

The Relationship Between Indonesian Children's English Vocabulary Size and Academic Success at School in Leeds, UK

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Abstract

Having a high vocabulary size is crucial for young L2 learners who study at L1 schools. As a result of the high number of international students in the United Kingdom, many young Indonesian learners studying in L1 schools face challenges in acquiring a second language and academic achievement. Previous studies on vocabulary size and academic achievement often focused on L1 speakers and EFL in home countries, but few studies discussed the topic of Indonesians studying in English-speaking countries. This study investigated the relationship between vocabulary size and academic achievement of Indonesian primary students, aged from 7 to 9, living in Leeds, UK. A mixed-method was implemented using a picture vocabulary test adapted from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) to measure ten participants' vocabulary size and six interviews with parents to explore participants' current academic achievement. The finding showed that, while seven participants reached the 1000-word level, there were only two students who had obtained the 2000-word level, and no participants had passed the 3000-word level. By using thematic analysis, interview data showed a strong relationship between vocabulary size and academic success. Although low vocabulary size might have had little influence on some participants' academic performance, it still affected students' engagement and class participation. This study contributed to supporting multilingual learners studying in an L1 school.

Keywords: vocabulary size, academic achievement, vocabulary test

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a growing number of Indonesian university students living in the United Kingdom. While the Indonesian student association in the United Kingdom noted 1,212 Indonesian students in 2021 (PPIUK, 2021), the number of Indonesian students in the United Kingdom increased from 3,095 in 2018/19 to 4,230 in 2022/23 (GSLGLOBAL, 2025). In Leeds, there are more than 413 students enrolled in universities around Leeds. Most of them are undergraduate and master's students who study at different universities across Leeds. Although the number of doctoral students is not as many as others, married individuals often bring their families, contributing to the number of Indonesians in the UK. The growing number of Indonesian families creates a unique experience for Indonesian children as they experience a transition from studying in their home country to an English-speaking country. After arriving in the UK, Indonesian children often begin going to primary school in years 1 to 4.

As many Indonesian parents commented, a concern has been expressed about their children forgetting their mother tongue, so they encourage their children to speak Bahasa Indonesia at home. These Indonesian children are speaking two languages while living in the UK: speaking Bahasa Indonesia at home with their Indonesian parents and speaking English with their teachers and peers at school. Additionally, another concern has arisen that because Indonesian students are more accustomed to teacher-centred learning, they often face language barriers that make them struggle to keep up with their peers in academic performance at school, as UK schools tend to emphasize interactive and student-centred approaches. Thus, it makes these children struggle to adapt to the new school environment. The challenges highlight the importance of providing children with linguistic resources, specifically vocabulary knowledge, to bridge the gap between children's language level and linguistic demands required across school subjects.

The more words L2 learners can acquire, the more chances they have, including children, to use the language effectively. It makes vocabulary size become a crucial component in learning a second language for students. By acquiring a high vocabulary size, students may be able to understand text, follow instructions, and engage in academic discourse better than those who have a lower vocabulary size. Thus, vocabulary size can be a measurable indicator of language proficiency, which then justifies students' academic success at school.

For these reasons, I am interested in conducting research to find out Indonesian vocabulary size, which later defines the relationship between their vocabulary size and their academic performance. Such information provides insights for parents and teachers about the current vocabulary size of Indonesian children living in Leeds and future directions in children's language development. As it is also linked to academic achievement, I am motivated to contribute knowledge to identify gaps and strengths that help to build better language support and instruction and improve academic outcomes. To form research questions in this study, a literature review will be provided in the subsequent chapter.

Literature Review

What Is Vocabulary Size?

Vocabulary size plays a crucial role in students' language learning. Vocabulary size, or knowledge, refers to the number of words that are known, and "knowledge" refers to how well students know the words Qian (2002). The knowledge of a word not only presents a definition

but also defines how that word fits into the context (Stahl, 2005), which is an essential skill to ensure the effectiveness of communication (Nguyen & Nation, 2011).

L1 vocabulary development refers to learners' ongoing process of acquiring and understanding the depth of words and their meaning, which supports learners' comprehension across all language areas (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019). Through different types of assessment, many studies defined learners' vocabulary size, measured in word family, based on their age. A word family can be defined as a base word and its related forms of inflections and derivations, such as "act," "acting," "actor," and "acted" (Hestetræet, 2018). Hart and Risley (1999), who studied children aged 19 to 36 months, found that word growth within children under three years old is still under the influence of parental involvement. Around age 4.5 to 5, children can comprehend verbally based word meanings (Biemiller, 2024). According to Nation and Waring (1997), native speakers will add roughly 1,000-word families per year to their vocabulary size. That means that a five-year-old learner will have around 4,000 to 5,000-word families. After age 5, children typically experience rapid growth in both receptive and productive vocabulary, as Biemiller and Slonim (2001) calculated children's vocabulary size at ages 6 to 11 years old (grades 1–5) ranges from 2,669 to 8,411-word families, while Anglin (1993) estimated the range from 3,092 to 7,532-word families. Moving on to junior high students, around 9,684-word families are acquired (Zechmeister et al., 1995). However, it is important to remember that vocabulary growth is not solely influenced by age but often correlated strongly with cognitive development and reading comprehension (Anglin, 1993).

For L2, vocabulary development is needed, as it is a crucial component in language learning. According to Miralpeix (2019), L1 and L2 share a similarity in vocabulary acquisition in that both L1 children and L2 learners face a big challenge to learn many target words. Unlike L1, incidental learning does not often occur within L2 learners due to the different amount of language exposure L2 learners get, which Rasinski and Rupley (2019) claim can hinder L2 learners from reading comprehension in the target language. While L1 children can learn up to 500 words annually in their school years, L2 learners need five to six years to acquire around 3,000-word families (Nagy et al., 1985). For L2 primary students, various studies were conducted in different countries to estimate primary students' vocabulary size. Catalán et al. (2006) calculated 130 Spanish Grade 6 students' receptive vocabulary size through Vocabulary Level Test in two different school setting (English as a subject and English used as communication tool), which revealed estimates of less than 1,000 words. Another study by Orosz (2009) estimated only 500 words within Hungarian Grade 3 students through a checklist test. In that test, students were provided with 120 words and asked to tell whether they know the meaning of the word or not. However, it is fair to remember that L2 students start learning the target language at different speeds, and other factors such as input, country, or gender may influence the vocabulary size test results. Thus, for L2 learners, it is highly suggested to have a high frequency of repeated exposure, learning strategies, and adequate studying time to master the target language (Moody et al., 2018).

The Relationship Between Vocabulary Size and Learners' Performance at School

Understanding about vocabulary size demands for achieving academic success may vary among researchers. The first 1000-word families cover the largest proportion of English, which allows English practitioners to estimate common vocabulary knowledge that impacts learners' ability to communicate in English (Webb et al., 2017). Several studies had shown that having a greater proportion of English vocabulary may improve students' ability in reading comprehension and academic spoken English. By mastering the first 1000 words in English,

students may have coverage of 83.25% when reading children literature and 91.06% coverage when reading graded books (Webb & Macalister, 2013); both types of coverage could go even further to 90% and 96.73% at the 2000-word level. Text coverage of 64.74%–88% on a standardized English proficiency test might be possible for students at the 1000-word level (Webb & Paribakht, 2015). In terms of academic spoken English, students may have coverage of 87.54% in 1000-word level (Dang & Webb, 2014). At 3000 high-frequency English vocabulary words, children may understand spoken English with 95% coverage (Hestetraet, 2018). Although the studies above do not mention other factors influencing students' ability in communication, all figures represent a statement that mastering word knowledge increases the chance to be proficient in English comprehension at certain levels. All figures mentioned above may set a standard for learners to acquire English words for building effective communication, both for native and non-native speakers, in L1 school setting. Without vocabulary knowledge, language production and language comprehension are impossible to achieve (Milton & Treffers-Daller, 2013). It implies that when children show difficulties in achieving academic success, there is a possibility for learners to have a smaller vocabulary size compared to age-matched peers.

Giving the context to Indonesian learners, most studies are focusing on older L2 students' vocabulary size, which indicates that studies focusing on young L2 learners are still rare. A study of Indonesian university students' vocabulary size using a vocabulary level test (Novianti, 2016) showed the result that many students had a size lower than 2000 words although they received extra hours of English instruction. Mustafa (2019) also investigated high school graduates' vocabulary size, which showed the result of 72% of 1000 words, 54% of 2000, and 49% of 3000 words. These figures suggest that it did not satisfy the curriculum standards in Indonesia. However, despite the extensive research on older Indonesian students, there is a lack of empirical data on Indonesian primary students studying in an English-speaking country. This present study addresses the gap by focusing on two research questions: 1) What is vocabulary size of Indonesian L2 primary students in Leeds? 2) What is the relationship between vocabulary size and Indonesian children's performance at school? Details about the methodology and how they answered the research questions will be explained in the next chapter.

Methodology

Coming from my research questions, which determined different types of data, my research approach used mixed methods. Mixed methods refer to a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the depth of the issue and give more comprehensive answers (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015). A quantitative approach using receptive vocabulary assessment justified a student's receptive vocabulary size, while for the qualitative approach, interviews with parents were conducted to understand learners' vocabulary learning strategies before coming to the UK and children's performance at school.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used for both methods, which selected participants based on judgment and perspective that best facilitate insight into the research (Emmel, 2013). 10 Indonesian children (2 boys, 8 girls, N = 4: 7 years old, N = 4: 8 years old, N = 2: 9 years old) who are currently living in Leeds, UK, were recruited with their parents' consent. Participants were selected based on their background, e.g., having moved from Indonesia and enrolled in different primary schools in the UK. All participants have been living in Leeds for different

periods, ranging from 2 to 48 months. As academic performance is an important component in this study, I excluded those who are home-schooled and paid more attention to those who study in local primary schools in Leeds. For the qualitative data, 6 parents of the identified children were interviewed, and they were recruited through consent forms sent to them.

Data Generation

The students' receptive vocabulary size test took place around June and July 2025 in Leeds, UK. The vocabulary picture test required children to pick one out of twelve (12) pictures that best represents the word the examiner said. There were twelve sets, which made a total of 144 words taken from PPVT word lists. Following the nature of PPVT word lists, test takers started the set based on age, meaning each age group had a different start item. Each participant should complete all 12 words in each set that were intended to become increasingly difficult without being timed, and the basal set rule was one (1) or zero (0) errors in a set. Before having the real test, participants must have a trial test to check their understanding of the rules. All students' responses were recorded in the response and errors form.

The administered words were then profiled using the VocabProfilers Frequency Frameworks (Laufer et al., 2025) to categorize the words into 1000–16000-word frequency levels. The participants started the set containing mostly K1 and K2 words, and the level would increasingly be difficult in each set. However, although naturally PPVT set lists contain high-frequency words in the beginning, there was at least one higher-level word, such as K6 or K7, in earlier sets, which would limit the students from getting higher marks because the ceiling set rule was eight (8) or more consecutive errors in the original test. It then might underestimate their vocabulary sizes. Therefore, in the modified picture test, a revised ceiling rule of 8 errors in total across all items was proposed to create space in observing students' error patterns. Once the children achieved eight errors or more in total, the test would stop. Table 2 below shows the details of how many administered profiled words in each level.

Following this, semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted after the quantitative data had been collected to “investigate such constructs as experiences, identities, attitudes, and beliefs” (Rose et al., 2020, p. 114). Because these Indonesian children are studying in different schools, conducting interviews with parents was more efficient, which suited to find out children's experience before coming to the UK and their academic performance at school. The interviews were all conducted in person, and I used a voice recorder to record their answers.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question (RQ1), each student's answer was checked to find the correct answer, which would be presented as a raw score. It was then sorted by its frequency level from the 1000, 2000, and 3000, as these levels are the most frequent words in English. The data then were converted into percentages to represent each student's receptive vocabulary size. A strong reason why word frequency levels were used was that it could be a baseline for interpreting the scores.

When considering the threshold, 12 out of 18 correct answers, or about 66%, indicates a need for additional lessons in learning vocabulary (Nation, 1983), and 80% correct answers of administered words was recommended by Schmitt to be the standard (Xing & Fulcher, 2007). However, following Guttman scalability analysis, 26 out of 30 correct answers, around 87%, are needed to acquire each level (Schmitt et al., 2001). Thus, an 87% threshold was proposed

to reflect students' vocabulary size. When the student achieved 87% of the words given, they had acquired the level in language learning. For instance, children who passed the standard of 87% in 3000 high-frequency English vocabulary words understand spoken English with 95% coverage (Hestetraet, 2018).

Qualitative analysis works with text and meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In my research, qualitative data were collected through interviews with parents. My direction derived from description to deeper analysis and interpretation. In the description, I tried to define what the participants do/think/say and how they feel/behave by setting up an interview process and transcribing data from the interview using Word Cloud Microsoft 365. Manual transcription was also conducted to ensure the accuracy of participants' responses. This analysis examined the entirety of the data collected to identify things and moments of interest and categorize it into code and theme. This analysis would find the answer for the second research questions.

Findings and Discussions

Indonesian Students' Vocabulary Size

The first set of questions (RQ1) aims to estimate the vocabulary size of Indonesian children living in Leeds. A modified picture vocabulary test was conducted which required participants to choose a picture represent what examiner says. The participants included ten children aged between 7 and 9 years old. After collecting and analysing the data, Indonesian receptive vocabulary test scores ranged from 25 to 96, which represents a quite diverse score. 7 out of 10 children had obtained a minimum of 87% or more in the 1000-word frequency level. 2 out of 4 7-year-old children acquired percentages below the threshold, although the average proportion reached a satisfactory level ($M = 80.25\%$). As for 8-year-old children, only one participant did not achieve the threshold ($N = 4$, $M = 93.75$). The average proportion for 9-year-old participants ($N = 2$) was 94.5%, which showed both achieving the threshold. Moving on to the higher word level, the 2000-word level, it was found that only 2 out of 10 participants had acquired the minimum of 87%, that is, one from each of 8- and 9-year-old groups ($M = 82.75\%$ and $M = 81.5$). None of the participants from the youngest group had achieved the minimum ($N = 4$, $M = 59.5\%$). Finally, no children had passed the threshold of 87% in the 3000-word level. Compared to older children, 7-year-old students showed the lowest average of 22.25%, while the rest of the age groups showed the average of 50% and 53%. Surprisingly, those who had not achieved in the first 1000 words were students who had been living in the UK for no more than two years.

Compared to L1 speakers, the estimates from the present study were far below the estimated vocabulary size of the native speakers in the same age level. For L1 7-year-old speakers, the estimate of 5,175-word families was stated to be the minimum (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001), while 8- and 9-year-old L1 speakers acquire 4,582- (Anglin, 1993) and 6,794-word families (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). The estimates showed that the participants still have a long way to reach the same level of estimates as L1 speakers, as there were only two students who passed the 2000-word frequency level.

Furthermore, compared to the thresholds of reading and speaking comprehension discussed in the literature, these students' vocabulary size estimates showed that while seven participants might understand basic academic spoken English with text coverage of 87.54% (Dang & Webb, 2014), text comprehension, such as children literature and graded reading with text coverage of 83.25% and 91.06% (Webb & Macalister, 2013), and 64.74%–88% of text coverage in

standardized English test (Webb & Paribakht, 2015), only two students might be able to comprehend more complex academic text comprehension with text coverage of 90% and 96.73% (Webb & Macalister, 2013). Lastly, since no participant could pass the threshold in the 3000-word level, it suggested that all participants were not at the level required for full classroom participation.

The Relationship Between Vocabulary Size and Indonesian Children's Academic Success at School

The last research question outlined a strong relationship between children's vocabulary size and their academic performance at primary school. From six interviews, four interviewees confirmed the first hypothesis that high vocabulary knowledge has a huge impact on children's social participation with teachers and peers, which had emerged as the first theme. However, in the second theme, two interviewees have commented that the vocabulary knowledge had no significant impact on their children's academic scores.

Most informants gave information that the improvement of their children's English vocabulary had a huge impact on students' engagement and social participation at school with their teachers and peers, which emerged as the first theme. Children who had a high vocabulary size on the test were more likely to be active in class activities, such as raising their hands to answer or asking questions, and to enjoy specific subjects, e.g., science. More than half of participants were recognized as active in collaborating with peers in both academics and sports, and several children received recognition like notice cards, certificates, or awards for being a good friend or communicator from the teachers.

On the other hand, for the second theme, one interviewee commented on how this vocabulary size does not affect their children's performance at school. Although it helps children to connect with their teachers and peers, their academic scores were not significantly improved, as the subject materials are considered advanced. Children may need to learn more beyond their general vocabulary knowledge to catch up with school subjects. The ones who commented on this matter were the parents who's the child having estimates under the threshold in all word frequency levels.

The "school academic performance" data justified the vocabulary size result. Participants who were considered passing the threshold in the assessment have high social performance at school, while those who were not achieving the minimum of 87% were informed to have developing progress at their school. As the findings showed that four out of seven participants (P2, P3, P6, P10) who had passed the 1000-word frequency level achieved participation awards, the vocabulary knowledge obtained by Indonesian children may positively affect their engagement with teachers and friends. These children might have acquired important communication skills, as in the 1000-word frequency level, these children have coverage of 87.54% in spoken language (Dang & Webb, 2014). By having an adequate vocabulary size, they are confident in speaking English and able to make connections with others (Uchihara and Harada, 2018). This was also encouraged by the rich exposure these students obtained inside and outside the classroom, giving them more opportunities in practicing their target language. Thus, prior vocabulary knowledge encourages students to be more confident and enhances their willingness to participate in classroom activities.

Overall, it can be concluded that the result of the analysis emphasizes the relationship between vocabulary size and students' academic achievement at school. Specifically, it correlates with

students' contribution to class activities by building positive relations with teachers and peers and affects their scores in non-English subjects. However, a few participants experienced no effect of having a high vocabulary size on their academic performance due to a lack of academic word knowledge. Thus, developing teacher skills in teaching and raising awareness of academic word use in primary school are necessary to support L2 primary students in understanding school subjects (Schuth et al., 2017). The next chapter will present the conclusion of this study.

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the relationship between Indonesian primary students' vocabulary size and their academic performance at school in Leeds, UK. In answering the first research question (RQ1), the study revealed that with the threshold of 87%, 70% of all participants (N = 10) had passed the threshold in the 1000-word level, and there were only 20% of students who had obtained the minimum in the 2000-word level. Unfortunately, no participants had passed the minimum in the 3000-word level. The vocabulary size of Indonesian students showed that although these participants have been living in the UK, their vocabulary size is still far below that of native English speaker of the same age.

The discussion also answered the second research questions. This study suggested a strong relationship between the vocabulary size of Indonesian primary students in Leeds and their academic performance. The results show that vocabulary size might affect both participants' academic performance and social engagement. However, some parents commented that having a high vocabulary size had no effect on their children's performances at school. The discussion also suggests that in children's language learning, parents and teachers should focus not only on the language instruction but also on adequate language exposure and opportunities for interaction.

This present study has direct implication for language learning strategy, teacher training, and language support for multicultural students living in an English-speaking country. As this study underscores the importance of language exposure for L2 learners, it could encourage UK schools to have a language support policy specifically for L2 primary students. Furthermore, developing teacher skills in teaching and raising awareness of academic and specialist word use in primary school are necessary to support L2 primary students in understanding school subjects (Schuth et al., 2017).

There are some limitations in this present study. First, as the Indonesian population in Leeds, UK, is increasing each year, more participants should be involved in the vocabulary assessment to ensure the validity and the reliability of the test result. The number of samples affects the test results, which also influences the conclusions of the study. Second, most studies about the relationship between students and academic performance were conducted quantitatively; however, in this present study, the access to know students' academic performance from school officially is limited, and it may take a long duration to collect the data. Third, BNC/COCA word lists should be used in the assessment to make the analysis easier. As the analysis was done based on the first 3000-word families, it would be more manageable if BNC/COCA word lists were used. In this present study, PPVT word lists were used because the test was about receptive vocabulary using pictures.

For further study, first, with a larger number of participants, further study should be conducted in estimating academic vocabulary size to find out a deeper relationship between vocabulary

size and academic achievement at school. Second, specific academic subjects at school should be specified, e.g., English, math, and social science, within a similar demographic. It would highlight differences in vocabulary demand in each subject using the AWL, or academic word list, in the assessment.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I acknowledge the use of Copilot (Microsoft, <https://copilot.microsoft.com/>) to generate initial ideas on my topic and to give simple explanations of concepts that later I engaged with in academic literature. I also acknowledge it to translate some phrases from Bahasa Indonesia to English for the transcription as well checking the grammar and punctuation.

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