Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies

BREADTH AND DEPTH OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY
KNOWLEDGE: ASSESSING THEIR ROLES IN
ACADEMIC READING AND WRITING OF
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Bachelor of Arts with Honours
(Linguistics)
2017

BREADTH AND DEPTH OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE: ASSESSING THEIR ROLES IN ACADEMIC READING AND WRITING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

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This final year project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours (Linguistics),
Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

2017

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship between English language learner's (ELL) academic vocabulary and their performance in academic reading and writing. The objectives were to determine the correlation between academic vocabulary knowledge and the academic reading comprehension and writing and the extent to which academic vocabulary knowledge contribute to academic reading and writing performance. Quantitative research design was employed in the study. Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (PVLT), Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge Test (DVK), Reading Comprehension (RC) test and Writing test were administered to 90 UNIMAS undergraduates. Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was a significant correlation between breadth and depth of academic vocabulary with academic reading and writing performance of ELL. Vocabulary depth had a stronger correlation with academic reading comprehension while vocabulary breadth had a stronger correlation with academic writing. The multiple linear regression results revealed that both dimensions of academic vocabulary knowledge contributed moderately to academic reading comprehension and writing performance although vocabulary depth contributed more to academic reading comprehension while vocabulary breadth contributed more to academic writing performance. Both breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge were rather significant predictors of academic reading and writing performance of learners and therefore a combination of these two dimensions will aid in better performance. Thus, the teaching and learning of the English language should emphasize in vocabulary building in terms of enriching learners' vocabulary storage as well as improving the usage of vocabulary in context by understanding the meaning.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memperlihatkan hubungan antara ilmu kosa kata akademik pelajar Bahasa Inggeris dengan prestasi mereka dalam pembacaan dan penulisan ilmiah. Objektif yang spesifik bagi kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji hubungan antara keluasan dan kedalaman pengetahuan perbendaharaan kata dengan prestasi pelajar dalam pembacaan dan penulisan akademik di samping untuk mengenal pasti sejauhmana keluasan dan kedalaman pengetahuan perbendaharaan kata meramal prestasi pelajar dalam pembacaan dan penulisan akademik. Kajian kuantitatif telah dijalankan dan ujian bahasa iaitu "Vocabulary Levels Test" (VLT), "Productive Vocabulary Levels Test" (PVLT), "Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge Test" (DVK), "Reading Comprehension" (RC) dan Ujian Penulisan telah diedarkan kepada 90 mahasiswa UNIMAS. Analisis korelasi Pearson telah menunjukkan bahawa terdapat hubungan yang positif antara keluasan dan kedalaman pengetahuan perbendaharaan kata akademik dengan pembacaan dan penulisan akademik. Kedalaman perbendaharaan kata mempunyai hubungan yang lebih kukuh dengan pembacaan akademik manakala keluasan perbendaharaan kata mempunyai hubungan yang lebih kukuh dengan penulisan akademik. Analisis regresi menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua dimensi menyumbang secara sederhana kepada varians pembacaan dan penulisan akademik walaupun kedalaman perbendaharaan kata menyumbang lebih kepada pembacaan akademik manakala keluasan perbendaharaan kata menyumbang lebih kepada penulisan akademik. Namun begitu, kedua-dua dimension mempunyai sumbangan yang tidak boleh dipandang ringan dalam meramal prestasi pelajar Bahasa Inggeris dalam pembacaan dan penulisan akademik. Oleh itu, pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris patut menitikberatkan pembinaan ilmu kosa kata dengan memperbanyakkan kosa kata dan meningkatkan pemahaman makna melalui penggunaannya dalam konteks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First, I am deeply grateful to Professor Madya Dr. Soubakeavathi Rethinasamy, my Final Year Project supervisor, whose guidance, comments and suggestions have significantly improved the quality of this work. She was always there to help and guide me throughout my project and without her expertise and helpfulness it would definitely be hard for me to endure through the hardships in conducting the research. I am really glad and thankful that I have such a dedicated supervisor.

I would like to thank all the volunteer undergraduates of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in my study. Without their cooperation this project would be impossible to complete. I would also like to thank all the instructors of Academic Reading and Writing course (ARW) in UNIMAS who gave me the permission to assess to their students. Without this helpful gesture, I would never have been able to recruit so many participants in such a short period of time. I would also like to thank some lecturers from the Faculty of Language and Communication Studies whom I reached for help and suggestions. Even though I was not their Final Year Project supervisee, they still helped giving me ideas and suggestions for me to improve.

Lastly, I would never forget all the encouragement and support from my family who gives me mental support all this time while I struggled in completing my study. Without their mental support, it would be really hard for me to endure through all the obstacles I faced throughout the period of conducting the project. For all my friends who helped me during my study, I would also like to express my gratitude.

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LIST OF ABBREVAITIONS

Acronym	What it stands for
AWL	Academic Word List
DVK	Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge Test
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English Language Learner
ESL	English as a Second Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
L1/L2	First/Second language
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
PVLT	Productive Vocabulary Levels Test
RC	Reading Comprehension
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
VKS	Vocabulary Knowledge Scale
VLT	Vocabulary Levels Test
VS	Vocabulary Size Test
WAT	Word Associates Test

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter overview

This chapter provides an outline of the research to the readers with the background of the study as well as the problem statement, research questions, aim and objectives of the study. It also includes definitions of terms used in this study, significance of the study to related fields and the scope of the study.

1.1 Research problem

The English language is a global language spoken across the world and also an important second language (L2) which is widely used and spoken in previous British colonies such as Malaysia (Graddol, 1997). In Malaysia, a bilingual education policy is employed in which the national language is the Malay language while English, on the other hand is the additional language or L2 (Darmi & Albion, 2013). This enhances the existence of English side by side with the indigenous languages in Malaysia, recognizing its functions as the international language used in the domains of politics, economy, media, jurisdiction, higher education and so on (Roche & Harrington, 2013; Thirusanku & Melor as cited in Darmi & Albion, 2013). English is also viewed as a vital element to achieve development and acquire knowledge (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Therefore, being competent in the English language is considered important especially in the

education domain since competency in this language can serve as a pathway to better academic achievement (Bellingham as cited in Rethinasamy & Chuah, 2011). The unsatisfactory competence in English among Malaysia learners is a concern among the educators, especially for those in the tertiary institutions since the vital role of English in tertiary institutions has long been recognised (Darmi & Albion, 2013; Rethinasamy & Chuah, 2011). In particular, English is considered very important in university academic reading and writing as these two skills are two of the most important skills in academic-bound context and majority of assignments university students need to complete is reading assignments, written assignments and coursework in English (Folse, 2004; Tschirner, 2004). Therefore, this study intends to look at university students' reading and writing performance with relation to their vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary has undeniably been considered as one of the most crucial aspects in language learning alongside with other components such as pronunciation, orthographical system, pragmatics, rhetorical modes for reading and writing, culture, spelling (Folse, 2004, p. 1) and another component which is often being prioritised and receives more attention in language teaching, grammar (Wilkins, 1972). However, Wilkins (1972) also neglected the dominance of grammar over vocabulary by stressing that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Nation (as cited in Nebbe, 1999) stated that students, instructors and researchers think that vocabulary is the most crucial factor in language learning. Learners often detect that their problem in receiving language and producing language is due to insufficient vocabulary (Nation as cited in Nebbe, 1999). In other words, a language learner has to know words to receive information in a language by reading texts and listening to others and also need to have knowledge of words in order to produce intended message and communicate

effectively through writing and speaking (Bintz, 2011; Neuman, & Dwyer, 2009). Or else, one will find himself literally "at a loss of words" (Wilkins, 1972). Therefore, a learner's vocabulary knowledge will affect one's overall performance and proficiency in that language and in turn affect one's academic skills and educational success at schools and general intelligence as well (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Santos, 2010; Vermeer, 2001) and thus it is clear why vocabulary is viewed as an important indicator for overall language ability to be incorporated into tests for admission and placement for most universities in the world (Nebbe, 1999).

In general, there are two basic dimensions of vocabulary knowledge which can be measured which are the breadth of vocabulary knowledge or vocabulary size and the depth of vocabulary knowledge (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Qian, 1998, 1999). Breadth of vocabulary knowledge is defined as "the number of words for which a learner has at least some minimum knowledge of meaning" (Qian, 1998, p. 13) or how many words a learners know while depth of vocabulary knowledge or quality of vocabulary knowledge is about "how well the learner knows the word" (Shen, 2008, p. 136) which is one's knowledge of the various aspects associated with a word such as pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, register, frequency, connotations, morphology, syntax or grammar, stylistic possibilities, appropriate uses, collocations, semantic associations and idioms containing the target words (Nation as cited in Vermeer, 2001; Qian, 1998; Shen, 2008;).

Specifically, vocabulary knowledge had been found to be an important component in reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Mezynski, 1983; Qian, 1998, 1999) because if one does not know words, it is impossible for one to understand the whole text (Mezynski, 1983; Vermeer, 2001). This is proved by the many researchers who had attempted to study the

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relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. For example, Mezynski (1983) found that a considerable amount of variance in the factor analyses of reading comprehension tests was accounted by vocabulary knowledge. From those researches, contradictive findings were obvious as some researches concluded that breadth of vocabulary knowledge is a more powerful predictor to reading comprehension such as the research of Farvadin and Koosha (2011). They reported that breadth of vocabulary knowledge has stronger relationship with reading comprehension of 78 freshmen majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at a university in Iran. Similarly, Elmasry's (2012) study also concluded that breadth of vocabulary knowledge is more significant in predicting reading comprehension performance of 93 high school grade 12 students from five secondary schools in the United Arab Emirates.

On the contrary, several researches reported that the relationship between depth of vocabulary knowledge and scores on reading comprehension is stronger than that between breadth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. For example, Qian (1998) explored the relationships between vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth and reading comprehension of 74 adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from China and South Korea studying in two universities in Ontario, Canada and he concluded that the prediction by depth of vocabulary knowledge to the scores in reading comprehension was the highest. Also, Rashidi and Khosravi (2010) examined the extent to which scores on depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge add to the prediction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' performance in reading and depth of vocabulary knowledge is proved to have a stronger relationship to reading comprehension. Although the study of the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension

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is quite common in L2 research, there are relatively little research on the specialized academic vocabulary and its roles in reading comprehension.

This study intends to investigate the relationship between academic vocabulary knowledge and writing performance of students in UNIMAS. This is in accordance to Laflamme (as cited in Brynildssen, 2000) who stated that both the process of reading and writing are similar processes that involve the production and organisation of ideas. Hence, if vocabulary is important to reading then vocabulary is important to writing too (Brynildssen, 2000). Nadarajan (2011) also stated that L2 learners always face hardships in their writings due to their inadequate knowledge on vocabulary. Studies by past researchers also found that the lack of vocabulary increases the difficulties students faced in their process of writing in a second or foreign language (Leki & Carson, 1994; Raimes, 1985) and vocabulary proficiency is the main factor in indicating the quality of a written composition (Astika, 1993; Santos, 1988). Yet, not much research has been done devoted to the relationship between academic vocabulary knowledge and writing performance of L2 learners. Stæhr (2008) studied the relationship between breadth of vocabulary knowledge and the writing abilities along with other skills which are listening and reading of 88 Denmark EFL students from lower secondary schools. His results showed that students' receptive vocabulary size was significantly connected with their writing and reading skills but only averagely associated with their abilities in listening. However, there is limited study that examines the role depth of vocabulary knowledge play in writing performance of learners.

As have been mentioned, many existing research concerned with the roles of breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge focuses exclusively on general vocabulary and its relationship with reading comprehension. Even so, the results are contradictive as they vary from research to

research. Besides, limited researches had been done to measure learners' academic vocabulary and the relationship with academic reading comprehension. As for writing performance, research conducted on the roles academic vocabulary knowledge play in writing is limited as well, which becomes the motivation for the current study. Therefore, it is essential to identify the roles of breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension and writing performance of English language learners (ELL).

On the whole, this present study thereby attempts to investigate the relationship between English language learners' academic vocabulary and their performance in academic reading and writing to answer the following research questions:

1. How do scores on breadth of vocabulary knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge and the academic reading comprehension of ELL correlate with each other?

2. How do scores on breadth of vocabulary knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge and the academic writing of ELL correlate with each other?

3. To what extent does breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge add to the prediction of ELL's scores in academic reading comprehension?

4. To what extent does breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge add to the prediction of ELL's scores in academic writing?

1.2 Aim and objectives of study

The aim of present study is to investigate the relationship between ELL's academic vocabulary and their performance in academic reading and writing. The specific objectives examined in this study are:

1. To determine the relationship between breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge and the academic reading comprehension of ELL;

2. To determine the relationship between breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge and the academic writing of ELL;

3. To find out the extent to which scores on breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge contribute to ELL's performance in academic reading; and

4. To find out the extent to which scores on breadth and depth of academic vocabulary knowledge contribute to ELL's performance in academic writing.

1.3 Operational definitions of terms

Specific terms used in this study were defined in this section.

1.3.1 The nature of vocabulary

Vocabulary, according to Lessard-Clouston (2013) is about the understanding of "*lexis*" which is "word" in Greek. Carter and McCarthy (1988) said that words are "composed of meaningful bits of language" (p. 18). To build up the vocabulary of that language, words are

needed. Therefore, according to Raphael (n.d.), vocabulary is the knowledge about words and the meanings those words carry as supported by Hornby (as cited in Alqahtani, 2015) who stated that vocabulary is the total amount of words in a language and it is a series of words with their respective meanings. Vocabulary can also be defined as a group of words in a language that an individual knows (Jamil, Majoka, & Khan, 2014, p. 32) and uses (Burns as cited in Alqahtani, 2015). However, vocabulary is not just about words as single items only as there are phrases or chunks known as "lexical chunks" which are formed of two or more words (i.e. multi-word units) but still function as single lexical units such as phrases like "Good morning", compound words, idioms and hence forth. In other words, the definition of vocabulary can be concluded as the words in a language, which include individual items and phrases which are words that usually attached and used together to convey and carry a specific meaning, in the same way as the function of individual words. These kinds of chunks are known as having formulaic sequences (Lessard-Clouston, 2013).

Likewise, Alqahtani (2015) and Neuman and Dwyer (2009) stated that vocabulary refers to the words a language learner needs to know in order to communicate well and effectively with others which are words used in speaking (i.e. expressive or productive vocabulary) and words used in listening (i.e. receptive vocabulary). According to Raphael (n.d.), expressive or productive vocabulary includes all the words a language learner feels confident using in his or her communication regardless of orally or non-orally. Those words, according to Milton (2013), exist in language learners' mind and can be readily used in their speech and writing. This type of vocabulary can be called as active vocabulary as well as producing vocabulary to express thoughts to other people is an active process (Alqahtani, 2015). On the other hand, receptive or passive

vocabulary includes all of the words that a language learner comprehends and recognizes in listening or reading, but may or may not feel comfortable and most probably unable to use them in their speech or in writing.

1.3.1.1 Definition of a word

To understand the nature and principle of vocabulary, the very notion of words would first be discussed. Cronbach (as cited in Li & Kirby, 2014) proposed a definition that considered vocabulary knowledge as the capability to define word meanings besides knowing the multiple meanings those words bring, and also a range of aspects of sub-knowledge the word carries (Teng, 2014). It also takes into account the ability to use words according to situations and contexts. Nation (2001) stated that knowing a word means having knowledge of form, meaning and use that is similar to the term "lexical knowledge" as it means the extent to which a learner's knowledge of a word is related to the form, meaning and use of that word (Li & Kirby, 2014).