

In the Name

of

Allah



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EXAMINING THE VOCABULARY LOAD
OF THE PRE-UNIVERSITY ENGLISH
TEXTBOOK

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Dedicated To My mother

And

My late Father

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ABSTRACT

Examining the Vocabulary Load of the Pre-university English Textbook

By

Mahmood Dorahaki

Researchers all agree that the main prerequisite for reading comprehension is having enough vocabulary. It is reported that Iranian students experience many difficulties reading texts in their textbooks. The present study was an attempt to examine the vocabulary load of the pre-university English textbook used in Iran's educational system and, at the same time, assessed the vocabulary knowledge of those students who intended to study this textbook. In order to evaluate the vocabulary knowledge of students, 464 students, both male and female, studying in three branches of humanities, natural science and mathematics, sat for the 2000 word vocabulary level test at the beginning of the school year. The students were from three provinces, Bushehr, Fars, and Tehran as a representation of the whole country. Analyzing texts in pre-university textbook using RANGE program indicated that in order to comprehend the texts, taking the 98% threshold as the base, students are required to know not only words from 2000 high frequency words, but also academic words, and in some cases some low frequent words. On the other hand, results from vocabulary level test showed that students participating in the study did not possess sufficient vocabulary knowledge in order to comprehend texts. There was no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their vocabulary knowledge. However, math students performed better than the other two groups on the vocabulary level test. On average, students had a vocabulary knowledge of far below 2000 words. The results would be of much interest to stakeholders, especially, teachers and curriculum developers.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS

BNC

C2

CPE

EFL

ELT

ESL

GSL

L1

L2

MA

PhD

REFERNCES

British national corpus

The mastery level of Common
European Framework of
Reference for languages

Certificate of proficiency in
English

English as a foreign language

English language teaching

English as a second language

General Service List

First language

Second language

Master of arts

Doctor of philosophy

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.0. Introduction

This chapter includes four parts: the first part, generally, deals with the importance of vocabulary in both communication and in ESL and EFL learning and teaching. Second, the theoretical framework of the study will be discussed, and then the research problem is stated followed by the objectives and significance of the study.

1.1 Preliminaries

Words are the basic building blocks of language, units of meaning from which larger structures such as sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts are formed. Vocabulary has always been an essential element of language teaching, and after a long period of relative neglect, it is now widely recognized as such. This has partly been due to a period of sustained attention and research which picked up momentum in the early 1990s. In recent years, second language vocabulary acquisition has become an increasingly interesting topic of discussion for researchers, teachers, curriculum designers, theorists, and others involved in second language learning, and a number of influential books

focusing on vocabulary were published (Nation, 1990, 2001; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Folse, 2004). At the same time, research articles focusing on vocabulary issues appeared with regularity. Rivers (1983 cited in Nunan, 1991) considered knowing adequate vocabulary as the most important factor in communication and believed that one might not be able to use the structures learned for comprehensible communication without having a good command of vocabulary. Lewis (1993 cited in Olga, 2001) maintained that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical items. Research has shown that lexical errors tend to impede comprehension more than grammatical errors, and native speaker judges tend to rate lexical errors as more serious than grammatical errors (Ellis, 1994). So some researchers suggested an integration of the communicative approach with a focus on lexis (Lewis, 1993 cited in Grove, 1994). Focusing on vocabulary is so important that Coady and Huckin (1997) considered lexical competence as the centre of communicative competence. Moreover, Weigand (1998) claimed that “to learn a language means to know how words are used and what utterances are used in specific situations” (p.44). Several approaches to language learning including *The Lexical Syllabus* (Willis, 1990), *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching* (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), and *The Lexical Approach* (Lewis, 1993) have been proposed that view vocabulary and lexical units as central in language learning and teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.132). Lexical approaches in language teaching seek to develop proposals for syllabus design and language teaching founded on a view of language in which lexis plays the central role.

DeCarrico (2001) stressed that vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second or foreign; although it has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching. Jullian (2000) also

agreed that lexical knowledge is very important because shortage of words can face learners with two problems: on the reception side, they fail to understand the words which fall just a little outside ordinary language, and on the production side, they produce very simple utterances and therefore can not convey different emotional loads or express shades of intensity or connotations.

Second language learners are typically conscious of the extent to which limitations in their vocabulary knowledge hamper their ability to communicate effectively in the target language, since lexical items carry the basic information load of the meanings they wish to comprehend and express (Read, 2004) and that is why many learners see second language acquisition as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary and hence, devote a great deal of time to memorizing lists of L2 words and rely on their bilingual dictionaries as a basic communicative resource (Read, 2000). This gives vocabulary study a salience for learners that may be lacking in the acquisition of other features of the language system. Recent research (Nation, 2006) showing learners need to know 98% of the words in written or spoken discourse in order to understand it well verifies the key role vocabulary plays in the language.

Not only researchers but also language teachers have paid special attention to vocabulary. Candlin et al. (1988 cited in Knight, 1994) pointed out "the study of vocabulary is at the heart of language teaching in terms of the organization of syllabuses, the evaluation of learners' performance, and the provision of learning resources" (p. 285). Fowle (2002) believed that vocabulary learning should be central to the language program, and language teachers should help students develop the necessary skills for processing and learning new lexical items. Learning vocabulary causes major problems for a foreign language student, and it is probably the most difficult aspect of foreign language instruction because of the inherent complexities of the task and the great differences in the attitudes of learners. Channel (1981) clarified these

lexical problems; first, the learner knows the basic meaning of the word but does not know its collocations; second, he assumes the distribution of a word is the same as that of the translation equivalent (native language interference); third, he overuses a few general items which he is sure of, which results in a flat, uninteresting style, and failure to express the variety of ideas he wants to communicate; finally, the learner does not realize the potential of the words he knows. This may lead to insufficient generalization.

Teachers usually use different methods to teach vocabulary in classrooms. For example, Carter (2001) believed that teachers could help learners in vocabulary learning explicitly by means of paired translation equivalents, word lists and in variously related semantic sets. They can also help learners by more indirect or implicit means, such as exposing learners to words in the context of reading real texts. Nation (2002) believed in a systematic approach to vocabulary instruction. He stated that one should focus on vocabulary as a part of the design of communicative task and argued that vocabulary teaching should be integrated into listening, speaking, reading, and writing, i.e. vocabulary can be acquired by receiving meaning-focused input through reading and listening, through meaning-focused-output by speaking and writing, through fluency development and through language-focused instruction. So he believed that not only reading but all the other skills could be important for learning new words. Hunt and Beglar (2002) contended that teachers should develop exercises that deepen learners' knowledge of words like sorting lists of words and deciding on their categorizers, making semantic maps with lists provided either by the teacher, or the learners, generating derivations, inflections, synonyms and antonyms of a word, drawing tree diagrams which show the relationships between superordinates, coordinates, and specific examples, identifying associated words, combining phrases from several columns, matching parts of collocations using two columns,

completing collocations as a cloze activity and playing collocation crossword puzzles. But, of course, one should not forget that each of these methods could be implemented with certain students in specific situations.

1.2. Theoretical framework

The majority of pieces of research into what vocabulary will provide the best return for learning have been frequency counts, which have presented lists of the most frequent and widely used words of a language (Nation & Newton, 1997). A convenient division for the levels of vocabulary is provided in Nation (1990) based on written academic test. Table 1.1 presents this division.

Table 1.1: Frequency band of English words

Level	Number of words	Text coverage %
High-frequency words	2,000	87
Academic vocabulary	800	8
Technical vocabulary	2,000	3
Low-frequency words	123,000	2
Total	128000	100

Many researchers (see, e.g., Nation, 2001) advocate that learners should initially be taught a large productive vocabulary of at least two thousand words. The theoretical framework of this study uses this perspective. That is, learners should first learn the high frequency words and should not be overloaded with other words. Nation and Newton (1997) believe that the 2000 high frequency words of English should receive basic attention because without these it is not possible to use English in any normal way. Nation and Kyongho (1995)

present evidence that counting 2000 most frequent words of English as the highest frequent words is still the best decision for learners going on to academic study. Nation (2001, p.14) is in favor of 2000 word level by saying that “usually the 2000 word level has been set as the most suitable limit for high frequency words.” He maintains that due to the frequency, coverage, and range of these words, teachers and learners should spend a lot of time on them. There is plenty of evidence that 2000 words is an appropriate size for list of high-frequency words (Nation & Meara, 2002).

Given the importance of 2000 most frequent words, the EFL context in Iran is no exception. On the one hand, it is assumed that students should learn and know those most useful and frequent words in English during their school years, and before entering university so that they will be well-prepared to satisfy their academic needs and handle their academic texts with more ease. On the other hand, the assumption is that in the selection of texts chosen for the pre-university textbook, the students’ level of vocabulary knowledge should be taken into consideration. In other words, passages in the text-book should reinforce learning the most frequent words, and at the same time, be user-friendly texts in terms of text coverage so that they assist teachers in teaching students to read, as the main objective of the course, and do not deter students from reading with pleasure.

1.3. Statement of the problem

In line with the points mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the problem is that Iranian students in schools, especially in pre-university centers, are reported to be usually overwhelmed with the texts they encounter in their

textbooks and have difficulty reading and comprehending the passages. The vocabulary is the key factor in comprehending the texts and researchers believe that there is a language threshold for reading comprehension, that is students should know 95-98% of the words in a passage so that they could manage deciphering the meaning of the text. It is hypothesized that maybe the students lack enough vocabulary knowledge or the books demand a wide range of vocabulary beyond the students' expected level. Examining the vocabulary load of English text-books at high school level is a relatively unexplored area in Iran. Moreover, no study has been reported on assessing the vocabulary size of the Iranian students as EFL learners.

1.4. Objectives of the study

This study follows two objectives: the first one is to examine the vocabulary load of the pre-university English textbook and the second, to assess the students' vocabulary knowledge. Further, some tentative suggestions and guidelines for determining the difficulty students will have with the vocabulary they meet in their pre-university English textbook will be provided. The study seeks to answer the following research questions.

- 1- What is the level of vocabulary in pre-university English textbook as compared with the word frequency lists?
- 2- How many words do pre-university students know? And based on this assessment, what burden can we predict for students in terms of new vocabulary?
- 3- How can student's knowledge of vocabulary in three branches of mathematics, natural sciences, or humanities be compared? Which of the three

groups of students, mathematics, natural sciences, or humanities know more words?

4- How does the textbook attempt to aid students in learning the large amount of new vocabulary they will encounter? How can we classify the activities and exercises in terms of vocabulary learning?

1.5. Significance of the study

Knowing enough vocabulary, as mentioned before, is very important in communicating in a language. In fact, effective communication and fluency in using language rely mainly on the possession of an adequate and appropriate vocabulary (Vermeer, 1992 cited in Prince, 1996). So vocabulary learning is considered to be the most important aspect of foreign language learning, and considering the students' difficulties in this aspect of language, teachers should put enough emphasis on teaching them by applying effective techniques of vocabulary instruction. Assessing the vocabulary knowledge of students and at the same time examining the vocabulary load of the text-books in terms of the text coverage to see what it demands from students can help detect the difficulties students meet reading their English text-books.

Through the present research, the texts in terms of their vocabulary load will be examined, and the students' vocabulary size will be assessed. It will be argued whether the pre-university English text-book placed a heavy vocabulary burden on students or not. In other words, the texts will be analyzed to see how much vocabulary is needed on the part of the students to comprehend them. On the other hand, it would become clear whether the students possess enough vocabulary, and they have reached the threshold level required for