Comparing Vocabulary Knowledge of Sophomore and Senior Qassim University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating vocabulary size and lexical growth of Saudi EFL students at Qassim University. The primary goal of this research was to examine the vocabulary sizes of English students at Qassim University. The participants consisted of 60 second and fourth year English department students at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. As this study focused on the vocabularies of Saudi EFL learners, the XK_Lex test was selected as the instrument of measurement. Participants were asked to complete the XK_Lex vocabulary test with its yes/no format, and data was then collected and analyzed statistically. The data analysis showed that the second-year students have a vocabulary knowledge of approximately 2000 words, while senior students know about 3000-3800 words. The results also confirmed that the students possess more word knowledge as they move onto higher years at an appropriate rate. Thus, these results suggest that vocabulary knowledge can be used as an indicator of the students' progress and academic achievements.

Keywords: Vocabulary size, Saudi Arabia, English as a Foreign Language, University

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role to comprehend the target language: "Vocabulary knowledge is a multifaceted construct" (Laufer & Nation, 2001). For a vast majority of learners, the ultimate goal of studying English is the ability to communicate effectively. Mastering vocabulary is not only crucial but necessary in a foreign language environment. Vocabulary knowledge is essential to facilitate learners' communications (Nation, 2001). Several empirical research performed during the 1980s and 1990s determined that for most of the language skills, vocabulary knowledge is a requirement (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). Previous studies on corpus showed that about 2000 most common words in the English language seem to represent from 80 to 85% of any verbal or written communications (Nation, 1990). However, in order to understand an academic text, L2 learners may need more vocabulary knowledge than this. According to Nation (2006), L2 learners are required to grasp between 8000 and 9000-word families to independently understand what they read and between 6000-7000 word families for verbal communications. Meara, Lightbown, and Halter (1997) claimed that L2 learners should gain a no less than 5000 word-families to embark on a course of study in English-medium university programs. This study will discuss English proficiency and size of vocabulary among sophomore, and senior English as a Foreign Language students enrolled at Qassim University.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the vocabulary size of Saudi university students?

2. Does the size of Saudi EFL students' English vocabulary grow as they move from second to fourth-year levels of study?

1.1 Literature Review

Knowledge of vocabulary is described as a fundamental aspect of relevant language knowledge. A learner's ability to gain adequate knowledge of English language pragmatics improves the learner's general ability in daily academic work (Anderson et al., 2013). Furthermore, the learners' reading competence in university is determined by their level of vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, a language's ease of acquisition is facilitated by the level of vocabulary knowledge concerning the respective language. The assessment of language vocabulary level and progress is fundamental because it is believed that vocabulary knowledge influences the target language ability and development (Alharthi, 2014).

Staehr (2008) identified a noticeable association between the vocabulary size of EFL learners' and the skills of listening, reading and writing. He identified that vocabulary size tests scores were as follow: 39% of the variance in listening tests, 52% in writing tests, and 72% in reading tests. Staehr's study also clearly showed that learners' achievements in their studying skills are impacted by their vocabulary knowledge.

Previous studies findings confirmed that the vocabulary knowledge has a substantial influence on reading comprehension and that students can read without great challenging when they obtained excellent vocabulary knowledge (Segalowitz, Segalowitz &

Wood, 1998). Thus it can be suggested that vocabulary knowledge can be a good indicator of academic achievement.

The English Language is taught periodically to improve students' understanding of the English language in most of the Saudi public schools (Al-Mansour, 2014). In the Saudi context, Al-Nujaidi (2003) conducted his study on Saudi college students. He first asked the experimental group to read Oxford Fact Files, while the control group was not exposed to English texts. He used the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, 2000) to identify the participants' vocabulary size pre and post the experiment. His main finding was that the reading group gained 283 words in the 3000-word section, while the experimental group obtained 48 words. Therefore, Al-Nujaidi found that a relation exists between English proficiency and vocabulary size among junior and senior Saudi Arabian English as Foreign Language university students. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the size of English vocabulary at various levels of university education, and whether or not student vocabulary increases with students' academic levels.

2. Method and Data Collection

For better communication, the participants of the study must have an adequate knowledge vocabulary essential to effective communication. Without a productive vocabulary size, no meaningful communication can take place, since communication competence heavily relies on knowledge of vocabulary (Crystal, 2013). Accordingly, the XK-Lex test was selected as the method of data collection for this study. The test was conducted on junior and senior level university students, aiming to investigate both the students' number of known words and their depth of knowledge of known vocabulary (Al-Seghayer, 2014). The participants of this research included 60 male Saudi students of Saudi Qassim University from both a sophomore and senior levels of education. The major difference between the sophomores and senior students is the number of hours each has spent being taught English in class. The senior students in this study are expected to be selected as English teachers after taking the test. The sophomores were at the end of their second semester when they took the test (Liton, 2013).

2.1 Participants

A group of 60 senior and junior Qassim University English majors participated in this study. The participants were students between 20 and 26 years of age. The participants represented two years of study, and they all studied English from elementary school to high school. Participants included 30 students from sophomore and senior years of study, and they were all Saudi Arabic native speakers.

2.2 Instrument

The XK_Lex test was selected as the instrument by which this study measured vocabulary. The test is a simple Yes/No type of vocabulary assessment. The computer-based version was chosen as the appropriate tool for this research. Students click on YES if they know the meaning of a word; otherwise, they click on NO. This test was chosen because it measures, at once, the students' vocabulary size and knowledge. It is also flexible, easy to apply, and takes a short time for participants to complete. In general, the XK_Lex test consists of

columns of vocabulary. Each column consists of English vocabulary words selected from the Nation's list (1984) and the most frequently used English words Kilgarriff (2006). To estimate participants' score, each correct choice from the real English lexical items counts as 100 marks, while 500 marks are deducted for each wrong choice to give an adjusted score.
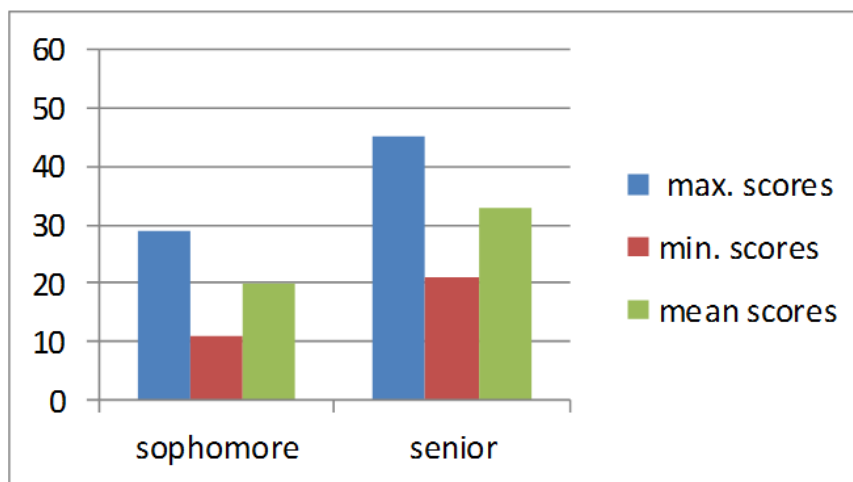

Figure 1. Summary of XK-Lex A Scores for Correct Words Chosen by Second and Fourth Year Students

3. Results

According to the research conducted, sophomore university students have a lower level of vocabulary knowledge compared to students at the senior level. For instance, the sophomore students recorded knowledge of 2000 out of 6000 significant words in the mean scores of the XK-Lex test. The senior students, on the other hand, recorded knowledge of about 3300 out of 6000 KX-Lex words. According to these statistics, it is clear that the level of English knowledge increases as students graduate from sophomore to senior university level.

According to the mean scores of the L_Lex test, as shown in Figure 1, sophomore students knew an average of 19.49% of the basic 6,000 words, with a vocabulary size of about 2000 words. Senior students, on the other hand, possessed vocabularies of 51.83% of the 6,000 words, with a vocabulary size of nearly 3000 words.

Moreover, results of the test revealed that years of English learning had a significant effect on the two levels' mean scores. The more time students study in university, the better the chances are that they might learn new lexical items from different word levels. The L_Lex test results have shown that students' vocabulary sizes increase with years of English study.

3.1 Discussion of Results

This study set out to explore vocabulary size and growth among a selected sample of sophomore and senior students at Qassim University. The general results of the study reveal that higher level students had larger vocabulary size than students from a lower level. The difference in vocabulary size between students from various levels was found to be massive. In fact, the mean scores suggest that sophomore students can gain vocabulary with exposure

to academic words throughout the years they spend in university. The results of the vocabulary level test demonstrate that students with more English learning performed better on the test. The findings also reveal that sophomore students when starting their study at the university generally know from about 1650 to 2000 words in English. This number of vocabulary is expected between 3000 and 3600 English words when they are about to be graduated.

University level English majors are expected to be trained enough to embark on teaching English to Saudi students from different stages in the public schools. It can be claimed that students with high level of English knowledge are more likely to become effective English teachers. However, when these learners are not fluent, this will require considerable support and continued language enhancement if they are willing to become successful teachers. It can be said that in-service training could support these learners, and would assist to promote English levels in their school.

The analyzed data also reveals that vocabulary knowledge of Saudi students increases as they proceed to higher years of study. It shows that the rate of vocabulary knowledge rises from the second year to the fourth year. The second-year participants have vocabularies around 1500 to 2000 words, while senior year vocabulary level is as high as 3000-3800 words. Thus, the size of the vocabulary of Saudi university students, also using XK_Lex, comes up with a range of 1650 to 2000 words for the low-level group, and between 3000 and 3800 words for the senior students. Theoretically, this should shed light on the future of Saudi's EFL.

4. Conclusion

This research was performed to examine the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and educational accomplishment for Saudi English majors in a Saudi University. The results provided in this research recommend that the XK_Lex test (Milton & Al-Masrai, 2009) to measure vocabulary knowledge proved to be a reliable indicator of learners' educational accomplishment. The results reveal that a minimum of 5000 words and above is a requirement for L2 students to understand the academic text. Falling behind this number may jeopardize the learner's progress and hinder him from understanding academic texts. As shown in the above results, it is possible to determine accurate proper estimates of vocabulary knowledge levels among Saudi University students. Most of these students make remarkable progress acquiring English vocabulary as they advance through university. Once a teacher can identify the type and size of his/her student's vocabulary, he/she should enhance and implement appropriate methods to improve the student's vocabulary levels for more efficient learning progress.

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