (39.6%). The students have not reached the 83% threshold yet.

Table 6: Summary of the results

Receptive Vocabulary				
Levels	2000-word	3000-word	5000-word	Academic Vocabulary
Pass ($\geq 80\%$)	117 (86%)	73 (53.7%)	65 (47.8%)	68 (50%)
Fail ($<80\%$)	19 (14%)	63 (46.3%)	71 (52.2%)	68 (50%)
Productive Vocabulary				
Levels	2000-word	3000-word		
Pass ($\geq 83\%$)	73 (53.7%)	4 (3%)		
Fail ($<83\%$)	63 (46.3%)	132 (97%)		

Table 6 shows the number of students who have successfully achieved the threshold of 80% for receptively known words for 2,000-word and 3,000-word levels. Based on Table 6, it can be seen that for 2,000-word level, 117 (86%) of the students had passed the test while 19 (14%) had failed the test. For 3,000-word level, 73 (53%) of the students had passed while 63 (46.3%) had failed. At 5,000-word level, 65(47.8%) of the students had passed while 71 (52.2%) had failed. Finally, 68 (50%) of the students had passed the academic-word level.

The number of students who have successfully achieved the threshold of 83% for productively known words for 2,000-word is 73 (53.7%), while 63 (46.3%) had failed. At 3000-word level, only 4 (3%) had passed and the majority which was 132 (97%) had failed the test.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study it can be concluded that the majority of the participants have the average receptive vocabulary knowledge of between 2,000-3,000-word families and around 2,000-word families for productive vocabulary knowledge. In reference to Table 4, the average number of the participants' known words is around 3,652 word families. More than 50% of the participants failed to achieve the 5,000-word level and only half of them managed to achieve the academic word level which are considered the basic requirement for tertiary level studies as proposed by [38, 33]. The majority of the students have lower average productive vocabulary than receptive vocabulary knowledge. This is consistent with the second language acquisition (SLA) theory which says that receptive vocabulary of a person is larger than his productive vocabulary knowledge. Receptive vocabulary is important for reading and listening skills while productive vocabulary is important for speaking and writing.

It is also reasonable to conclude that the majority of the students are not ready for university learning environment and without intervention, the students may not be able to cope with the demand of their content studies. Thus, it is recommended that the university come out with English language programme which will focus not only on grammar but on vocabulary development as well to ensure that these learners are adequately equipped with the necessary skills to deal with the challenges of tertiary education.

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