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Receptive Vocabulary Levels of Malaysian University Students

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ABSTRACT

Acquiring adequate vocabulary knowledge is necessary for English language learners in order to be able to function effectively using the language. The study investigated the English language receptive vocabulary knowledge among Malaysian undergraduates in terms of word levels. The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) by Schmitt *et al.*, (2001) was employed in order to assess the students' receptive vocabulary knowledge at five different word levels. The result reveals majority of the students are weak in terms of their receptive vocabulary knowledge and most of them failed to reach the mastery level for all the five word levels; 40 (57%) of the students do not master the 2000 word level, 58 (83%) of the students do not master the 3000 word level, 65 (93%) of the students do not master the 5000 word level, 70 (100%) of the students do not master the 10 000 word level and 65 (93%) of the students do not master the academic word level. The findings were useful insights on the English language receptive vocabulary knowledge among Malaysian university students in terms of word levels.

Keywords: Receptive vocabulary, vocabulary profile, word levels, university students

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English language is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of primary as well as secondary schools. It is also taught at higher learning institutions along other academic courses to enhance the English language proficiency of university students, particularly the skills of English for workplace purposes. This is often done through the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) modules which are designed to meet specific English language needs of university students so as to function effectively and proficiently in their subject areas such as business, tourism, law, science and so on (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011).

The English language proficiency has become a major employability factor in Malaysia today. This is in line with the internationalisation of the language where it is widely used by communities around the globe to conduct business deals and transactions. Thirusanku and Md Yunus (2014) stress that "in recent years the

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English language has been viewed as an asset to achieve development and to acquire knowledge" (p.255). For this reason, business organisations or companies nowadays are increasingly looking for employees who are not only good in academic achievements but more importantly those who have excellent command of the English language (Ismail, 2011; Menon & Patel, 2012). Due to this fact, it becomes imperative for all educational institutions particularly higher learning institutions in Malaysia to produce university graduates who are capable of using English language fluently and proficiently in order to enhance their employability skills and increase their opportunity to secure a good job as they complete their studies (Mohd Abd Wahab & Ismail, 2014). In doing so, it is first necessary for the universities to ensure that the students have successfully acquired or mastered various instrumental aspects of the language one of which is vocabulary to enable them to function proficiently in the language (Nation & Webb, 2011).

Vocabulary is the most fundamental component of a language for which the lack of it will impair learners' capability in using the language (Read, 2000). The needs for attaining adequate vocabulary knowledge in order to gain proficiency in the language has been highlighted in the findings of numerous research studies. For example, Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) and Schmitt, Jiang, and Grabe (2011) reported that reading proficiency of learners can be enhanced significantly as they know more of English vocabulary. Moreover, Miao and Kirby (2015) found that with greater vocabulary knowledge, learners are able to produce better written compositions in the language. In addition, Solano (2014) indicates that speaking performance of learners can be improved as they attain better knowledge of English vocabulary. Furthermore, Koizumi and In'nami (2013) claim that the greater the vocabulary knowledge of learners, the more proficiently they can speak in the language.

The findings of the studies implicate the importance to assess vocabulary knowledge of Malaysia university students in order to understand whether they have acquired adequate vocabulary knowledge to be able to function effectively and proficiently in the language. It is necessary to identify whether the students are adequately prepared in terms of their vocabulary knowledge to cater English language demand throughout their academic studies and future career. To address this concern, the present study intends to investigate the English language vocabulary knowledge of Malaysian university students in terms of level.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is defined as the basic building blocks of a language which are always required in the construction of language structures such as sentences, paragraphs and texts (Read, 2000). Vocabulary relates to either single word item, word phrases or word chunks which are necessary for meaningful language use to occur (Alfaki, 2015). Nation and Waring (2002) explain the vocabulary thresholds which language learners should acquire to cater their language needs. The 2000 most frequent word families or known as the high frequency vocabulary is considered as the most crucial English language

vocabulary which learners must learn to enable them to use the language for simple everyday communication. It is extremely useful for learners to learn and acquire the high frequency vocabulary as it covers up to 95 percent of all words used in general English texts which they deal with(Gilner, 2011). However, Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) argue that instead of the 2000 word families, learners actually need to know the 3000 most frequent word families in order to be able to use the language for basic conversation.

After the high frequency vocabulary, language learners at university level need to learn the academic vocabulary from the Academic Word List (AWL) developed by Coxhead (2000). AWL consists of words beyond the 2000 most frequent words and it occurs frequently across a wide range of academic texts. AWL is used greatly in formal academic materials thus it is very crucial to be acquired by university level learners in order for them to successfully deal with academic texts used at the universities. Additionally, university level learners need to learn the words beyond the high frequency vocabulary and AWL, which Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) define as the medium frequency vocabulary. Knowledge of medium frequency vocabulary enables learners to read and listen to authentic English texts. This vocabulary should be acquired in order for learners to fully comprehend information that are in the authentic texts they read or listened to. Furthermore, university level learners must learn the low frequency vocabulary. Low frequency vocabulary is the vocabulary which very rarely occurs in general English texts but are found only in texts of specific disciplines or fields.

Accordingly, university level learners should acquire around 6000 to 9000 word families of English language in order to meet the demand for English language use at the universities to enable them to use the language independently throughout their academic studies (Dang & Webb, 2014; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Nation, 2006). With vocabulary knowledge of lower than this, they might face difficulty to cope with the level of English language at the university hence they will fail to perform well in their studies.

Receptive Vocabulary

The notion of receptive vocabulary knowledge is defined as the knowledge to understand the meanings of words or vocabulary which are encountered in spoken and written texts (Read, 2000). Nation (2001)through his word knowledge framework has provided a comprehensive explanation on receptive vocabulary knowledge. According to Nation, receptive vocabulary knowledge entails learners' ability to recognise a word as it is used in spoken or written texts, understand the word parts and its meaning, recognise the general and contextual meanings of the word, understand concepts that can be associated to the word, recognise other words which are related to that particular word, recognise collocations of the word as well as able to tell whether the word has been used correctly or not in a sentence.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Participant

A total of seventy (N=70) first year undergraduates studying at a Malaysian public university were involved in this study. The participants are from two different faculties namely the Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage and the Faculty of Entrepreneurship and Business. They were from four intact groups. Their age ranged from 19 to 24 years old. The students were comprised of 18 male students and 52 female students. Majority of the students were Malays (58), followed by Chinese (9), Indian (1), Kadazan (1) and Bidayuh (1). All of the students used English as their second language (L2). Based on the results of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which they took prior to their enrolment into the university, 5 of the students achieved Band 1 in MUET, 37 students achieved Band 2, 22 students obtained Band 3, 5 students obtained Band 4 and only one student achieved Band 5.

Instrument

As explained, the study aimed to examine the vocabulary knowledge among the students in terms of level. As such, the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) by Schmitt, Schmitt, and Clapham (2001) was employed in the study. VLT was originally designed by Nation (1990) and revised by Schmitt *et al.*, (2001). The test consists of five sections testing knowledge of words at five word levels. The first section tests knowledge of words at the 2000 word level, the second section tests knowledge of words at the 3000 word level, the third section tests knowledge of words at the 5000 word level, the fourth section tests knowledge of words in the Academic Word List (AWL) and the last section gauges knowledge of words at the 10 000 word level. Each section of the test comprises of 30 target items which should be matched correctly with their definitions. Table 1 illustrates an example of VLT item (Schmitt *et al.*, 2001).

Table 1 Example of VLT item

Target item	Definition
1 belt	__4__ idea
2 climate	__5__ inner surface of your hand
3 executive	__1__ strip of leather worn around the waist
4 notion	
5 palm	
6 victim	

(Source: Schmitt *et al.* 2001)

As shown in Table 1, the students need to match the items in the right hand column with the definitions provided in the left hand column. Referring to the example given in Table 1, the students should match "idea" with option 4 (notion), "inner surface of your hand" with option 5 (palm) and lastly "strip of leather worn around the waist" with option 1 (belt). One score is provided for each correctly defined item, constituting to 30 maximum score for each section of the test.

According to Schmitt *et al.*, (2001), a minimum score of 26 (87 percent) should be obtained for the students to be considered to have mastered the words of each frequency level. For example, if they score 26 or 87 percent in the 5000 word level, this means they know the most frequent 5000 words of English language. From this result, the students can be considered to have receptive vocabulary knowledge of around 5000 word families.

The administration of VLT was carried out during English language period in separate classroom sessions. The students were allocated one hour and thirty minutes to complete the test. This was decided upon the outcomes of a pilot study conducted before the employment of the actual test.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the English language vocabulary knowledge among Malaysian university students in terms of level at five word frequency levels specifically the 2000 word level, 3000 word level, 5000 word level, the Academic Word level as well as the 10 000 word level. Accordingly, the scores which the students obtained in each word level of the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) were analysed in terms of mean, median, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores obtained for each word level are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2 VLT scores of the students

	2000 word level	3000 word level	5000 word level	10 000 word level	Academic Word level
Mean	25	19	17	8	19
Median	25	19	16	7	19.5
SD	4.13	5.89	6.25	3.85	5.64
Min	13	17	5	1	0
Max	30	30	30	21	29

As seen in Table 2, the students achieved the mean scores of 25 for the 2000 word level test, 19 for the 3000 word level, 17 for the 5000 word level, 8 for the 10 000 word level and 19 for the Academic Word level. The median achieved is 25 for the 2000 word level, 19 for the 3000 word level, 16 for the 5000 word level, 7 for the 10 000 word level and 19.5 for the Academic Word level. The standard deviation (SD) of the test scores is 4.13 for the 2000 word level, 5.89 for the 3000 word level,

6.25 for the 5000 word level, 3.85 for the 10 000 word level and 5.64 for the Academic Word level. Table 2 shows the minimum score achieved by the students is 13 for the 2000 word level, 17 for the 3000 word level, 5 for the 5000 word level, 1 for the 10 000 word level and 0 for the Academic Word level. Meanwhile, a maximum score of 30 was achieved for the 2000 word level. Likewise, 30 maximum score was also obtained for the 3000 and 5000 word level tests. As for the 10 000 word level, the maximum score achieved by the students is 21. For the Academic Word level, the maximum score obtained is 29.

Following [24], the present study used the score of 26 out of 30 (87 percent) to mark mastery level of each word level of the test. In other words, if the students manage to get 26 items correct for each word levels, this indicates they have mastered the words of that level. For example, if they score 26 or 87 percent in the 5000 word level, this means they already master the most frequent 5000 words of English language. From this result also, the participants can be considered to have mastered all the words in the 2000 and 3000 word levels.

The study found that the students in average have weak receptive vocabulary knowledge since the majority of them failed to achieve at least 87 percent for all the word levels tested. Detailed results of the percentage of students who are able and also fail to pass the mastery level of the test (87 percent) are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Word mastery level of the students

	2000 word level	3000 word level	5000 word level	10 000 word level	Academic Word level
Above 87%	30 (43%)	12 (17%)	5 (7%)	0 (0%)	5 (7%)
Below 87%	40 (57%)	58 (89%)	65 (93%)	70 (100%)	65 (93%)

According to Table 3, the majority of the students have failed to reach the mastery level (87%) for all of the word levels included in the test. In specific, 40 (57%) of the students failed to master the 2000 word level, 58 (89%) of the students failed to master the 3000 word level, 65 (93%) of the students failed to master the 5000 word level and all of the students (100%) failed to master the 10 000 word level. Moving to the Academic Word level, a high percentage of students (93% or 65 students) were also found to fail to master the academic vocabulary. The percentages of the students who failed to reach the mastery level of the test increases as the word level progress.

In short, these results suggest that the majority of the students have very low attainment of English language receptive vocabulary, as they failed to reach 26 (87%) score for all of the word levels in the test. This is in line with the preliminary result which found that the mean scores achieved by the students for all the word levels are all below than 26 (mean=25 for 2000 word level, mean=19 for 3000 word level, mean=17 for 5000 word level, mean=8 for 10 000 word level, mean=19 for Academic

Word level). Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the students have very low vocabulary knowledge level, which is below than 2000 word families.

The results also highlight the deficiency in academic vocabulary knowledge of the students as 93 percent of them failed to master the academic words which are crucial to be known by university students.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The present study examined the English language receptive vocabulary knowledge among Malaysian university students in terms of level. The findings reveal that the students have very weak knowledge of English vocabulary as they have not successfully acquired the vocabulary at all of the five word levels. Majority of the students do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge in order to be able to use the language proficiently as at university level. Their vocabulary knowledge is far below than the expected vocabulary level (6000 to 9000 word families) which they are required to know as university students. Moreover, the finding indicates there exists a great deficiency in the students' knowledge of academic vocabulary as 93 percent of them were found to not master the academic word level. This finding is in line with what has been found by previous research studies (Engku Ibrahim, Othman, Sarudin, & Jariah Muhamad, 2013; Harji, Balakrishnan, Bhar, & Letchumanan, 2015) which investigated English language vocabulary knowledge of Malaysian learners. In general, the previous studies reveal that Malaysian university students have weak vocabulary knowledge which is only between 1000 to 3000 word families. Likewise, the previous studies found that Malaysian university students have acquired very minimal amount of academic vocabulary.

Consequently, the findings of the current study and the previous studies call for a systematic and effective vocabulary teaching methods to be incorporated into the current English language syllabus taught at higher learning institutions in Malaysia. This is to particularly increase the students' knowledge of the high frequency vocabulary (2000 to 3000 most frequent word families) as well as the academic vocabulary. This alarming situation needs to be addressed effectively as the failure to do so will hinder the students from coping with English language use at the university and subsequently impede their overall academic performance (Kaur, 2013).

Despite its findings, the current study was however carried out under certain limitations. First, the samples were rather small and taken at only one public university. Hence, the results obtained in the study may not be generalisable to indicate receptive vocabulary knowledge level of all university students in Malaysia. Second, the present study only assessed the students' receptive vocabulary knowledge according to word levels. It would be useful to also assess the students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of size or total number of words which they know. Moreover, the study did not take into account productive vocabulary knowledge of the students. Thus, a comparison on their receptive and productive vocabulary abilities cannot be undertaken. To conclude, a larger scale study which involves higher number of samples taken at different public universities in Malaysian should be carried out in order to gain more comprehensive insights on the receptive and productive vocabulary ability of Malaysian university students.

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