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Words Matter: The Case of Junior High School Students' English Achievement

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Abstract: *An extensive vocabulary is necessary to survive intellectually. As such, this descriptive study investigated the acquired word knowledge of the 132 Grade 10 junior high school students in Cebu City Division. Furthermore, the study looked into the relationship of the students' English achievement as measured by their academic grades to the acquired size of vocabulary as measured using the Paul Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT). The result of the VLT showed that the students were proficient in the 1000-word and 2,000-word levels while they were least proficient in 5,000-word level and the University Word List Level. Using the paired t-test, the findings indicated that there was no significant difference in the VLT mean scores between the boys and the girls. Also, there was a substantial, significant correlation between the students' vocabulary size and their English performance. The higher the vocabulary knowledge of a student, the better he/she performs in an English class. Such a result implied that the teachers might have failed to develop among the students at least the threshold vocabulary expected of their year level. A vocabulary intervention is deemed necessary to help the students acquire the vocabulary size needed to achieve a better English performance.*

Key Words: *English achievement, threshold vocabulary, word knowledge, vocabulary levels test*

Introduction

To understand what one hears and reads, he needs sufficient vocabulary knowledge. It would be so hard to get the meaning if one does not know many of the words in the reading text. Learning is entirely dependent on vocabulary knowledge since it is a language-based activity. To know a word is beyond correct decoding. It is in knowing what the word means that measures vocabulary acquisition.

In the Philippines, achievement tests are regularly given to assess students' acquisition of level-specific competencies. For the past three years, the identified least mastered skills in all levels were related to word meanings. Identification of synonyms, the use of antonyms and word derivations were among the top 13 common errors committed by the Fourth Year students. When asked about the difficulty they encountered as they took the test, students readily responded that they had trouble in understanding what they read. A significant cause of this difficulty is their lack of understanding of abstract English words, especially those words (e.g., *freedom*, *motive*, *change*) that they see in content area textbooks (Haryanto, 2007).

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To understand what one hears and reads, he needs sufficient vocabulary knowledge. The importance of vocabulary knowledge to school success, in general, and reading comprehension, in particular, is widely documented (Nagy,1998, Scmitt and M. Carty, 1997). Similarly, to develop second language proficiency, language learners need to learn vocabulary first. Children with an insufficient amount of vocabulary knowledge will be handicapped in learning subjects in school. Researches show that poor reading comprehension can be attributed to underdeveloped vocabulary since one has to know the words first before he can extract the meaning from the reading passages.

Motivated by the premise that word knowledge relates strongly to the students' English achievement, the researcher attempted to make an investigation on the vocabulary size acquired by the Grade 10 students. This study further investigated the correlation between their vocabulary size and English grades.

Literature Review

Students' success in school and beyond depends greatly on their ability to comprehend what has been read. Reading comprehension entails mainly an understanding of words. To get meaning of what has been read one has to know a great number of words. Thus, students' vocabulary knowledge is very important in reading development. This study was premised on the following principles and reviews of other researches made.

The relationship between vocabulary and reading can be illustrated by what Coady (1997) in Lin (2003) described as "they nourish each other." When a learner recognizes more words, he/she can read more and hence by doing so learn much more words. Then the circle starts again and continues. The growth of vocabulary will raise the quality and quantity of reading comprehension. Anderson and Freebody (1981) in Lin (2003) reported the high correlation between tests of vocabulary and reading comprehension as a consistent finding in L1 reading research. Laufer (1992) emphasizes the importance of having a vocabulary large enough to provide coverage of 95% of the words in a text. It is necessary for a student to attain the adequate vocabulary level to be able to transfer their reading skills from the first language to the second language. There is a general agreement that there is a threshold vocabulary that each has to know to be able to decode the input he received.

The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) initially designed by Paul Nation is used to measure the students' vocabulary size. Nation's VLT is divided into six levels: 1,000-word, 2,000-word, 3,000-word, 5,000-word, 10,000-word (University Word List) and the Academic-Word Levels (AWL). Laufer and Nation (1990) designed the blank-filling VLT for English as Foreign Language (EFL) and English as Second Language (ESL) language learners. The VLT format resembles the Cloze test since it uses blank-filling. The cloze test uses the first half of a word with a smaller number of letters (Laufer and Nation, 1990 in Huang, et.al, 1999).

In the VLT, there are 18 items from the 2,000-word level up to the AWL level. The maximum score at each level is 18 points. If a student received 13 points at the word level, the

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student could be assumed to reach the word level. For reading purposes, Laufer in 1992, proposed that 3,000-word families were the threshold for reasonable reading comprehension.

There are threshold words, the base in which comprehension is built. Paul Nation divides vocabulary into three groups: (1) a small number of high-frequency words, which are clearly so important that considerable time should be spent on them by teachers and learners; (2) a very large number of low-frequency words, which require the mastery of coping strategies; and (3) specialized vocabulary which is of interest of learners who are active in specific professional fields.

Several factors are contributory to successful reading comprehension. Nunan (1996) in Agbay (2002) pointed out the interactive process of reading, that is, a reader has a background of what the writer's purpose and the meaning attached to the text. Good readers can relate the text and their own background knowledge efficiently. Simply put, the schema theory explains how students learn. The more he reads, the more words he learns, making him a better reader. On the other hand, poor readers read less, thus, becoming poorer in comprehension skills.

The number of vocabulary words the students acquire would depend on their conscious use of the prior knowledge, the learned vocabulary. The schema theory explains how people learn. The representation of knowledge facilitates the learning of the concept. Without the sufficient amount of word knowledge, students will find decoding of meanings very difficult. The threshold words serve as the base in which comprehension is built. It will help them attain success in any academic task at hand. Armed with sufficient vocabulary knowledge to understand the printed symbols, students will find reading a pleasurable activity, hence, they read more. As they read more they acquire more words. On the other hand, those with an insufficient amount of vocabulary will find reading very tiring and boring, hence, they read less. The lesser they read the fewer words they will acquire. The Matthew effect would affect the overall performance of the students in English.

Methodology

This study employed the descriptive-survey method of research. In order to attain the purpose of this study, there were two major points for designing the methodology of the study. The first was to investigate the 132 Grade 10 students' vocabulary size and the second one was to analyze the correlation between their vocabulary size and their English achievement. To obtain relevant information, the results of the test administered to the research respondents were statistically tested, analyzed and duly interpreted.

Results and Discussion

Overall results of the Vocabulary Levels Test

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The Vocabulary Levels Test measures vocabulary knowledge and is based on words from five-word frequency level namely, the first 1,000 words with 39 questions that measure recognition, the 2,000-word with 18 items, the 3,000-word with 18 items, the 5,000 words with 18 items, the University Words List with 18 items. Specific vocabulary learning objectives are embedded in each level. According to Nation, the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels contain the high-frequency words that all learners need to know in order to be effective speakers and writers. The highest 5,000- word level represents the high-frequency vocabulary which teachers must spend to teach. Lastly, words at the University level should help the students in reading their textbooks and other academic reading material.

The respondents from the different groups took the VLT. The responses were checked and analyzed and were shown in Table 1.

Table :1
Overall Results of the Vocabulary Levels Test

Groups	1,000-word		2,000-word		3,000-word		5,000-word		University Word List	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Group 1 (n=39)	37	94.87%	35	89.7%	5	12.82%	5	12.82%	2	5.13%
Group 2 (n=39)	39	100%	37	94.87%	9	23.08%	6	15.38%	6	15.38%
Group 3 (n=24)	19	79.17%	15	62.5%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Group 4 (n=30)	27	90%	20	66.67%	2	6.67%	0	0%	0	0%
N=132	**122**	**92.42%**	**107**	**81.06%**	**16**	**12.12%**	**11**	**8.33%**	**8**	**6.06%**

The overall result showed that 92.42% (122 out of 132) of the students passed the 1,000-word level, 81.06% (107 out of 132) of them passed the 2,000-word level 12.12% (16 out of 13) passed the 3,000-word level while only 8.33% (11 out of 132) reached the 5,000-word level and 6.06% (8 out of 132) reached the University Word List Level

The result of the VLT would give the teachers the general picture of the students' vocabulary level. Knowing the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension, teachers, then, should emphasize the importance of expanding the vocabulary level of the students by developing activities and materials to help them acquire at least the threshold vocabulary. To do this, it is imperative that vocabulary intervention be given.

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Difference in the VLT Mean Scores

It was hypothesized that there was no significant difference in the VLT mean score between the boys and the girls. Table 2 shows the difference in the VLT mean scores between the boys and the girls.

Table :2
Difference in the VLT Mean Scores between the Boys and Girls

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Diff. bet. means	Computed t	Tabled value at p=0.05 w/ n-2 df
Vocabulary Level Test	Boys	61	36.57	11.59	3.19	1.66^{ns}	1.98
	Girls	71	39.76	10.23			

Table 2 reveals a no significant difference between the boys and girls VLT mean scores. The achievement of the two gender groups was considered comparable. In this study, gender has no bearing on vocabulary development. Both boys and girls had similar potentials as they were admitted to the school, passing the same entrance examination. Although there are factors that likely contribute to the differences in the performance, still the mean difference is insignificant. The result shows that the school demonstrates a very good practice in preparing girls and boys equally for the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing world of work. However, the findings contradicted the theory of Pearson (2001) that boys engage in more aggressive behavior than girls, results in exclusion and with fewer opportunities to learn. Pearson observed that in most classes girls outperform boys in English while boys traditionally outperform the girls in science and math. There were many factors that contributed to the differences in performance specifically in English. One is the attitude factor. Girls plan and organize more effectively than boys. Girls are also more likely to bring the right materials to the classroom. Girls seek out help more often than boys when they are struggling. When teachers comment on a student work, girls are more likely to be receptive to the suggestions than boys.

Students' English Achievement

The students' achievement in English, measured by their Final Grades in English, along with the four language modes, were sought. The students' grades were computed based on the grading system stipulated by the Department of Education and of the school's standard of performance. Table 3 presents the students' mean grade and the corresponding qualitative description.

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Table :3
Students' English Achievement

Group	N	Mean Grade	Qualitative Description
1	39	81.87	Fair
2	39	83.90	Good
3	24	77.10	Poor
4	30	78.80	Fair

It can be gleaned from Table 3 that grades range from poor to good. Class time and degree of motivation in terms of the level of engagement might be contributive to the students' overall English performance. For the students enrolled in technical vocational schools (Groups 1 and 4), shop work time is longer than with students in the regular sections paving the way for the regular students (Group 2) to have more study time. Preparations for school, district, division and even national competitions also demand time, as such, fewer reviews could be done during rehearsal days. As for the students enrolled in the evening class (Group 3) their performance might be affected by the nature and demands of their work during daytime since the majority of them are working scholars.

Students come to class from the day's work exhausted. Another probable reason for such seemingly low performance in English is the lack of exposure to school activities since these are usually held during daytime.

Correlation between English Performance and Vocabulary Size

It was hypothesized that there was no significant correlation between the students' English performance and their vocabulary size Table 4 presents the correlation between the Grade 10 students' English grades and acquired vocabulary size.

Table :4
Correlation between English Performance and Vocabulary Size

Variables	N	Mean	Test Statistics		
			r	Computed t	Tabled value at 0.05 w/ n-2 df
English Grade	132	81.55	0.59	8.33*	1.98
Vocabulary Size	132	38.29			

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The obtained r-value of 0.59 indicates a substantial relationship between the students' English grades with their vocabulary size. Vocabulary size has a bearing in the students' English grades. This means that students with a wide vocabulary have the tendency to have better grades than those students with poor vocabulary. This explains that vocabulary level will have an effect in the students' English grades. English includes all the four language modes where vocabulary plays a central role. The more words the students know the better they will be able to decode the meaning of the reading materials at hand. Acquiring the threshold vocabulary will greatly aid them as they go through the learning process. A corollary to this is the findings in reading research wherein the extent of students' vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Becker, 1977; Davis, 1942; Whipple, 1925 in Lehr, 2004). This also confirmed Anderson and Freebodys (1981) in Lin's findings on the high correlation between tests of vocabulary and reading comprehension. The study of Balighizadeh and Golbin's (2010) involving 83 Iranian first-year university students given a vocabulary size test (Nation 1990) and a reading comprehension test (TOEFL version 2004) found a strong relationship between the respondents' reading comprehension and vocabulary size in understanding reading passages.

Sy's (1985) findings on the reading speed and comprehension of the freshmen secondary students of Cebu State College of Science and Technology (CSCST) pointed out that the correlation between reading and comprehension implies that readers do better in their academic studies. As students read, they acquire new words and they derive pleasure from reading. Henceforth, vocabulary development activities may be considered to build the students' word knowledge.

Conclusion

Vocabulary size has a bearing in the students' English grades. The students with extensive vocabulary have the tendency to have better grades for word knowledge is the foundation of comprehension which is vital in achieving school success in general. The better control they have over words, the more successful their adjustment is likely to be. As students develop a larger vocabulary they will be increasingly aware of what is going on. They will enjoy what they read and they will read more. New pleasures will be opened to them. Besides clarity, a large vocabulary provides variety. It is the single largest factor in writing and speaking will be greatly important to students in the future.

Recommendation

With students not meeting the threshold vocabulary expected of their level, teachers can be strategic about introducing new vocabulary to students repeatedly, by providing a rich discussion and analysis of the words, and by exploring possible vocabulary interventions that suits the level and context of the students. In so doing, students will achieve success in the use of English. It is

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hoped that every classroom vocabulary will occupy a central role in the reality of language learning.

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