

***Implementing Incidental or Intentional Vocabulary Learning Strategies:
Estimating The Receptive Vocabulary Size of University Level
English Language Learners in Malaysia***

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Abstract

The notion that we can acquire most of our vocabulary – a core component upon which language proficiency is reliant – through extensive reading (ER) is now entrenched within second/foreign language teaching. The reported benefits of ER are encouraging, specifically in the areas of reading comprehension, grammatical competence, and vocabulary knowledge development. ER on its own mainly draws upon incidental learning, but the claim that ER alone is adequate for vocabulary learning has been challenged. Admittedly, although some lexical gains are certainly acquired incidentally via extensive reading, there are researchers who believe it to be insufficient and even suggest the method to be unsuitable for those with a vocabulary size of below 3,000 word families. According to Davidson, Atkinson and Spring (2011) for instance, it seems fairly conclusive that 3,000 word families are the minimum that a learner needs in order to be able to read effectively in a language other than their mother tongue, and that the first 2,000-3,000 most frequent words may be best dealt with through explicit teaching (Nation and Meara, 2010). The present study focuses on estimating the vocabulary size of English language learners at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and hopes to provide better direction for educators with regards to the implementation of incidental (ER) or intentional vocabulary learning strategies in their respective classrooms/literacy courses.

Keywords: Second/foreign language, extensive reading (ER), incidental vocabulary learning, explicit vocabulary instruction, lexical gains, tertiary students

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1. Introduction

1.1 Vocabulary in Language Competence, Literacy Development and Academic Achievement

The vital role that vocabulary plays in language learning has long been acknowledged in language acquisition research. Hunt and Beglar (2005) stated that the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon, in tandem with Singleton (1999) who pointed out that the major challenge of learning and using a language – whether as L1 or L2 – lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the nitty-gritty of the lexicon.

Yuksel and Kavanoz (2010) noted that existing studies in the field have revealed vocabulary size and overall language proficiency to be significantly correlated. Indeed, various correlation studies have documented the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary size and proficiency in specific language skills. For instance, between vocabulary size and reading comprehension (Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002), and writing ability (Llach and Gallego, 2009), and spoken communication (Oya, Manolo and Greenwood, 2009), and listening comprehension (Milton, Wade and Hopkins, 2010).

Furthermore, Carlisle (2002) observed that vocabulary knowledge is not only significantly related to language competence and literacy development, but also overall school achievement. Studies on academic achievement done over the years have repeatedly shown that vocabulary plays an important role in many aspects of schooling and in the world beyond school. In effect, it has an impact throughout one's lifespan. Students with inadequate vocabulary knowledge have been found to be at a much higher risk of performing poorly in high school, community college or university (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997; Hazenberg and Hulstijn, 1996).

1.2 Incidentals and Intentional Vocabulary Learning

Within the framework of vocabulary acquisition, researchers concur with two major foci, that vocabulary gains are attained through explicit vocabulary instruction/study (intentional learning) and via exposure to context (incidental learning) (Shahrzad and Derakhshan, 2011; Hulstijn, 2001; Nation, 2001). Exposure to context typically occurs during independent reading and listening activities, whereby available contextual clues assist in the learning of unknown words.

The difference between intentional and incidental learning, as highlighted by Ellis (1999), is based on the distinction between focal and peripheral attention. Ellis explained that “intentional learning requires focal attention to be placed deliberately on the linguistic code (i.e., on form or form-meaning connections)” whereas “incidental learning requires attention to be placed on meaning (i.e., message content) but allows peripheral attention to be directed at form” (pp. 45-46).

Incidental vocabulary learning via extensive reading has been an area of interest for many researchers over the years, and is believed to occur as a natural consequence to being exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1989). The concept of inferring word meanings through the use of contextual clues has its share

of advocates among researchers as well as its share of critics, with suggestions that the method may be unsuitable for those with a vocabulary size of less than 3,000 word families and that the first 2,000 to 3,000 word families may be best learnt through explicit vocabulary instruction/study.

1.3 Research Problem and Objective

A lack of vocabulary knowledge has been repeatedly shown to contribute to learners' inability to cope with the four language skills, which does not only hinder them from achieving a higher level of proficiency in the target language but also adversely affects their literacy development and overall academic achievements.

It is disturbing that, despite years of compulsory English language learning during formal schooling, Malaysian tertiary learners are still lacking with regards to English vocabulary knowledge. In their study involving Malaysian tertiary students enrolled in various academic programmes, Ahmad Azman et al. (2010) found that a majority of them failed to achieve the passing scores, even at the lowest level, of the Passive Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) as well as the Controlled Active Vocabulary Test (Laufer and Nation, 1995).

According to a Bloomberg News report in 2006, a lack of proficiency in English is causing unemployment among Malaysian graduates; the MEF's (Malaysian Employers Federation) 2011 survey found that both local and foreign employers based in the nation have specified competence in the English language as top in their hiring priorities (Human Resources Online, 11 April 2011).

Malaysian tertiary students evidently lack English vocabulary knowledge and are confronted with English proficiency woes, a disability that becomes especially paralysing when they enrol in tertiary studies and when they attempt to enter the workforce. Although preliminary, it is hoped that the findings of this study will provide better direction for educators with regards to the implementation of incidental (extensive reading) or intentional vocabulary learning strategies in their respective classrooms/literacy courses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Extensive Reading and Lexical Inferencing

Simply put, extensive reading (ER) is reading – a lot. To read extensively is to read independently, broadly and in quantity, and to read for pleasure over a continual period of time (see Day and Bamford, 1998, for the specific features of ER). Reading is essentially a cognitive process which involves deep processing (see Craik and Lockhart, 1972, for more on depth/levels of processing) and is likely to result in long-term retention of information strands, including vocabulary knowledge.

One primary reason contributing to failed attempts at inferring word meanings through the use of contextual clues is a learner's poor mastery of the target language's vocabulary. According to Prichard (2008) and Laufer (1992), research has shown that learners should possess a vocabulary size of at least 3,000 word families in order to

comfortably attempt lexical inferencing, a process often impacted by the following (Hunt and Beglar, 2005):

- 1) The availability of clues in the immediate or global context
- 2) The possibility of more than one plausible inference
- 3) Deceptive transparency
- 4) The explicitness and concreteness of the clues, as well as their presence and proximity of recurrence

It has been observed that the first 3,000 word families should be learnt via intentional means for second/foreign language learners to master a working reading lexicon, assuming then that lexical inferencing during reading will become less challenging and potentially result in more significant lexical gains.

2.2 Explicit Vocabulary Instruction/Study

Schmitt (2002) noted the three main strategies of intentional vocabulary learning: studying word cards, using word parts, and dictionary use. While relatively time-consuming and impractical for prolonged learning, intentional vocabulary learning can be very useful for vocabulary knowledge development among second/foreign language learners, particularly at the initial stages; isolating and studying lexical items minimises possible word-meaning confusion and largely ensures the uptake of correct meanings.

Similar to implicit learning via ER, explicit – and comprehensive – attention to word features constitutes elaborate cognitive effort (i.e., deep processing, see Laufer and Hill, 2000) and is likely to result in long-term vocabulary knowledge retention.

Pertaining to the importance of helping learners gain control of the first 3,000 word families and the premise that effective vocabulary learning is dependent upon deep cognitive processing, strategies employed should not only channel attention to targeted words but also have provisions for learners to provide elaborations of these words.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The study was conducted at the main campus of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia, and involved 106 Malaysian tertiary students from different academic programmes. The participants were remedial English language learners undertaking an English proficiency course, coded LMT 100, reserved for those of the lower proficiency MUET (Malaysian University English Test) bands of 1 to 3.

3.2 Instruments and Procedures

Nation and Beglar's (2007) Vocabulary Size/Recognition Test was employed in the present study. The test, originally developed by Paul Nation (1983), was designed to

provide a reliable and comprehensive measure of a learner's receptive vocabulary size, and was validated by Beglar (2010) using a Rasch-based validation procedure.

The test is to some extent more demanding than Nation's (1990, 1983) Vocabulary Levels Test as the correct answer and distractors share elements of meaning; in order for the test-taker to select the correct answer, he/she would need to have a moderately developed knowledge of the word's meaning. Below is a sample item from the test:

- | |
|--|
| 1. SEE: They saw it.
a. cut
b. waited for
c. looked at
d. started |
|--|

The test was administered prior to the start of LMT 100's teaching-learning period. Although the creators of the test did not specify a time frame, the limit was set at 60 minutes (all the participants were able to complete the test within the imposed time limit). The tests were then scored and the raw data computed and analysed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, version 22.

The test covers the most frequent 14,000 word families of the English language and features ten items from each 1,000 word level. In terms of scoring, each correct answer is awarded one point whereas incorrect answers (or items left unanswered) are awarded none. The total score is then multiplied by 100 for the total receptive vocabulary size.

4. Results

With regards to the participants' vocabulary size, the results are as follows:

Table 1: Total Score and Mean

Number of participants	Total score	Mean
N=106	358,700	3,384

Table 1 indicates that on average, the receptive vocabulary size of the participants is approximately 3,400 word families with the mean at 3,384 word families. This is well below the recommended level of 10,000 word families, a magnitude which may be necessary for students to cope with the complexities of tertiary study in a second/foreign language (Hazenburg and Hulstijn, 1996).

Table 2: Mean Breakdown

MUET Band	Mean
1	3,155
2	3,275
3	3,509

The breakdown in Table 2 shows the average receptive vocabulary size of the participants according to their MUET bands. The mean for those with MUET Band 1 is 3,155 word families and for those of the Band 2 cohort, 3,275. The mean for those of the Band 3 cohort is approximately 3,500 word families.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, the study affords us useful insights into the broad field of vocabulary learning, one of the most essential areas of language acquisition – be it L1 or L2. The findings of this study have practical implications for more effective vocabulary learning, especially within the ESL/EFL context, in offering better direction for language instructors and course planners with regards to the implementation of incidental or intentional vocabulary learning strategies in their respective classrooms and literacy programmes.

Apart from considering the implementation of extensive reading only when learners possess at least 3,000 word families (and considering explicit vocabulary instruction/study for learners with smaller vocabulary sizes), another feasible option is an integrated approach using simpler texts. For instance, learners can be introduced to less complex reading materials, which will facilitate lexical inferencing, and instructed to note down encountered words that are unfamiliar or unknown to them. These words can then be explicitly and comprehensively taught or independently studied (e.g., through dictionary consultation).

Lastly, words are the very tools that we call upon to access knowledge, to communicate, and to elucidate our thoughts and opinions. It is perhaps impossible to overemphasise the significance of vocabulary knowledge; as put forth succinctly by Ludwig Wittgenstein, “All I know is what I have words for.”

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