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## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE RECEPTIVE VOCABULARY PROFILE: A CASE OF NOVICE BUSINESS UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

<sup>1</sup>Nor Hazwani Munirah Lateh, <sup>2</sup>Sarimah Shamsudin & <sup>\*3</sup>Abdul Halim Abdul Raof

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Language Studies and Generic Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan,  
16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi  
Malaysia, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi  
Malaysia, 81300 Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

\*Corresponding author: [m-halim@utm.my](mailto:m-halim@utm.my)

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### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the challenges for undergraduate students is coping with the demand for English language use at universities. Generally, vocabulary knowledge of learners affects how well learners can function in the language, whereby better vocabulary attainment enables more effective use of the language. Thus, it is vital to understand the vocabulary ability of university students to ensure that their overall English language proficiency could be enhanced. This study explores the receptive vocabulary profile of 35 novice business undergraduates at a public university in Malaysia. The profile was explored in terms of size and level. Two tests were administered -- the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) and Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001). In terms of size, the results indicate the average was 2971 word families (the maximum known was 3800). This is in line with their vocabulary level which reveals 97% of the students did not reach the mastery level of 3000 word family level i.e.*

*have not acquired adequate vocabulary to be able to use the language. The study offers insights into the profile of receptive vocabulary of novice undergraduate students which could be used to enhance vocabulary teaching and learning at universities.*

**Keywords:** Business undergraduates, receptive vocabulary profile, vocabulary level, vocabulary size, word families

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The significance of vocabulary to second language acquisition has been a topic of broad discussions and wide-ranging research in the last couple of decades. Research on this area has focused mostly on the influence of learners' vocabulary knowledge to their ability to perform specifically to read (Mehdi & Farzad, 2014), listen (Stæhr, 2008), write (Shi & Qian, 2012) as well as speak (Koizumi, 2005; Masoumeh & Rahimy, 2014) in the language. A lot of studies also have been carried out on examining numerous vocabulary teaching or learning techniques (Tegge, 2015; Atasheneh & Naeimi, 2015; Boers, 2013; Dobao, 2014; Heidari-Shahreza, 2014), in search for the most effective approach that can help learners to develop their vocabulary knowledge. In essence, learning vocabulary is a prerequisite to acquire a language. Thus, its development is one of the most important keys to enhancing learners' overall language proficiency. Considering this, it is essential for learners across various proficiency levels to become aware and understand their individual vocabulary competence as they intend to grasp the language better. In doing so, an in depth and comprehensive examination on their vocabulary knowledge is required (Mehring, 2006).

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is regarded as the elementary part of a language which is needed in the development of a larger and meaningful language forms such as sentences, paragraphs as well as texts (Read, 2000). Alfaki (2015) adds that vocabulary ranges from one single item to word chunks. It is important to note that vocabulary of a language is comprised of its various sub-

knowledge among which is spoken vocabulary, written vocabulary, word meanings, collocation, grammatical knowledge as well as associational knowledge (Nation, 2001). Vocabulary is a central tool to communicating and acquiring knowledge particularly among second language learners (Milton, 2009).

### ***2.2 Receptive and Productive Vocabulary***

Generally, vocabulary of a language is built on two different but interrelated dimensions that is receptive and productive vocabulary. While receptive vocabulary relates to the vocabulary which learners can comprehend as they are encountered in spoken or written texts, productive vocabulary on the other hand refers to the vocabulary which learners are able to recall and produce when engaged in speaking or writing in the language (Nation, 2001). Receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary of learners develop as a continuum where receptive knowledge of a word is believed to be a fundamental requirement of its productive knowledge. Hence, Laufer, Elder, Hill, and Congdon (2004) assert that it is common for learners to acquire higher receptive vocabulary as compared to productive vocabulary. Nonetheless, as learners encounter words in spoken and written texts, their productive knowledge of the words also develops.

In this respect, Nation (2001) proposes nine sub knowledge which learners should attain in order for them to acquire a word receptively or productively. First, they should know the spoken as well as written forms of the word. They also need to know about the parts of the word. In addition, they should know the link between the word form and meaning. Knowledge of concepts that could be linked to the word is also needed. Moreover, learners need to know other vocabulary which is associated with the word. Knowing grammatical functions related to the word is also one of the sub knowledge of acquiring a word either receptively or productively. Other than that, learners also need to know about collocations which are related to the word and finally they should understand the register and frequency of that particular word.

### ***2.3 Vocabulary Required to Function in English***

English language is rich hence it has countless number of vocabulary. This implies that it is unlikely possible for learners to learn and acquire all the vocabulary of English language. Researchers in fact assert that it is unnecessary for learners to know considerable amount of vocabulary like native speakers in order for them to function in the language competently,

either for reading, listening writing or speaking (Nation & Waring, 2002). Generally, word frequency count is used in order to determine the kind of vocabulary which is appropriate to be taught to different groups of learners (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014). In this respect, the most useful and important vocabulary in the context of English language is called as the high frequency vocabulary. The most well-known high frequency vocabulary is the General Service List (GSL) which comprises of the 2000 most frequent word families of English language. GSL was developed by West (1953) via analysing five million word written corpus. According to Nation and Kyongho (1995), it is extremely important for learners to learn and acquire the first 2000 word families of the English language, as they may cover up to 90 percent of all running words included in any English language use, including reading, listening, writing and speaking. However, Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) proclaim that the boundary for high frequency vocabulary should have been updated and increased to the most frequent 3000 English word families. The first 3000 word families according to them is maximally useful vocabulary and thus crucial to be acquired by every learner. Their justification lies in the findings of research studies which reveal that knowledge of the most frequent 3000 English word families largely provides learners the ability to comprehend a variety of English texts (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2003; Nation, 2006; Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013).

Besides the high frequency vocabulary, tertiary level learners also need to learn and acquire general academic vocabulary in order to comprehend a wide range of academic texts used across their academic studies (Nation & Waring, 2002; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014). In addition to this, learners need to acquire the mid-frequency vocabulary as well as low frequency vocabulary if they want to gain the ability to use the language proficiently and effectively. Specifically, mid-frequency vocabulary is the vocabulary beyond the 3000 frequency level and below the 9000 frequency level. The mid-frequency vocabulary is important to be acquired by learners as they want to adequately engage with English for authentic purposes such as reading newspapers and novels as well as watching a wide range of TV programs. In other words, mid-frequency vocabulary provides pleasure in reading and listening activities which learners do. As for the low frequency vocabulary, it comprises of words which occur very infrequently in general English texts and their appearance in the texts is limited to certain contexts or disciplines (Nation, 2011). Thus, low frequency vocabulary according to Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) has very limited utility in the language use. Specifically, the low frequency vocabulary comprises of the vocabulary from the 9000 most frequent word families and beyond.

#### ***2.4 Reason for Investigating Vocabulary Competence***

There are a number of reasons why investigating vocabulary competence of learners is significantly important. One major advantage of examining vocabulary knowledge of learners is that it serves as an authentic and practical guideline to teachers and even the learners themselves in deciding the kind of vocabulary intervention methods that should be employed to improve the students' vocabulary knowledge and their overall language proficiency (Mehring, 2006). Different students would face different issues and problems in terms of their vocabulary learning. For example, the vocabulary ability and vocabulary needs of low proficient students are of no doubt different than the high proficient students. Thus, it is very important for an in depth investigation on learners' vocabulary knowledge to be carried out, considering the fact that learners with different level of proficiency might have different vocabulary capability and needs.

#### ***2.5 The Present Study***

A review on the literature shows that there is a need to carry out a study which investigates the profile of Malaysian tertiary level students' knowledge of English language vocabulary. The profile should comprise vocabulary (receptive and productive) of similar students in order to identify their vocabulary competence. The vocabulary profiles could work as a guideline to develop effective vocabulary teaching hence increase the students' vocabulary knowledge and subsequently improve their overall language performance.

On this concern, the present study adds to and expands the literature by investigating the profile of receptive vocabulary of limited English proficiency undergraduate students. The present study is part of a doctoral research (Lateh, 2018) conducted to discover the receptive and productive vocabulary profiles of Malaysian university undergraduate students.

Thus, the following key research question was addressed throughout the present study:

1. What is the receptive vocabulary profile of limited English proficiency students?
  - a) What is the receptive vocabulary profile of limited English proficiency students in terms of size?
  - b) What is the receptive vocabulary profile of limited English proficiency students in terms of level?

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### ***3.1 Participants***

The objective of the study is to examine the receptive vocabulary profile of Malaysian undergraduate students with limited English proficiency. As such, the samples of the study were purposely selected by considering their English language proficiency, in this respect using the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) results. According to the Malaysian Examinations Council (2014), a candidate who obtained Band 2 in the MUET is considered as a limited user of the language in which he or she is not able to use the language appropriately and fluently. Very often, grammatical errors are made when using the language. A total of 35 first year students who obtained Band 2 in the MUET participated in the study.

The reasons why the study focuses on the first year students are due to the fact that they are still new to tertiary education which highly uses and applies English language for most of the time and occasions. Exploring vocabulary profiles of the students in a way would provide possible solutions to enhancing vocabulary competence of the students hence help to improve their language proficiency and academic performance in the forthcoming years at the university. As such, the first year students seem to be the most appropriate participants to be examined and helped in terms of their vocabulary competence.

There were 27 female and 8 male participants of the study. All of them use English as the second language (L2). They study two different business courses namely Bachelor of Entrepreneurship (Commerce) and Bachelor of Entrepreneurship (Retailing). Their age ranged from 19 to 23 years old. For purpose of reliability, it was ensured that all participants had sat for the MUET not more than three years from the time the study was conducted. This is based on the Malaysian Examinations Council which asserts that MUET result is valid for five years (Malaysian Examination Council, 2016).

#### ***3.2 Instrumentation***

There were two main instruments (receptive vocabulary tests) employed in the study. They are the Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Schmitt, Schmitt, and Clapham (2001) and the Vocabulary Size Test created by Nation and Beglar (2007). In addition to these, the study also distributed a set of questionnaire in order to obtain demographic background of the participants.

##### ***3.2.1 Vocabulary Levels Test***

The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) was initially designed to help teachers diagnose learners'

knowledge of words at different frequencies (Nation, 1990). Since its first creation, VLT has been widely used in research and also classroom practices. Ten years after its introduction, changes were made, particularly in relation to the test items (Schmitt et al., 2001). In its previous version the VLT had 18 items for each section while the revised version contains 30 items. The old version used the University Word List (UWL) to test learners' knowledge of academic vocabulary, the later version on the other hand utilises the new Academic Word List (AWL) which is a more updated and has a higher percentage of coverage across academic texts. VLT has five separate sections each assesses learners' mastery at five different word levels. The first section tests knowledge on the words at 2,000 words level, the second at 3,000 words level and the third at 5,000 words level. The fourth section assesses learners' knowledge on academic vocabulary, specifically the Academic Word List (AWL). The last section tests learners' knowledge at the 10,000 words level. VLT therefore is used to disclose learners' knowledge of the high frequency vocabulary, mid-frequency vocabulary, academic vocabulary and low frequency vocabulary.

Figure 1 below shows an example of an individual unit of VLT. There are six words listed in the left column and three definitions in the right column. The task is to match the three definitions with the correct words from the left column. One point is given when a word is correctly matched to its definition. Therefore, 30 will be the total score for each level of VLT. In this regard, Schmitt et al. (2001) state that a minimum score of 26 (or 87 percent) is required for a learner to be considered to have passed any of the VLT levels. Should a learner fail to answer at least 26 out of the 30 test items correctly, he or she has yet to master the words of that particular frequency level. On the contrary, if a student manages to score 27 for the 3,000 words level, for example, it indicates that he has mastered all the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1000 most frequent word families of English language. This also shows that the student has successfully acquired the high frequency vocabulary hence should progress toward learning academic vocabulary, mid frequency vocabulary and low frequency vocabulary.

Although VLT is useful in indicating how well learners acquire or master vocabulary of different word levels or frequencies, it is still unable to provide an estimation of their total vocabulary size. For this reason, the next vocabulary test is employed in the study.

|   |          |                                  |
|---|----------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | business |                                  |
| 2 | clock    | __6__ part of a house            |
| 3 | horse    | __3__ animal with four legs      |
| 4 | pencil   | __4__ something used for writing |
| 5 | shoe     |                                  |
| 6 | wall     |                                  |

Figure 1: An example of a VLT item (taken from Schmitt et al., 2001)

### 3.2.2 Vocabulary Size Test

The Vocabulary Size Test (VST) designed by Nation and Beglar (2007) is a multiple options test which gauges written receptive vocabulary knowledge of learners. In specific, VST measures the size of English word families which a learner knows. Currently, two versions of VST are available (the 14,000 words families version and the 20,000 words families version). Taking into consideration the English language proficiency level of the participants and their background, the 14,000 version which gauges learners' knowledge up to 14,000 word families was used. The nature of the test is as follows. A target word which is put in bold in a sentence should be defined or matched to its synonym by selecting one out of four options provided in each test item (see example in Figure 2).

|  |
|--|
| <p><i>Instruction</i></p> <p><i>Circle the letter a-d with the closest meaning to the key word in the question.</i></p> <p>Figure: Is this the right <b>figure</b>?</p> <p>a. answer</p> <p>b. place</p> <p>c. time</p> <p>d. number</p> |
|--|

Figure 2: An item of VST (taken from Nation & Beglar, 2007)

The test consists of 140 items where each item represents 100 word families. Hence, in order to get a measure of the total vocabulary size which a student knows, the score which he obtains needs to be multiplied by 100. Beglar (2010) validated the test using Rasch-Based analysis and



reported a result of 0.96.

In this study, the participants were given two hours to answer each test. Hence, four hours were used to complete both tests. The tests were administered in two classroom sessions with two days gap. And to avoid any preparations, the participants were not informed beforehand that they were going to sit for another vocabulary test in their next class.

#### 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

The results of the two tests (VLT and VST) were analysed accordingly in order to find out the participants' receptive vocabulary profile in terms of level and size.

##### 4.1 Receptive Vocabulary Profile of Limited English Proficiency Students in Terms of Level

With regard to the profile of receptive vocabulary in terms of level, the profile is presented for each of the word frequency level included in the test. The profiles which consist of the mean, median, standard deviation, minimum as well as maximum scores obtained for each word level are analysed and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the participants' receptive vocabulary level

|               | <b>2000<br/>word<br/>level</b> | <b>3000<br/>word<br/>level</b> | <b>5000<br/>word<br/>level</b> | <b>10 000<br/>word<br/>level</b> | <b>Academic<br/>Word<br/>level</b> |
|---------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Mean</b>   | 23                             | 15                             | 13                             | 4                                | 16                                 |
| <b>Median</b> | 24                             | 15                             | 13                             | 3                                | 17                                 |
| <b>SD</b>     | 5                              | 7                              | 7                              | 4                                | 6                                  |
| <b>Min</b>    | 10                             | 0                              | 0                              | 9                                | 0                                  |
| <b>Max</b>    | 30                             | 28                             | 24                             | 16                               | 24                                 |

Referring to Table 1, the score of participants in average decreases from 23 for the 2,000 words level test to 15 for the 3,000 words level to 13 for the 5,000 words level to 4 for the 10,000 words level. The average score for the academic word level is 16. Likewise, the median achieved also decreases from 24 for the 2,000 words level to 3 for the 10,000 words level, and 17 for the academic word level. The standard deviation (SD) of the test scores is 5 for the 2,000 words level, 7 for the 3,000 and 5,000 words level, 4 for the 10,000 words level and 6 for the academic word level. As for the minimum score achieved, it is interesting to note that the score

is zero at the 3,000, 5,000, and academic word level. Meanwhile, a maximum score of 30 was achieved but only for the 2,000 words level. The others decrease thereafter. The maximum score achieved by the participants for the academic word level is 24.

A further analysis was carried out in order to find out the proportions of participants who passed and did not pass each word level of the test. The results are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of participants who pass and fail each word level (scored 87% and above)

|   | <b>2,000</b>      | <b>3,000</b>      | <b>5,000</b>      | <b>10,000</b>     | <b>academic</b>   |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|   | <b>word level</b> | <b>word level</b> | <b>word level</b> | <b>word level</b> | <b>word level</b> |
| <b>Pass</b><br><b>(87%</b><br><b>and</b><br><b>above)</b> | 14 (40%)          | 1 (3%)            | 0 (0%)            | 0 (0%)            | 0 (0%)            |
| <b>Fail</b><br><b>(below</b><br><b>87%)</b>               | 21 (60%)          | 34 (97%)          | 35 (100%)         | 35 (100%)         | 35 (100%)         |

According to Table 2, most of the participants (21) scored below than 87 percent for the 2,000 words level. Only 14 of them were able to pass the 2,000 words level, implying only 40 percent of the students have adequately acquired the General Service List (GSL) which consists of the most basic English words which every learner must know. As for the 3,000 words level, only one student passed. However, none of the students were able to pass the 5,000 and 10,000 words levels. It is quite alarming to find out that all of the participants failed the academic word level suggesting all of them have weak knowledge of academic vocabulary.

#### ***4.2 Receptive Vocabulary Profile of Limited Level Students in Terms of Size***

Descriptive statistics was employed to analyse the scores which the students obtained for the VST hence establish the profile of their receptive vocabulary in terms of size. The result is described in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Profile of the students' receptive vocabulary size

|               |      |
|---------------|------|
| <b>Mean</b>   | 2971 |
| <b>Median</b> | 2900 |
| <b>SD</b>     | 478  |
| <b>Min</b>    | 1700 |
| <b>Max</b>    | 3800 |

As shown in Table 3, the mean score of the VST achieved by the students is 2971 indicating the students in average know around 2971 word families of the English language. The median score is 2,900 while the standard deviation (SD) is 478. The lowest and maximum scores are 1,700 and 3,800 respectively.

Based on the profiles of their receptive vocabulary, we could thus infer that limited English proficiency participants (Band 2 students) have very weak knowledge and attainment of English language receptive vocabulary. The profiles clearly show that the majority of the participants (97 percent) failed to adequately acquire and master the high frequency vocabulary (3,000 words level), despite the fact that these vocabularies are extremely important to them. Even more surprising, none of them have sufficiently attained the academic vocabulary which is significant to be known by university students as Coxhead (2,000) points out.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

The study had aimed to profile the English language receptive vocabulary of first year limited English proficiency undergraduate students. In particular, the study intended to investigate in depth the profiles of the students' receptive vocabulary in terms of the size as well as level. The study outlines two main findings in regard to the profiles of receptive vocabulary of the students. The first finding which relates to the size of their receptive vocabulary shows that limited English proficiency students who are unable to use the language appropriately and fluently (Band 2 students) know only 2,971 words families of the English language. It is important to note that there is a student who scored only 1,700 for the test, showing a very minimum and weak attainment of English vocabulary by the student. In addition, the maximum word family they know is only 3,800.

Another finding of the study supports the first finding where the majority of the students (97 percent) were found to not be able to pass the high frequency vocabulary (3,000 words level) of the test. This implies the students' receptive vocabulary is lower than 3,000 words

families. They have not adequately acquired the high frequency vocabulary which is very important to be known by learners if they want to function in the language even for basic daily communication. In short, what the students have now in terms of their receptive vocabulary knowledge is way insufficient to enable them to cope with the English language use at the university. This is based on Dang and Webb (2014), Kaneko (2013, 2015), Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) who propose that learners should know between 6,000 and 8,000 words families in order for them to be independent users of the English language. Furthermore, the students were also very weak in terms of their academic vocabulary knowledge as none of them could reach the mastery level of the Academic Word List test, despite the importance of academic vocabulary to successful comprehension of written or spoken academic texts.

The findings of the present study add more evidence to what has been put forward by previous research (Engku Ibrahim, Othman, Sarudin, & Jariah Muhamad, 2013; Harji, Balakrishnan, Bhar, & Letchumanan, 2015; Kaur, 2013; Mokhtar et al., 2010) regarding the critical lexical paralysis problem faced by the majority of Malaysian university students. Accordingly, the findings highlight a very important fact with regard to the vocabulary competence of our university students particularly the limited English proficiency students. There is indeed a serious and real lexical paralysis problem occurring among the students, which needs to be effectively overcome in order to prevent difficulties in themselves when dealing with academic studies at the university. The research points to the need to develop effective strategies for the teaching and learning of vocabulary in order to equip students with adequate knowledge of English vocabulary. This particularly concerns the high frequency vocabulary and the academic vocabulary which are clearly crucial to tertiary level learners for them to be able to comprehend various kinds of English texts (spoken and written) which are used throughout their academic courses.

At this point, Nation's (1990) suggestion on explicit vocabulary teaching approach seems to be a wise and practical step to be undertaken in order to increase the students' vocabulary knowledge. He suggests that to work on the high frequency vocabulary (vocabulary of 3,000 words level and below), direct vocabulary teaching should be implemented. Several ways of teaching high frequency vocabulary directly to students may include teaching wordlist based on the General Service List (GSL) as well as doing intensive and extensive reading of a variety of English texts (simple and unsimplified texts). As for academic vocabulary, Nation (1990) proposes that learners should be explicitly exposed and taught the University Word List (Xue & Nation, 1984) or the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). In addition, they should

read a wide range of academic texts intensively. Nonetheless, what is faced by our students in terms of their vocabulary shortage demands for considerable and holistic measures to be taken. If not, more serious implications will surface thus affecting the students' academic performance and future career (Kaur, 2013).

## **6.0 LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study contribute only a small part to the field of vocabulary learning and acquisition. The present study involved a small number of learners (N=35) from only one institute of higher learning as well as one discipline. Hence, for the results to be transferable to other groups of students with similar or different level of English language proficiency, further research should therefore be undertaken. Next, the study only reported the profiles of receptive vocabulary of the students. Another dimension of vocabulary knowledge which is productive vocabulary has not been examined in the study. Furthermore, the present study mainly focuses on examining the profile of receptive vocabulary of limited English proficiency students (MUET Band 2 students). A larger scale of research is needed to also explore the vocabulary profiles (both receptive and productive) of students of other proficiency levels such as very limited (MUET Band 1), modest (MUET Band 3), satisfactory (MUET Band 4) and Proficient (MUET Band 5). Nevertheless, the study has provided an authentic overview of what is going on and what needs to be done with regard to vocabulary teaching and learning at Malaysian higher learning institutions.

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