

## **English Lexical Acquisition of Adult Learners in Instructional Settings: Issue on Lexical Input**

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### ***Abstract:***

*This study examined the receptive and productive English vocabulary knowledge of tertiary students. Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) consisted of three tests, namely Passive Vocabulary Test (PVT), Controlled Active Vocabulary Test (CAVT), and Free Active Vocabulary Test (FAVT) was used to collect the data. A total of 360 first-, second- and third-year university students were involved in the study. The findings revealed that majority of them had very limited lexical knowledge to use English as their second or foreign language, though formal exposures to English language had been given to them for at least 11 years before entering the tertiary level. In trying to unfold the unsuccessful attempt to enhance the students' lexical competent through the present Malaysian education system, the issue of lexical input in terms of quantity and quality had been raised.*

***Keywords:*** *English vocabulary, tertiary students, lexical, vocabulary test*

## **1. Introduction**

*“Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”*

(Wilkins, 1972, p. 111)

The above quotations clearly indicate the significance of vocabulary in learning any languages. In learning English, educated native speakers of English are expected to know approximately 20,000 word families or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001). Nevertheless, educated non-native speakers of English know less than one quarter of the native speakers' vocabulary (Laufer & Yano, 2001). A solid foundation of vocabulary knowledge is essential at every stage of the learners' English language development because one cannot have effective communication without sufficient vocabulary knowledge.

In Malaysia, the issue of incompetency in English language is already a national issue. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1991), as early as 1990s, voiced his perturbation regarding the poor results of the national English exam and reckoned that Malaysia might 'lose its economic competitiveness and find it hard to progress in the industrial and technical fields' due to the poor command of English language among Malaysians. This situation is very closely associated with the first quotation above.

The failure to produce competent English users among Malaysians raises the question of the quality of the education system we are following. This paper is thus highlighting the influence of Malaysian English language education system on the development of lexical knowledge among adult learners.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Malaysia's English Language Policy**

When it comes to English language, Malaysia has excellent policies, at least on paper. Since 1990s, English language teaching policy for primary schools in Malaysia for example, clearly states that English language is still a strong second language in Malaysia. The primary English language syllabus, for instance, declares:

“In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling.” (KPM, 1995, p. 1)

English language teaching (ELT) in primary education, therefore, aims at equipping pupils with the basic English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and knowledge of grammar to enable them to communicate (orally and in writing) in and out of school for different purposes, and different situations (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2003). In fact, the English language syllabus for the primary schools specifies the aims:

“To equip pupils with the basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school.” (KPM, 1995, p. 1)

After attending compulsory primary education for six years, Malaysian students would enroll into secondary schools. The secondary education is the continuation of primary level education. The syllabus, Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah or Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSM/SSIC) was developed to suit the needs and aspirations of the country. KBSM/SSIC aimed at equipping the students to function appropriately in everyday life, when they have to communicate with people, access information and when they had to understand and respond to literary works. As in the primary syllabus, the learning outcomes are based on the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also included the teaching of grammar, the English sound system and the appropriate use of vocabulary.

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary School) the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin bin Haji Mohd. Yassin, stated that “Our goal, and the purpose of the educational system, is to equip our students holistically to allow them to succeed in the twenty-first century, with all the opportunities and challenges that this new era presents.” This roadmap, which is Shift 2 of the Blueprint, is built on the current policy, “To uphold Bahasa Malaysia to strengthen the English Language” or in Malay “Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)” introduced in 2011 (Yassin, 2013). This policy allows English to be taught as a subject in all schools and efforts will be made to raise students' proficiency levels closer to international standards. There are varied initiatives that have been drawn up to ensure students both at primary and secondary levels, of different ethnic and social backgrounds and from different locations in the country have equal access to quality education and a meaningful English learning experience.

The transformations of English language teaching and learning processes under “Strengthening the English Language” or in Malay, “Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBI)” policy (Ministry of Education, n.d.) touch several areas namely, delivery of English lessons, new elements in the curriculum, contact time for English, a compulsory pass for English subject at SPM from 2016, establishment of the standards and quality council for English, and English subject teacher professional development to name a few.

## **2.2 Vocabulary Knowledge**

In an article entitled ‘Key Literary Component: Vocabulary’ by National Institute for Literacy, there are two important skills that are associated with vocabulary development namely *word identification* and *word analysis*. *Word identification* or *decoding* refers to the ability to correctly decipher a particular word out of a group of letters. On the other hand, *word analysis* is defined as the process involved in

understanding the letters, sounds and roots, prefixes and suffixes that make up words, to enable a student to understand and use those words. Word knowledge also includes *syntactic awareness* or awareness of the grammatical use of a word, such as the part of speech represented by a word. It is assumed that students successfully analyze a word when they articulate its meaning and use it correctly in sentences that indicate understanding of both the word's meaning and correct syntactic usage. In addition, once words are recognized, students use *pragmatic awareness* or sensitivity to how words are used to communicate, to understand the purposes of their use. All of these processes together constitute students' vocabulary knowledge. Word identification or recognition without comprehension of the meaning and use of a word reveals a deficiency in vocabulary knowledge.

### **3. Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to identify the tertiary students' levels of English lexical knowledge after learning English for 11 years in schools.

To achieve the above objective, there are three research questions which need to be answered:

- a) What are the students' levels of passive lexical knowledge?
- b) What are the students' levels of controlled active lexical knowledge?
- c) What are the students' levels of free active lexical knowledge?

### **4. Research Methodology**

#### **4.1 Sampling**

From a population of 5413 students, according to Wunsch (1986), at least a sample of 346 was needed to make an estimation with a sampling error of  $\pm 5$  percent at 95 percent confidence level. Nevertheless, 360 students were chosen. Out of the 360 students, 126 students were from Semester 1, 102 from Semester 2, and Semester 3 comprised of 132 students.

#### **4.2 Instrumentation**

This study employed the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) consisted of three different lexical tests to measure the three dimensions of the students' English lexical knowledge. The three different lexical tests were the Passive Vocabulary Test, Controlled Active Vocabulary Test, and Free Active Vocabulary Test.

##### **4.2.1 The Passive Vocabulary Test**

The Passive Vocabulary Test involved word-definition matching although, in a reversal of the standard practice, the students were required to match the words to the definitions. Each frequency level of the test comprised six sections and each section includes 6 words and 3 definitions. In other words, there were 36 words and 18 definitions at each level. Although there were only 18 words at each level, Nation (1990) argued that 36 words were actually tested because the respondents needed to check every word against the definitions in order to make the correct matches. Words in each level of the test were representative of all the words at that level. In

fact, the test was designed to be sensitive to any vocabulary knowledge held by the students. Therefore, each word in the test was distinctly different within each set of words being tested.

#### **4.2.2 The Controlled Active Vocabulary Test**

To evaluate the students' productive vocabulary knowledge, two vocabulary tests were used, namely the Controlled Active Vocabulary Test and Free Active Vocabulary Test. The function of the Controlled Active Vocabulary Test was to measure the controlled active vocabulary size was developed by Laufer and Nation in 1995. It was modeled on the Passive Vocabulary Test, in which it used the same frequency bands and the same items. It elicited target items from four frequency levels in short sentences with the items' first few letters provided in order to eliminate other possibilities. The students were to provide the missing word in each sentence.

#### **4.2.3 The Free Active Vocabulary Test**

It was used to evaluate the lexical richness in free written expression (Laufer & Nation, 1995). When testing vocabulary, it was important to distinguish between how well a word was known and how well a word was used. One way to do this was by using the Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP). The LFP measured the amount of vocabulary from different frequency levels used by the students in their composition writing. The measure was normally applied using a computer program called *VocabProfile* which compared words in a text with word lists that accompany the program. A student's lexical frequency profile was the percentage of word types at the high-frequency level (2000 word family), the University Word List level and not in those levels, totaling 100%. The LFP did not show how well particular words were known, but indicated what use students were making of words at a particular frequency level. This was useful for diagnostic purposes to see if the vocabulary shown to be known on texts like the Vocabulary Levels Test was actually being used in meaning-focused performance.

### **4.3 Data Collection Techniques**

The three vocabulary tests, namely the Passive Vocabulary Test, Controlled Active Vocabulary Test, and Free Active Vocabulary Test, were administered within two weeks during three different class sessions. The tests were presented to the students as part of their normal class work.

The Passive Vocabulary Test took about 30 minutes to be completed whereas one hour was needed to do the Controlled Active Vocabulary Test. The two tests were immediately collected after that. As for the Free Active Vocabulary Test, it was treated as an assignment where the 250-word essays were to be typewritten and then emailed to the researcher.

## **4.4 Data Analysis Techniques**

### **4.4.1 The Passive Vocabulary Test**

The Passive Vocabulary Test had 72 items (18 in each level). It tested the target words out of context because context might provide clues to their meanings. The researcher was only interested in the number of words the students could understand without any clues, rather than their guessing ability. The answers were scored as correct or incorrect. Each correct answer was given one point. Since the test had 72 items, the maximum score is therefore 72. "A weak score at any level is defined as knowing fewer than 15 out of 18 items, or less than 83%" according to Nation's experience using the test (Nation, 1990, pg. 140).

### **4.4.2 The Controlled Active Vocabulary Test**

The test had 72 items- 18 in each level. The scoring is in terms of correct (1 point) or incorrect/ blank (0 point). An item was considered correct when it was semantically correct- the appropriate word was used to express the intended meaning. If used in the wrong grammatical form, it was not marked as incorrect. A word with a spelling error which did not distort the word was not marked as incorrect either. Most of the incorrect answers were non-words or existing words which were incorrect in the provided context. As in the test of passive vocabulary size, the maximum score was 72. "A weak score at any level is defined as knowing fewer than 15 out of 18 items, or less than 83%", according to Nation's experience using the test (Nation, 1990, pg. 140).

### **4.4.3 The Free Active Vocabulary Test**

In the Free Active Vocabulary Test the tertiary students were required to write a composition of about 300-400 words entitled "University education should be made free for all Malaysians. Do you agree?" The compositions then were analyzed using the *VocabProfile* program. This measure showed the percentage of words in the writing samples that came from different vocabulary frequency levels. For instance, a composition consisting of 200 word families contained 150 belonging to the first 1,000 most frequent words, 20 belonging to the second, 20 from the University Word List and 10 not in any list and if these figures were converted into percentages out of the total of 200 word types, the LFP of the composition was therefore 75%-10%-10%-5%. Laufer (1994) found that simply taking the percentage of words that were not within the first 2000 words gave a clearer indication of progress in vocabulary use over one or two semesters of university study than the full profile did. The 'beyond 2000' percentage was in fact an alternative way of calculating lexical sophistication. Since the profile always added up to 100 percent, more words beyond the 2000-word level inevitably meant a smaller proportion of the high-frequency words.

The entire calculation was done by the *VocabProfile* program which matched vocabulary frequency lists with a text that was typed into the program. For the LFP analysis to be performed, the compositions were typed into the program with the following modifications:

- 1) spelling errors that did not distort the words are corrected in order to make the word recognizable by the program;
- 2) proper nouns were omitted- they were not considered as belonging to the lexis of a given language;
- 3) words that were semantically incorrect such as wrong meaning and wrong collocation were omitted as well since they could not be regarded as known by the respondents.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 What are the students' levels of passive lexical knowledge?

Table 1: Passive Vocabulary Test Results

| Score          | 2000 Word Level |        |        | 3000 Word Level |        |        | University Word List |        |        | 5000 Word Level |        |        |
|----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|--------|----------------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|--------|
|                | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1               | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 |
| ≥ 83% (Pass)   | 6               | 9      | 21     | 5               | 10     | 30     | 1                    | 3      | 11     | 0               | 1      | 6      |
| < 83% (Fail)   | 120             | 93     | 111    | 121             | 92     | 102    | 125                  | 99     | 121    | 126             | 101    | 126    |
| Total Students | 126             | 102    | 132    | 126             | 102    | 132    | 126                  | 102    | 132    | 126             | 102    | 132    |

Based on Table 1, at the 2000 word level, 120 Semester One students, 93 Semester Two and 111 Semester Three are in the weak group. For the 3000 word level, 121 Semester One students, 92 Semester Two and 102 Semester Three students are categorized as weak. Then, 125 Semester One, 99 Semester Two and 121 Semester Three students were in the weak group for the University Word List (UWL). Finally, none of the Semester One students manage to pass the test at the 5000 Word Level; only one Semester Two and six Semester Three students pass. Those results suggest that majority of the students has limited English passive vocabulary knowledge.

### 5.2 What are the students' levels of controlled active lexical knowledge?

Table 2: Controlled Active Vocabulary Test Results

| Score          | 2000 Word Level |        |        | 3000 Word Level |        |        | University Word List |        |        | 5000 Word Level |        |        |
|----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|--------|----------------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|--------|
|                | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1               | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 | Sem. 1          | Sem. 2 | Sem. 3 |
| ≥ 83% (Pass)   | 29              | 40     | 62     | 2               | 7      | 17     | 6                    | 15     | 17     | 8               | 15     | 17     |
| < 83% (Fail)   | 97              | 62     | 70     | 124             | 95     | 115    | 120                  | 87     | 115    | 118             | 87     | 115    |
| Total Students | 126             | 102    | 132    | 126             | 102    | 132    | 126                  | 102    | 132    | 126             | 102    | 132    |

Based on Table 2, at the 2000 word level, 97 Semester One students are categorized as weak as compared to 62 for Semester Two and 70 Semester Three. As for the 3000 word level, only two Semester One students are not in the weak category. However, Semester Two and Three students have seven and 17 students respectively. Moving to the University Word List (UWL), 120 Semester One, 87 Semester Two, and 115 Semester Three students failed to get the minimum score of 15 correct answers out of 18 which make them eligible to be put in the good group. Finally, results in the 5000 word level indicate that more students fail the test- 118 Semester One students fail followed by 87 Semester Two and 115 Semester Three. Those results suggest that majority of the students are still weak in terms of their controlled active English vocabulary knowledge.

### **5.3 What are the students' levels of free active lexical knowledge?**

After analyzing 360 compositions, some interesting findings are discovered. First of all, 48 compositions written by Semester One students contained more than 90% of the 1<sup>st</sup> 1000 words compared to 31 and 34 compositions written by Semester Two and Semester Three students respectively. As for the 2<sup>nd</sup> 1000 words, 37 of Semester One students' compositions consist between 6% to 13% of the 2<sup>nd</sup> 1000 words compare to 32 compositions done by Semester Two and 51 by Semester Three students. Next, 4% to 8% of the words in 40 of the compositions written by Semester One students are controlled by the University Word List (UWL) compare to 38 for Semester Two and 65 for Semester Three students. Moving to the last level- the off-list words, 17 Semester One students' compositions are occupied by 4% to 7% of the off-list words compare to 15 compositions for Semester Two and 16 for Semester Three. Such results suggest that majority of the compositions written by the students mostly consist of high-frequency words; the use of the low-frequency words in their writing is still very limited.

## **6. Discussions**

Since the findings clearly showed that majority of the respondents failed to achieve the passing level of the Passive and Controlled Active Vocabulary Test and their writing consisted of mostly high-frequency words, a conclusion could be made that the teaching and learning approaches employed are unsuccessful in developing the students' lexical competence. This situation is alarming because the students before entering tertiary level have at least formally been exposed to English language in schools for 11 years. Thus, why does Malaysian school system seem failing to enhance students' lexical knowledge?

Before further discussion, it is better to highlight how Malaysian students normally learn English. In Malaysia, English language is treated more as a school subject rather than as a means of communication and is mostly learned in a formal classroom setting. This learning condition encourages the emergence of two practical constraints. The first practical constraint is the poverty of input in terms of both quantity and quality. Classroom English learners may often lack sufficient, highly contextualized input in English. This often makes it extremely difficult for them to extract and create semantic, syntactic, and morphological specifications



about a word and integrate such information into the lexical entry of that word. The three different types of information are believed to be represented in two components that make up a lexical entry: the lemma and lexeme. Figure 1 provides a graphic description of a lexical entry.

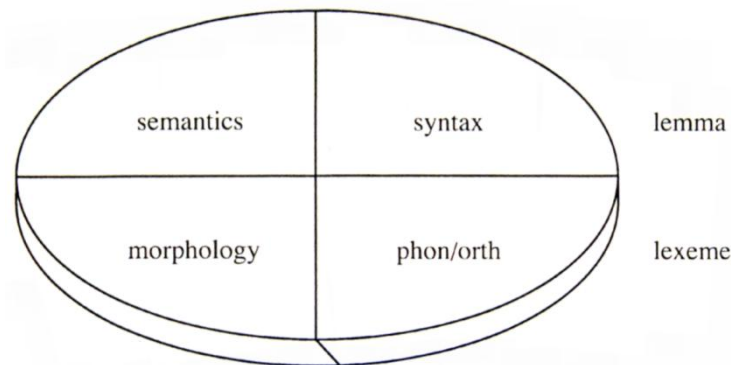


Figure 1: The internal structure of the lexical entry (adapted from Levelt 1989)

The lemma contains semantic and syntactic information about a word such as word meaning and part of speech, and the lexeme contains morphological and formal information, for instance, different morphological variants of a word, spelling, and pronunciation (Garrett, 1975; Levelt, 1989). In order to ensure the functionality of a lexical entry, the different types of information should be highly integrated within each entry, such that once the entry is opened, all the information automatically becomes available. Unfortunately, this is what the students fail to develop when English is learnt in the instructional setting.

What makes a formal instructional setting not conducive to a complete development of lexical entry? The key weakness in all the common teaching and learning practices in the formal instructional setting is the limited or rote interaction students have with the new words/concepts. For instance, one obvious practice of English learners in Malaysia is to depend heavily on dictionaries when encountering unfamiliar words. Despite the contributions dictionary use give to language learning, it does have its drawbacks in vocabulary acquisition to name a few. First, in order to attract buyers and boost sales figures, dictionary publishers tend to hold as much information and as much detail as possible in a dictionary. This can be very risky since users might find it too complicated to use and the over-loaded information might become a barrier to them (Kernerman, 1998). Second is the drawback of bilingual dictionaries. Tang (1997) reported the following teachers' concerns about the quality of bilingual (electronic) dictionaries: overly simplistic translations, outdated English, the lack of English sentence examples, and the failure to utilize frequency information as a criteria for determining the order of the different meanings of polysemous words. Another related criticism of bilingual dictionaries is that they may contribute to a narrow view of language learning as being merely a matter of one-to-one word translation (Baxter 1980). Some learners may use translation as a part of a low effort strategy designed to 'just get by' rather than deeply processing the language. Learners with poor language proficiency who rely

on translation are less able to accurately transfer L1 information to L2 contexts (Prince 1996). Thus, using a dictionary could lead to less retention of words looked up.

Another example is using translation. It provides “equivalents” in the learners’ mother tongue to help them learn syntax and lexis of the target language easily and effectively. It is viewed as the most acceptable and favorite model of language teaching which can be used as a convenient shortcut especially concerning grammar and vocabulary teaching. While translation as a meaningful and helpful means is widely used in ESL classrooms and creating benefits to language learners, some concerns were also raised by researchers. One of them is translation itself is limited because exact translation from one language into another language is almost impossible. Each language has its own structure, idiom and usage, which cannot be exactly translated into another language (Dash & Dash, 2007; Larson, 1998). A language is indeed a combination of various customs, traditions and modes of behaviors which differ from one community to another community. Therefore, literal translation or word-for-word translation sometimes ruins the exquisiteness of sentences in target languages or misrepresents the meanings of original works (Yiyu, 2015). This could also lead to less retention of words.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, obviously there is a hiccup in the lexical development of the students who spent most of their time learning English in a formal instructional setting during their schooling years. It seems that the learning environment does not provide a complete lexical entry to flourish the growth of a lexical competence due to the limited interaction the students have with new words/concepts. Some teaching and learning approaches indeed do affect the pattern of lexical development in second language (L2).

From the pedagogical point of view, the question of what is meant by learning a word is still vague. The simplest or most narrow definition is to define the acquisition of a word as being able to recognize or recall a word or its meaning. It is often implicitly employed as a working definition in many studies of L2 vocabulary acquisition. In many vocabulary studies, L2 vocabulary acquisition is often evaluated by measuring the percentage of new words the subjects are able to recognize, recall, or provide definition, synonym, or translation for. However, knowing that letters form a word or even knowing words’ meanings does not tell us much about whether one is able to actually use the words appropriately and efficiently in communication (Ellis & Beaton, 1993). Thus, future research should cover a broader definition of lexical competence comprises various kinds of knowledge one has to possess in order to use a word appropriately. Such definitions can be found, for example, in Richards (1976) and Nation (1990). Richards (1976) suggests eight assumptions concerning the nature of lexical competence. Lexical competence is seen as much more than knowing words’ forms and meanings. It also means to know, for instance, the association between a word and other words, the likelihood a word may occur in a linguistic context, and the limitations imposed on the use of a word according to variations of function and situation. Nation (1990)

similarly considers lexical competence as consisting of four dimensions of knowledge, namely form, position, function, and meaning.

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