

CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

It is said that “no amount of grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge can be employed in communication or discourse without the mediation of vocabulary”, (Richards (ed.), in Schmitt, 2000, p. xi). Vocabulary, hence, is highly regarded as a crucial foundational language block by linguists. This sentiment is also shared by the general population. The moment a baby words his or her first audible word is considered the greatest feat by the parents. This significant event marks the baby’s inception into the world of language.

Vocabulary enables people to *understand* meaning and ideas and to *use* words to express ideas. Their ability to ‘*receive*’ and ‘*produce*’ words are undoubtedly the fundamental building blocks to acquire a language. Grammar and structure takes second place, as without words, is there a language?

Extensive and intensive studies on vocabulary bear proof that vocabulary is indeed important. In the world of education, experts have noted that “learning, as a language-based activity, is fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary knowledge”, (Baker, et al., 1995). Other studies have highlighted that the vocabulary size of students is a predictor of academic achievement (Morris and Cobb, 2004; Doherty, 1997, cited in Government of Canada, 2006).

The evidence of the instrumental link between vocabulary and language proficiency and academic achievement, will be very much appreciated by teachers, parents and students alike, as they are the stakeholders in the ever furious race towards excellence in education, in this case, language achievement.

The status of vocabulary in language education is further elevated in other countries where it is employed as a placement tool for entry into school (Government of

Canada, 2006) and as one of the important pillars in a curriculum (Berne and Blachowicz, 2008). Hence, ‘the teaching of vocabulary is not a luxury; it is an equity issue’ (Berne and Blachowicz, 2008). Everyone benefits from it.

However, upon closer examination, studies have shown that this ‘link’ is not a one-size-fits-all concept. The ecological factor, rural and urban, is found to play a major role. Studies have shown that the ecological background affects a person’s vocabulary sizes and in turn, influences the language proficiency. Generally, urban students are at an advantage over their rural counterparts (Doherty, 1997, cited in Government of Canada, 2006; Easton and Ellerbruch, 1985, cited in Eddington and Koehler, (1987). Nevertheless, a more localized study on vocabulary is needed to understand the dynamics of vocabulary patterns better, given that students come from various, unique situations.

1.1 The Problem

Recognising this significance, Malaysia’s Ministry of Education has included word lists according to specified themes in its ESL syllabi for secondary level, for meaningful teaching and learning. Yet, not enough emphasis is given to these lists. One of the possible reasons is that vocabulary is not specifically spelled out in the curriculum specification’s description of skills. It is also not formally tested. Hence, it has since suffered a negative washback effect. Major English examinations in the secondary level in Malaysia include less than 2% vocabulary items. Based on the researcher’s experience as an English language teacher, vocabulary is also generally treated as an afterthought or a disposable addition to the teaching and learning processes in classrooms. On-going teacher training courses also have not made vocabulary one of their major components in recent years.

The result of this lack of attention to vocabulary in Malaysian schools is reflected in Ahmad Azman Mokhtar's (2010) study, where he found that Malaysian university students' vocabulary knowledge is alarmingly limited. His findings showed that a majority of these undergraduates have command of only the most frequent 2000 words, while the minimum expected level to function in English is at the 3000 word level. The 1000 word deficit is a valid and alarming cause of concern, considering that these tertiary students have at least 12 years of formal learning of the language in schools. Hence, for school-going children, who come from varied background, geographical location and exposure to the language, their vocabulary development, or even 'non-development' (deficit), may be even more alarming.

The disparity between rural and urban students' achievement has been reported to be quite apparent. Studies have shown that urban students outperform rural students in many disciplines and subjects, including vocabulary (McCleery, 1979, cited in Eddington and Koehler, 1987; Easton and Ellerbruch, 1985, cited in Eddington and Koehler, 1987), due to their geographical location, motivation and perception towards the language (Lok, 2007; Rosli Talif and Edwin, 1990; Sirin 2005; Xu, 2009; Gaudart, 1987).

This issue is made more significant as there seems to be a link between vocabulary and language achievement. Vocabulary size is said to be important for language development and is able to predict language achievement (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008, Chall & Snow, 1988, Webb, 2008, Morris & Cobb, 2004, Zareva, Schwanenflugel & Nikolova, 2005). This link is also reflected in the results of major English examinations in Malaysia, namely Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), where urban students, with larger vocabulary size, have always been higher achievers compared to rural students (Rosli Talif and Edwin, 1990).

Therefore, the vocabulary size of Malaysian students may be worth exploring as there seems to be a strong possibility that it affects and can assist language achievement.

1.2 The Aim of The Study

Thus, this study seeks to address the concerns that were highlighted. First of all, the size of students' vocabulary needs to be explored. This would include the students' size of receptive and productive vocabulary at different levels of frequency. This knowledge of it would be significant to determine whether their vocabulary development pattern is similar to the other reported studies. This information can also help to gauge students' vocabulary development; whether they are well versed with the word list provided, or there exists a gap. This study hopes to gain results by means of adapting existing vocabulary tests and customizing it using words from the word list provided by the Ministry of Education. To extend the scope beyond the confines of the word list, a supporting test was carried out.

Apart from that, urban and rural students' disparity in language achievement also needs to be examined. It aims to provide a clearer and localized picture regarding the extent to which vocabulary influences students' language achievement. This may also yield useful implications which the stakeholders can benefit from.

1.3 Research Questions

To achieve the aims and to guide this study, the following research questions are put forth:

- a) What is the receptive and productive vocabulary size of urban and rural students in the district of Kuantan?

- b) What is the relationship between:
 - i) the overall receptive and productive vocabulary of students?
 - ii) receptive and productive vocabulary at different word levels of urban and rural students?
- c) To what extent do the vocabulary sizes of urban and rural students correlate with their English language achievement (ELA)?

1.4 Significance of The Study

This study hopes to benefit all the stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, curriculum developers and researchers. From the results of this study, it is hoped that vocabulary will gain more distinction and emphasis. It can be administered in a more structured manner, with more time and thought put into its planning and implementation. This study also aspires to provide teachers, students and the ministry meaningful data on vocabulary patterns of students for them to consider. The data may act as a stepping stone to gauge students' vocabulary entry level size and progress. It would then be possible to address specific problems of individuals and target words. This study can also serve as a guideline to curriculum developers in their effort to revamp and revise the curriculum, as it is currently being carried out. As the government realizes the importance of English as a global language, the inclusion of it in one of its major education policy (MBMMBI - Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the Command of English) together with a sizable budget, indicates that research into this area is very much appreciated. Hence, with a localized context, this study can contribute to a better implementation of the policy by providing current and relevant information.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

Due to time, geographical and the researcher's linguistic resource constraints, there are some limitations to this study.

First of all, the scope of the study is restricted to the district of Kuantan, Pahang. Two urban schools and two rural schools were selected to participate in this study. Only Form Five students were chosen, in consideration of their nine years of formal ESL instruction. They were from the majority race, Malay, for the purpose of controlling L1 variability and for the ease of data analysis, as this study uses a translation test as one of its instrument. Other controlling factors include their subject stream (Science) and overall academic performance. Science stream students with the best overall academic results were chosen as they would have similar amount of exposure to English in classrooms, based on the subjects taken and near-similar academic performance.

This study also limits the items used in the vocabulary tests to words from the word list provided by the Ministry of Education. A supporting instrument that is used to gauge students' vocabulary size and pattern beyond the word list only provides minimal representation of their maximum vocabulary potential. Hence, this result reported in this study is very much limited to boundary of the word list and may not represent students' maximum vocabulary potential.

The English language achievement (ELA) is derived from students' Form Four English language final year test overall result. The Form Four exam results had to be used as data collection was conducted at the beginning of the students' Form Five year. The students had not taken any exams by then. The exam comprised a reading and writing test, which students had to take as two separate papers. Paper one tests purely the writing skill, where students had to write two essays. Paper two tests a combination of reading and writing, with a major portion based on writing. Students had to write a summary and write

open-ended responses to a novel, short story and poem. As for reading, there is only one long reading passage and a few short excerpts testing reading comprehension. Hence, the English test mainly tests the writing skill. This then may not be adequate as a basis of comparison to represent the overall language proficiency. However, this remains the scope of this study as the language achievement in secondary schools is measured mainly using this format.