

# Assessing In-Depth Vocabulary Ability of Adult ESL Learners

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines the in depth vocabulary ability of L2 learners in a foreign language and immersion setting. Using an in-depth vocabulary knowledge test, the researcher examined L2 learners' ability to recognize the various word meanings of 40 words and their collocations. Using L1 speakers word performance data for the same test, the study indicates that it is possible for advanced L2 learners in immersion settings to attain near native fluency in terms of word collocation skills for specific word ranges. The study also revealed that most L2 learners do not know the different meanings of words and this often affected the way they used a word. The study has implications for teaching and learning of academic vocabulary in the language classroom.*

**Keywords:** *second language, vocabulary knowledge, word collocation, in depth vocabulary knowledge*

## **Introduction**

This study investigates second language learners' in-depth vocabulary knowledge by measuring their ability to recognize word meanings and word collocations. It is a follow up from Qian & Schedl's (2004) study that assessed 'in-depth vocabulary knowledge' among Second Language (L2) learners in the context of developing a prototype for depth of vocabulary knowledge for the new TOEFL test. This study differs in terms of investigating the incremental levels of vocabulary knowledge of L2 learners within immersion and non immersion academic settings. The assessment framework is based on Chappelle's (1998) construct that language ability includes "both knowledge of language and the ability to put language to use in context" (In Read, 2005, p.28). In other words, vocabulary ability includes: a) the context of vocabulary use; b) vocabulary knowledge and fundamental processes; and c) meta-cognitive strategies for vocabulary use. The findings can be extended to examining how different L2 learners use their vocabulary knowledge to access in-depth vocabulary knowledge. In addition, the study has broad implications for understanding how L2 adult learners process their lexical knowledge and provides useful insight for learners' vocabulary ability.

## **Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Ability**

Vocabulary knowledge had long been recognized as central to language acquisition and use (Alderson, 2000; Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 1997). Within reading comprehension, (both in L1 and L2) vocabulary has been found to be more strongly related than all other components of reading (Laufer, 1997; Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Beck, Perfetti, & Mckeown, 1982, Laufer, 1991; Koda, 1989). As for grammar acquisition, knowing the words in a text or conversation is said to enable learners to understand the meaning of the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent (Ellis, 1994). The multiple benefits of vocabulary knowledge have in turn contributed to various interpretations as to what it means to know a word. Amongst them, Read (1989), Wesche et al (1996) and Qian (1999) contend that vocabulary knowledge should comprise at least two dimensions, which are vocabulary breadth or size, and depth or quality of vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary