

LEXICAL COMPETENCE AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS: TEACHER-STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Lexical competence is an important skill for the attainment of full mastery of the four language skills in order to enable students to cope with academic tasks at tertiary level. Unfortunately, after going through a decade of compulsory English language classes at primary and secondary school, it is discerned that Malaysian learners still lack attainment of the necessary word-level knowledge to cope with their academic courses at institutions of higher learning. This study reports the level of lexical competence of a group of students of various language proficiency levels at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. It also probes the reasons for the lack of competence from the learners' and their teacher's perspective on the extent the students are able to cope with their academic courses at the university. Recommendations are provided as to how we can reverse the situation and at least try to minimise the effects so that Malaysian learners can handle academic tasks successfully by improving language literacy via lexical competence.

Introduction

Vocabulary or lexis refers to the semantics of the language. Quite simply, a lexical item means an item of meaning. Lexical knowledge, that is, the ability to comprehend, acquire, retrieve and recall vocabulary items with relative success, is seen to occupy a key position in learning a second language (L2) and hence is the foundation of language learning. With adequate lexical knowledge and competence, learners are able to cope with the English language because vocabulary acquisition is a requisite and determinant of the extent of learners' language literacy via the four language skills (Torres & Ramos, 2003; Nation, 2001). However, vocabulary

is also seen as the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language. A vocabulary size approaching 20,000 word families is essential (Goulden et al., 1990) to match the lexical competence of L1 university graduates. Thus, ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) speakers need to learn about 1,000 word families per year to catch up with the level of an educated native speaker. Keeping this in mind and with vocabulary acquisition assuming a more central role in the language class since the 1980s and 1990s (Gu, 2003; Nation, 2001; Sökmen, 1997), it is therefore, necessary for learners to adopt strategies that work and have a positive attitude in developing their lexical competence.

Unfortunately, for many years, vocabulary has been perceived as the poor relation of language teaching and “the Cinderella of the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research” (Segler, 2001:1), where vocabulary instruction tends to take a backseat in our teaching priorities (Meara, 1980). In many instructional approaches, focus on structural signals and grammatical patterns of the language seem to override vocabulary (Croft, 1980) and students are more often than not expected to pick up vocabulary on their own, with little or no guidance (Crookall & Oxford, 1990).

Statement of the Problem

Given the large lexicon that exists within the language, there is only so much a teacher can do as it is not possible for the teacher to present and teach all the vocabulary needed for normal language use (Nation, 1990). As a result, acquiring a vocabulary size which is large enough to cope is probably the major hurdle facing EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners (Nation, 2001). It is conceived as “a learner’s nightmare” (Meara, 1980), and even their greatest language problem (Green & Meara, 1995). Several studies have found that learners regard the lack of lexical competence as one of the major hindrances in L2 or foreign language learning (e.g., Folse, 2006; Nation, 2001). Low (2004, cited in Zakaria, 2005:2) likewise, says that ESL learners in Malaysia face challenges in coping with the four language skills, mainly because they lack vocabulary. Various studies conducted at secondary schools as well as at institutions of higher learning (see Naginder & Kabilan, 2007; Zakaria, 2005; Syed Aziz Baftim, 2005; Lourdunathan & Menon, 2005; Ramachandran & Abdul Rahim, 2004; Pillai, 2004; Abdullah, 2004; Malek, 2000) show that lexical paralysis is a major contributor to learners’ incapacity to cope with the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This may possibly be due to the fact that it is not the most favoured of activities among teachers and learners alike. Hassan and Fauzee (2002) found that vocabulary exercises

ranked fourth, out of the nine language activities investigated on the frequency of use in an ESL lesson. Likewise, in the students' preference list, vocabulary learning is one of the lowest ranked language activities (Teh, 2004). Thus, students are in a state of "vocabulary deficit" in the language class.

Purpose of the Study

In order to raise the language proficiency of Malaysian learners, particularly in the scope of vocabulary competence, it is felt that learners must assume more responsibility and be in control of their learning processes. This will lead to autonomous learning, which essentially involves three phases, i.e., raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring of roles to the learners (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). This study is undertaken to address the first phase, which is raising awareness among learners. Insights are obtained from learners at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia and their class teacher to see the language learning process in totality as a prelude to the second and third phase of developing autonomous learners i.e., changing attitudes and transferring of roles to learners.

Methodology

This is a heuristic exploratory case study of a mono-cultural and bilingual class of 32 third semester Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) students, 5 students of Diploma in Investment Analysis (DIIA) and 1 part 6 (repeat) student of Diploma in Business Studies (DBS). Their ages ranged between 19-21 years and they had all passed the previous two semesters of compulsory English courses. Being of homogenous culture and attending commerce-related courses as well as staying within the campus, it can be inferred that they did not vary much in their prior learning experiences as they were all in the same class the previous semesters and hence had a similar worldview. Based on their first and second semester English courses, they can be said to be of mixed/varying language ability. There were a number of high ability language learners. 6 students had A+/A/A- in the previous semesters, 25 were of average ability (B+/B/B-) and 7 were rather weak (C+/C).

The students are enrolled in a preparatory course for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which is a 6-contact-hour course of 3 credit hours. It primarily builds on and further develops the major aspects of reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar skills. As a skills-based language course, students are supposed to be given the opportunity to practice and integrate language skills in meaningful tasks relevant to an academic context, as stated in the course syllabus. The course syllabus also explicitly states that, it "prepares students to meet the requirements of the Malaysian University English Test."

Therefore, lessons are tailored and planned so as to allow students room to express their views and share thoughts and opinions with others. The lessons focus on improving the students' communication skills using a variety of activities. The topics revolve around social issues, which range from teenage curfew, the influence of the Internet, as well as motivational stories, all of which are topics pertinent to the scope and focus of the skills tested in the MUET.

The study began with a diagnosis of the students' levels of vocabulary knowledge through the online *Vocabulary Levels Test*, available at <http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/levels/index.html>. There are 3 versions of the online Vocabulary Levels Test (Version A, B and C) developed by Paul Nation and Batia Laufer in 1999. The purpose of administering the test was to estimate the participants' vocabulary size at five levels by examining their basic knowledge of common word meanings, and, specifically, the extent to which they knew the common meanings of words at the 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 10,000 and university word levels. The test was hence, purely diagnostic in nature and served to inform the investigators of the participants' entry level in the case study with regard to their vocabulary size.

Fifteen students were selected from the class to complete Version A of the test of 1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 10,000 word levels and University Word List (UWL). These were 5 high ability learners, 5 average ability learners and 5 low ability learners, with their English results as the basis of classification, hence a representation of the class (i.e., 39.5% of the class enrolment, or about a third of the class size). Only a portion of the class was able to take the test, due to logistical problems such as availability of computer terminals. An apparent limitation was that this group of students was not allocated the Internet-ready language laboratories in their language class, making it extremely difficult to access the language laboratories to do the test. The researcher insisted on being physically present (but unobtrusive) when students did the test to allow for lack of student desire to participate and/or attrition.

Subsequently, in-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of the fifteen students - nine students were selected (again, based on the 3 levels of language ability as well as a balanced gender ratio - 4 males and 5 females) in order to obtain comprehensive insights into the lagging vocabulary knowledge among them, both from their perspectives as well as from the point of view of their female lecturer, who is a participant observer in this study. She documented reflections of the teaching process in relation to how learners responded to lexical teaching and learning and observations on direct and indirect actions and reactions to vocabulary learning made in class throughout the 14-week semester. The in-depth interviews

with the students were audio taped and then transcribed. Content analysis was done to understand why the students lacked vocabulary competence.

Findings

The table below shows the results (in percentile scores) obtained from the online *Vocabulary Levels Test* taken by the fifteen students from the class, according to the five levels of word-knowledge. Note that a minimum score of 83% is required for each level in order to qualify as possessing the particular level of word-knowledge.

Table 1: Vocabulary Levels Test Scores (%) of the Participants

Student	Language Ability	Level 1,000 %	Level 2,000 %	Level 3,000 %	Level 5,000 %	UWL %	Level 10,000 %
A	High	85	77	72	44	66	16
B	High	92	83	50	27	50	16
C	High	90	100	94	61	88	50
D	High	87	94	72	27	72	22
E	High	100	100	94	83	72	38
F	Average	74	100	27	27	72	27
G	Average	82	100	33	27	55	11
H	Average	85	77	38	27	22	11
I	Average	82	61	27	27	55	11
J	Average	97	83	55	27	50	16
K	Weak	74	50	50	38	38	16
L	Weak	72	66	50	22	44	5
M	Weak	67	61	33	27	33	5
N	Weak	79	55	22	11	16	16
O	Weak	51	77	61	55	47	11

From the results of the 15 students, we can see that:

- 7 students (47%) possess word knowledge of 1,000 words.
- 7 students (47%) possess word knowledge of 2,000 words.
- 2 students (13%) possess word knowledge of 3,000 words.
- 1 student (6%) possesses word knowledge of 5,000 words.

- 1 student (6%) possesses word knowledge of University Word List.
- 0 (0%) student possess word knowledge of 10,000 words.

Some probable inferences of learners at this institution of higher learning (or this class in particular) would be:

- High ability learners generally have about 2,000 word-level knowledge and can manage tasks requiring 3,000 word-level knowledge.
- Average ability learners can manage tasks of 1,000 to 2,000 word-level knowledge only.
- Weak ability learners do not possess word knowledge of even 1,000 words and can only relate to tasks revolving around the 1,000 word-knowledge, at the most.

Given this low level of lexical knowledge among university students, it is no wonder that they grapple and struggle in coping with their academic and core subjects at the university and face perennial problems with learning and using the English language.

Hence, if these results reflecting vocabulary knowledge among learners of different language ability are anything to go by, it is clear that learners at institutions of higher learning seriously lack the word-knowledge necessary to cope with academic courses at the university and other tertiary institutions. Hence they lack language ability to cope with academic courses. This in turn, explains the lack of language skills among Malaysian graduates, which is a major hindrance in seeking employment.

Further, insights were obtained from the learners themselves as well as their lecturer. The students cited a variety of reasons for their lack of lexical knowledge. Writing was found to be the most problematic skill, as it was difficult to find the exact words/expressions when writing. Speaking was found to be the activity with the least stress when trying to express ideas. The learners' responses were corroborated by their lecturer's notes and reflections which were perused to obtain in-depth knowledge of the situation at hand. The reasons for the lack of lexical knowledge, as seen by the students and their lecturer are discussed below:

i) Learners' Confidence Level

The lecturer believed there was a strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension because "having a wide vocabulary is important in any language class. It contributed to higher achievement of the students in their course." A student's weak vocabulary would result in his/her inability to perform well in

class activities as well as examinations. Therefore, it was frustrating both for the learners (through their admissions) as well as their lecturer when the majority of the students did not have a wide vocabulary. The low ability learners admitted that their rather limited vocabulary made communicating in English a chore, one that they would rather avoid if possible. The lecturer felt that the students perceived speaking in class as a risk, owing to their confidence level. As she reflected, "So much is at stake; they could be laughed at, ridiculed or be made to feel and look stupid in front of the rest, some of whom they perceive to be better. The fact that the class is a mixed-ability one does not help. The weaker students are made to feel self-conscious of their shortcomings".

The lecturer's classroom observations were congruent with the opinions expressed by the high ability learners; both parties concurred that they (the high ability learners) faced little problem expressing their views in class. They willingly voiced them and were not put off even when their answers were wrong. They did not mind being corrected as they probably saw it as a learning process. They were able to explain their views and could argue reasonably well to defend themselves. Their less than perfect grammar did not hamper them. These students had the ability to express themselves without having to grope for the right word when speaking. No doubt they did not always use the correct or most suitable word, but they did not stop in the middle of a sentence trying to think of just the right words. They did not lose their composure when they got stuck in the middle of a sentence. These students simply began the sentence again, rephrasing it and then continued to complete their explanation.

On the other hand, the lecturer noted that when a weak student was caught in the same situation, he/she would tend to discontinue without completing his/her sentence. He/She might say, "Err, I don't know" or perhaps just smile, saying, "You know ...", assuming (or hoping) that everyone has understood his/her meaning. It was not always easy for the lecturer to draw the weaker students out of their shell. They seldom volunteered to answer. They felt safer when responding to the lecturer's questions together with the rest of the class, but loathed being put in a spot. Weaker students would rather keep quiet than answer incorrectly, thus avoiding "making a fool of himself/herself" in front of everyone else.

ii) Revision and Use of Learning Strategies

All but one student admitted to revising vocabulary items mainly when the exam was around the corner; in this case, when preparing for the mid-semester test and the final examination. Thus, newly learnt vocabulary items in class were often forgotten and ignored. There were limited opportunities to reinforce and reactivate

new lexical items. The cyclical and spiral process of awakening the mental schemata did not occur when students failed to recognise words already learnt, due to non-retention.

It was also found that among the nine students interviewed, none maintained a vocabulary book to record their learning of vocabulary items per se. They contended that they maintained vocabulary logs and notebooks of sorts in the secondary school, only because their secondary school teachers had required them to do so. So, what happens at higher education level? Well, “the curriculum of all subjects is in English; so there is no need to focus so much on English!” was the general response.

It was also found that the learners did not maintain a systematic approach to lexical learning as new vocabulary items were recorded as and when they were encountered in the handouts. These words were normally underlined and written out “loosely” on the handouts. Learners clearly lacked a systematic approach to lexical learning; neither did they have vocabulary log books nor any other notebooks to record their learning. Only one learner in the class kept a notebook, which was used to write his ideas and points. This was found to be a hotchpotch of ideas and jottings related to all his academic courses, penned all over his notebook.

iii) Reading Outside Class

One of the major reasons for low lexical competence among learners was found to be poor reading habits beyond the allocated English class time. The students admitted that they rarely ever read anything beyond the stipulated coursework materials. English language materials such as the newspapers were a no-no; only a handful ever read the English newspapers. They also complained of being too busy to read; the computer (the Internet) was used to complete their assignments or play games in their free time. When they happened to use the Internet, some did surf online news websites. As for television, they reported watching television only during semester breaks.

Even though the Student Affairs Unit has taken the initiative of providing free English newspapers (*The Star*) for the students’ reading pleasure, the students explained that they were never able to obtain the papers as the number of copies available for daily circulation was limited and were often taken up before 8am. It also shows a lack of initiative on their part. This echoes the results of Pandian’s study (2000, cited in Giridharan & Conlan, 2003: 5) which found 80.1% of Malaysian university students to be reluctant readers of English materials. Many students fail to realise that as a component of literacy, “reading is a valuable commodity, providing access to power and enlightenment” (Kern, 2000: 24).

iv) Learner Effort

Except for a few, the rest showed no evidence of making any extra effort to learn new words. They seemed happy enough to learn the words to understand a given text and to answer the questions; and it stopped there. It was as if those words were only used in certain topics/units and would never ever re-appear elsewhere. They were often reminded to use English as often as they could as language must be used and practiced. None of the students disagreed on this. Yet, there was little evidence to show that they were doing much to improve themselves. Many were still too dependent on the lecturer to guide them. Very little outside reading was done.

Most students, even the better ones admitted that they did not speak English with their friends. A few did try but their efforts were not long-lasting. Therefore, there was limited opportunity to use those words. It seemed that the classroom was the only place where English was spoken. Even if they did speak English with each other, words like “impose”, “curb”, “bizarre”, “boon”, “ingenious”, “venture” would probably not make their way into their conversations. It is obvious they lacked interactive forms of communication. Reading, although a good way to increase vocabulary, did not provide two-way communication for them.

v) Learner Initiative

In this study, English was taught as a second language. Most of the time, it was only used in the classroom. Six hours of English class per week was not enough. Therefore, if students hope to improve, they would need to make an extra effort and work much harder. The lecturer noticed only one student who brought her dictionary to class. Other students found the meanings of words by asking each other. Occasionally, someone would ask the lecturer for help. One or two had a notebook for jotting down new words.

The lecturer was a little disturbed to find one or two students still refusing to speak during group speaking activities among their own groups of friends. These students chose not to speak when it was their turn to do so. How they were able to remain very quiet when their friends were having a heated discussion was perplexing. When quizzed, the students (2 of them, low ability learners) contended that they would rather remain silent (yet, contend that learning did take place) as they were simply not able to express themselves due to limited lexical ability. This is clearly a vicious cycle - a double-edged sword, as it were; The students were weak because they did not participate and they did not participate because they were weak. Although they contended that they were “learning” while the others actively participated, it did not come across to the lecturer as such. Neither was it reflected in their course progress. They seemed satisfied just to watch and listen to

the others. It is really hard to read what is on the mind of some students. Do they feel that a particular activity is just a waste of time or have they actually given up on themselves as learners of the English language?

vi) Over-reliance on the Dictionary

Another noteworthy point is that the students relied on the dictionary each time they needed to find the meaning of words. They contended that their lecturers in the previous semesters had instructed them to resort to the dictionary and it was the quickest and best solution. In this regard, it is noted that lecturers on their part, did not adequately engage students in activities such as guessing meaning from context or using other contextual clues to derive the meaning of words. Therefore, this vicious cycle is reinforced with the turnover of the semester, with no real difference in lecturers' attitude towards the dictionary, which in turn, is passed on to the students.

vii) Transfer of Learning

Filling in the blanks exercises were simple with ninety percent of the students answering them correctly. However, it was found that when students were required to write a letter on the topic already discussed, the new words did not seem to have registered in their mind. Many words that should have been retained were not. For example, instead of "imposing" a curfew, students wrote "making" a curfew. The written exercise was done in class. The text was in front of them to refer to. Yet, few bothered to check for the right word. They lapsed back into their old and fossilised ways. Obviously, in spite of repeating and explaining the meaning, few could actually remember or felt that was indeed important to try to. Even parts of speech were still used incorrectly. Nouns and adjectives were used interchangeably. They were also careless in the test. They were simply not conscious of their errors when speaking or writing. The students usually had to be directed to notice certain words. They forgot words learnt after only two weeks. For example, when discussing a text on Parkinson's disease, the word "tremor" cropped up. Only two students could remember that the word had been learnt in an earlier text on earthquakes and tsunamis. In general, the students might learn, use and memorise a few new words, but just as quickly forget them or forget to use them.

viii) Over-dependence on Lecturer

All the students who were interviewed concurred that they would only learn vocabulary items based on the word(s) highlighted or pointed out by their lecturer.

Dependence on the lecturer clearly shows a lack of initiative in learning words of their own choice and preference. It could be due to a lack of awareness as to which words to focus on and which words to ignore when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and hence students leave it all to the lecturer to decide. In this regard, we can see that these learners shunned being in control of their own learning processes, similar to the findings of Moir's (1996) study and were happy in a teacher-led class (even if it meant being led by the nose). Over-dependence on the lecturer on teaching and learning matters concurs with Nair and Ratnam's (2003) insights into Malaysian learners' lack of self-control in learning.

ix) Limited Communication with Lecturer outside Class

The students also admitted that they had not sought any consultation with their English language lecturer outside class hours, and were content with the 6-hour input every week. The in-depth interviews were conducted in the middle of the semester (around week 6), yet, students had failed to capitalise on the privilege reserved for them in the lecturer's time table. None had seen the lecturer for further consultation and this had been a trend carried on from Part 1 of their university life. The only time they actually sought the lecturers was at the end of each semester, for the purpose of knowing their ongoing assessment marks or requesting further information pertaining to the final examination papers.

x) Vocabulary Teaching Methods

The pedagogical approach and the emphasis given to lexical learning are paramount factors which determine the extent of vocabulary acquisition among learners. The learners said that their most preferred mode of learning was via speaking skills/group presentations because students could get the much needed opportunities to activate their language. They also gained experience in using it for communication. The speaking activities done in class this semester included role play, group discussions and individual presentations. However, it was discerned that the lecturers of the previous semesters did not engage them in adequate and meaningful speaking tasks which could enhance vocabulary acquisition. In fact, the learners stated that they had never been exposed to role play tasks in the previous semesters. Therefore, they found English classes to be boring and "the same thing" all the time. Failure to evoke learners' interest leads to disinterest in the language class. This further causes lack of motivation and effort in self-improvement, namely, in the area of lexical competence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

After completing the fourteen-week semester, the lecturer is of the opinion that the majority of the students are not independent learners when it comes to the learning of vocabulary. As the students do very little reading, the lecturer has to assume a heavier responsibility. Making decisions on what topics/lessons should be taught lies solely on the lecturer (guided by the course syllabus) (see Nair & Ratnam, 2003).

In addition, it is vital that the lecturer provides a supportive learning environment. This would help to reduce the students' level of anxiety, thus enhancing their learning experience. Lecturers who employ appealing teaching methods will be viewed as being friendly. Students, in turn, will feel more at ease. A non-judgmental and warm social setting must be established early in the semester to promote learning.

The role the teacher plays is paramount in his/her students' learning; more significantly perhaps than any teaching and learning methodology. In a classroom of mixed-ability students, the teacher cannot be satisfied with taking on the role of a facilitator. He/She has to guide the students actively by noting their strengths and weaknesses. This would allow him/her to plan lessons to meet the students' needs. Awakening or raising lexical awareness may be the step forward for the teacher to take, in terms of explicit/direct vocabulary learning methods, since incidental/contextual learning does not show retention among our students, as evidenced in this study. Explicit learning (such as word list learning, vocabulary exercises and even vocabulary games) can be the answer we are seeking and has been mooted as a superior learning method (e.g., Menon & Vijayarajoo, 2003; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Sökmen, 1997; Coady, 1997).

Whatever the case may be, the teacher can do only so much within a limited time. To say that our students still do not realise the importance of English is definitely incorrect. However, it is really up to them to change. A little sacrifice in terms of time and effort is needed for them to improve. As the study revealed, more is needed on the part of the students than on the part of the teacher to raise their awareness of lexical learning. The students need to take stock of their English learning situation and embrace change. The question here is - Are our students willing?

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