

INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF WORD PAIRS ON WORD KNOWLEDGE

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» Special Dedication «

For my beloved Mak and Ayah.

For my supporting brothers and sisters.

For my lovely hubby.

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary plays an essential role in language learning. The lack of vocabulary might cause incompetency to language users. Therefore, it is very important for language instructors to find suitable ways of teaching vocabulary since learning vocabulary consists of learning various aspects of word knowledge. These aspects include orthography, meaning and form, collocation, association and grammatical functions. There are various methods that could be used in gaining these aspects of word knowledge. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of word pairs in learning word knowledge. The researcher is interested to find out which aspects of word knowledge are gained by learning from Malay Translation, English Translation, Malay Definition and English Definition word pairs. One hundred twenty secondary school students were divided into four groups of 30 students and each group was given a set of word pair to learn. After they have learned the word pairs, they were asked to answer word knowledge tests. Data was analysed using SPSS software and the results for each word pair were compared. The results show that all word pairs promote large gains in learning aspects of word knowledge. The scores between the groups were also compared and it was found that the Malay Definition word pair scored the highest mean percentage, 90.4 percent, followed by the Malay Translation word pair, 84.9 percent, the English Translation word pair, 83.1 percent, and English Definition word pair, 69.8 percent.

ABSTRAK

Kosa kata memainkan peranan yang penting dalam mempelajari sesuatu bahasa. Kekurangan kosa kata mungkin menyebabkan pengguna tidak dapat menguasai bahasa dengan baik. Oleh itu, adalah sangat penting untuk guru mencari kaedah yang sesuai untuk mengajar kosa kata kerana pembelajaran kosa kata mengandungi pelbagai aspek pengetahuan perkataan. Aspek-aspek ini termasuklah ortografi, maksud dan bentuk, kolokasi, hubungan dan fungsi tatabahasa. Terdapat pelbagai kaedah yang boleh diaplikasi untuk mempelajari aspek-aspek tersebut. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kesan-kesan pasangan perkataan dalam mempelajari pengetahuan perkataan. Pengkaji berminat untuk menyelidik aspek mana yang akan diperolehi melalui pembelajaran pasangan perkataan maksud dalam Bahasa Melayu, maksud dalam Bahasa Inggeris, definisi dalam Bahasa Melayu dan definisi dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Seramai 120 orang pelajar sekolah menengah dibahagikan kepada empat kumpulan iaitu 30 orang pelajar bagi setiap kumpulan. Setiap kumpulan diberi satu set pasangan perkataan untuk dipelajari. Selepas itu, mereka diminta untuk menjawab ujian pengetahuan perkataan. Data dianalisis menggunakan perisian SPSS dan keputusan bagi setiap pasangan perkataan dibandingkan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa semua pasangan perkataan mendapat peratus yang tinggi dalam mempelajari aspek-aspek pengetahuan perkataan. Markah antara pasangan perkataan juga dibandingkan dan ia menunjukkan bahawa pasangan perkataan definisi dalam Bahasa Melayu

memperolehi peratus keseluruhan yang tertinggi, 90.4 peratus, diikuti pasangan perkataan maksud dalam Bahasa Melayu, 84.9 peratus, pasangan perkataan maksud dalam Bahasa Inggeris, 83.1 peratus, dan pasangan perkataan definisi dalam Bahasa Inggeris, 69.8 peratus.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ED	-	English Definition
ET	-	English Translation
MD	-	Malay Definition
MT	-	Malay Translation
S	-	Student (S1, S2...etc)
UPSR	-	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Knowledge is gained through reading. Thus, to succeed in any field, reading is essential. It is a source of learning, a source of enjoyment and a way to gain knowledge of the world (Nation, 2005). “However, without the proper vocabulary to encode the intended meaning of the transmitter, a message can never exist in the first place...” (Abdullah Mohd Nawi, 2005:5). In other words, the biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. Vocabulary, however, needs to be built alongside the language learning process which means it is a lifelong learning process. The main source of gaining vocabulary is through reading. Thus, the discussion on vocabulary will be incomplete without laying a hand on discussion on reading.

The present study is done in Malaysia. Thus, it will be useful to understand the previous and current reading situation in the country. A study done by Malaysia National Library in 1996 reported that on average, Malaysians only read two books a year (W. Rahimah Draman, 2007). This is very disappointing. Since then, many programmes are done to inculcate reading habits among Malaysians especially

among children and students. The New Straits Times Press, for instance, has launched a programme called School Sponsorship Programme on August 15, 2005 which encourages individuals or organisations to sponsor newspapers for schools (New Straits Times Press, 2010). This programme helps in nurturing reading English materials habits among students. Not only that, the teachers can also use the newspapers as teaching aids.

In addition, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) launched the use of English as a medium of instructions in the teaching of Science and Mathematics (ETEMs) in school in July 2002 (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). Even though ETEMs will be abolished in 2012 (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010), it serves as an eye opener to parents and teachers of the importance of English to their children and students. They have become aware of the significance of English in shaping their children's future. It is observed that students who use English as the medium in learning Science and Mathematics are more confident and able to use the language in everyday life.

Although almost anything can be learned, done and achieved through reading, it is not an easy job to do. Even with various programmes done to promote reading habit, it is reported that the reading habit among Malaysians is still low. Observations done by reporters from Utusan Malaysia at various Light Rail Transit (LRT) Station, commuter station, train and bus station revealed that most Malaysians do not use their free time to read (Rosalinda Md. Said, 2009). They preferred to just wait for their destination without reading a single book. By looking at this situation, an assumption of students' reading habit can be made as well. Students might not like reading because of uninteresting reading materials or simply because they do not understand what they read which means they are lack of vocabulary and therefore, give up easily.

1.1 Background of the Study

As stated in the previous section, reading is one of the means for students to be successful. However, reading needs considerable amount of vocabulary, knowledge and skill. “This knowledge includes recognising the letters and words of the language, having a large vocabulary and substantial grammatical and textual knowledge, being able to bring knowledge of the world to the reading task, and developing a degree of fluency with the reading skill” (Nation, 2005:10). Everything begins with a good grasp of language which definitely requires learners to understand what is said or written in English. Only then learners will be able to produce the language in spoken and written form. Thus, it can be said that vocabulary is an essential element in reading and language learning.

Teachers often encourage their students to do a lot of reading. It does not matter what kind of materials the students are interested in. Most teachers believe that reading will make their students know more. On the other hand, most teachers forget that for the students to read, they first need to have sufficient vocabulary. “How can they learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading when they do not know enough words to read well?” (Coady, 1997: 229). The text given to the students also might be too difficult for the students’ level of proficiency. So, these students need the teacher’s help to learn the words. By knowing a lot of words, learners will grasp the meaning of texts. Even if learners do not understand the full meaning, the word they know will help them in understanding the content of the text and later, add up to their word list. “Knowing a word is not an all-or-nothing proposition” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2009:2). The degree of knowing a word can range from being able to recognise the word to being able to define the word and also being able to use the word with other words.

The Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1989) suggests that language learners acquire vocabulary and spelling most efficiently by receiving comprehensible input while reading. However, it is questionable how beginners of English will be able to understand what they read when they do not have enough vocabulary to do so. “No text comprehension is possible, either in one’s native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text’s vocabulary” (Laufer, 1997: 20).

The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading, however, is a two-way relationship. It can be the effect of vocabulary knowledge on reading or the effect of reading on vocabulary knowledge (Hu and Nation, 2000). This relationship occurs at different times of learning. At the early stages of learning how to read, learners’ vocabulary knowledge will support them in reading. Learning is fundamentally dependent on vocabulary knowledge (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1997). Later on, reading will help them expand their vocabulary knowledge. This relationship shows that vocabulary knowledge and reading are two important factors in language learning.

1.2 Statement of Problem

One may argue that learners do not read much because they cannot understand the words used or vice versa; learners cannot understand the words simply because they do not read much. This problem is best defined by Nuttall (1982) in which she presents two circles that represent two types of readers. One is the Vicious Circle and the other is the Virtuous Circle. In the Vicious Circle,

learners who do not understand what they read will read slowly, which lead them not to enjoy reading and that makes them reluctant to read much and consequently, they will not be able to understand the text. The cyclical process will continue unless the learners are able to escape from the Vicious Circle.

To break the Vicious Circle and enter the Virtuous Circle, learners need to have sufficient vocabulary. The most significant handicap for L2 readers is not lack of reading strategies but insufficient vocabulary in English (Haynes & Baker, 1993). In the Virtuous Circle, learners who have sufficient vocabulary will understand better, read more, enjoy reading and therefore, read faster. The teachers must be aware of these cycles and know how to move their students, especially low proficiency learners, from the Vicious Circle to the Virtuous Circle. Low proficiency learners do not have sufficient vocabulary to assist them in reading (Hiebert, Lehr & Osborn, 2004) and difficulties in reading might hinder them to read more which make them know less. The cyclical process of the two circles can be seen in Figure 1.1.

In the Vicious Circle, there are four possible and related problems that need to be addressed in order to help the L2 learners read more. One of the problems is not being able to understand the meaning of words used in a text. Therefore, the researcher is interested in finding potential ways that will help the L2 learners in learning vocabulary.

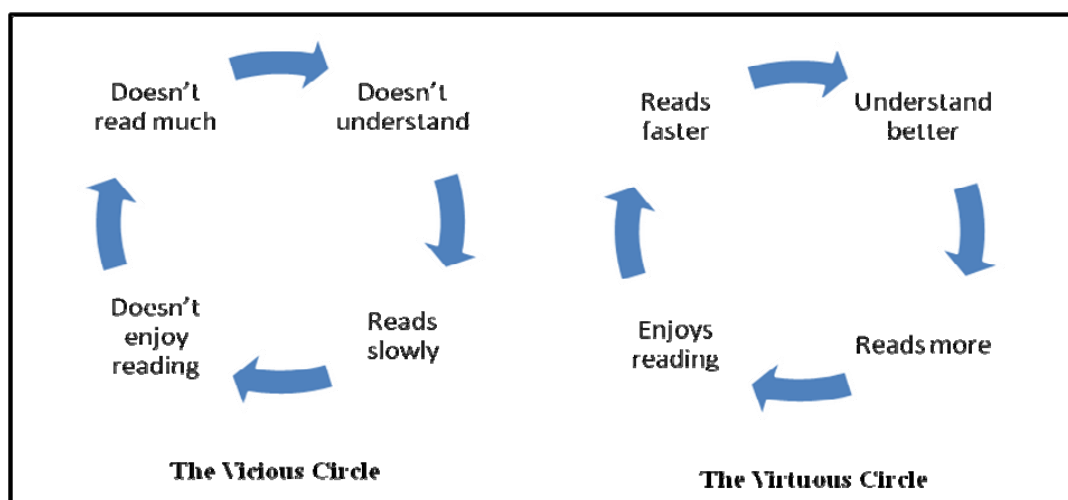


Figure 1.1: The Vicious Circle and the Virtuous Circle (Taken from Nuttall, 1982)

Other than facing problems in reading in L2, lack of vocabulary will also lead to lack of communication skills. For one to communicate efficiently, he has to be able to express himself and explain things clearly. This would not happen if he does not have sufficient vocabulary to do so. McCarthy (1990) also states that it does not matter how well the student learns grammar or L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, L2 communication cannot happen in a meaningful way.

Based on the discussion above, it can be seen that it is vital for language learners to expand their vocabulary. Expanding vocabulary is about knowing more words as well as know more about a word. There are many aspects involved to know a word. This is referred to as vocabulary knowledge or known as word knowledge. Learners' word knowledge is closely related to academic accomplishment and it helps in learning other subjects as well. Word knowledge consists of different aspects of knowing a word which are the spoken form, written form, word parts, form and meaning, concepts and referents, associations, grammatical functions,

collocations and constraints on use (Nation, 2001) (more detailed information in Chapter 2).

There might be thousands of strategies that can be used to help L2 learners in gaining word knowledge. Word pairs are one of them. Many studies that have been carried out showed that word pairs can be fast and efficient methods in acquiring L2 vocabulary (Waring, 1997, Webb, 2002, Webb, 2007). The studies, however, focused on tertiary level students. Thus, the present study is interested in investigating the use of word pairs in L2 vocabulary learning among secondary school students in Malaysian context. Since learning a word means knowing its word knowledge, the researcher also aims at looking at which word knowledge is gained through learning from word pairs.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Spencer & Guillaume (2009:1) states that “Content area vocabulary development is a tough job for students and teachers alike”. Thus, finding methods to help learners learn vocabulary is essential. The main purpose of this study is to investigate which word knowledge is gained through learning from word pairs. The researcher is interested to know to what extent word pairs can help L2 learners in learning vocabulary.

1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- (1) To investigate which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from Malay Translation word pairs.
- (2) To investigate which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from English Translation word pairs.
- (3) To investigate which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from Malay Definition word pairs.
- (4) To investigate which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from English Definition word pairs.
- (5) To investigate the effectiveness of learning from word pairs in gaining word knowledge.

1.5 Research Questions

It is hoped that this study will provide the answers to the following questions:

- (1) Which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from Malay Translation word pairs?
- (2) Which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from English Translation word pairs?
- (3) Which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from Malay Definition word pairs?

- (4) Which aspects of word knowledge are gained through learning from English Definition word pairs?
- (5) To what extent are word pairs effective in gaining word knowledge?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is carried out to investigate which word knowledge is gained through learning from word pairs. Biemiller (2001) points out that vocabulary is the “missing link” in reading instruction. Therefore, the present study intends to connect the missing link so that the learners will be able to expand their vocabulary and increase their language proficiency.

Moreover, the findings from this study will also help the teachers to use the suitable learning methods in teaching vocabulary. The findings will also make the teachers aware of the importance of vocabulary teaching especially to low proficiency learners. Teachers need to help L2 beginners to acquire at least 3000 word families (Coady, 1997) as the 2 000- and 3 000- word levels contain the high-frequency words that all learners need to know in order to function effectively in English. Since this study includes various aspects of word knowledge, it might help teachers to choose suitable activities based on the aspect of word knowledge they want to focus on.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study involves secondary school students in Johor Bahru. Only Malay students will be chosen since the researcher's native language is Malay. Since the focus of this study is to find ways to help L2 beginners acquire vocabulary, a 1,000 word level test will be conducted. The test will determine approximately how many words each learner knows.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is shown in Figure 1.2. As can be seen from the framework, the present study is conducted based on the importance of vocabulary especially in language learning, in reading and in language comprehension. These factors lead to vocabulary acquisition which is the focus of this study. Vocabulary could be acquired through learning. However, learning vocabulary is bound to several theories which are the Involvement Load Hypothesis proposed by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), memory in vocabulary acquisition (Atkinson & Schiffrin, 1968, Craik & Lockhart, 1972) and learning burden proposed by Nation (1990). According to them, the effectiveness of learning a word depends on how deep the learner involves himself or herself in the learning process and processes the word as well as the amount of effort needed in learning it. Apart from learning vocabulary, vocabulary could be acquired through assessment. It can be assessed in two ways: the breadth and the depth. Assessing the breadth of vocabulary is about measuring how many words a learner knows. This can be assessed using the Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Nation (1990, 1993) and

Schmitt (2000). Meanwhile, assessing the depth of vocabulary revolves around investigating how well a learner knows a word. When it comes to knowing a word, Nation (1990, 2001) suggests that there are nine aspects of word knowledge. Each aspect has its receptive and productive knowledge. These theories will be explained in detail in the literature review.

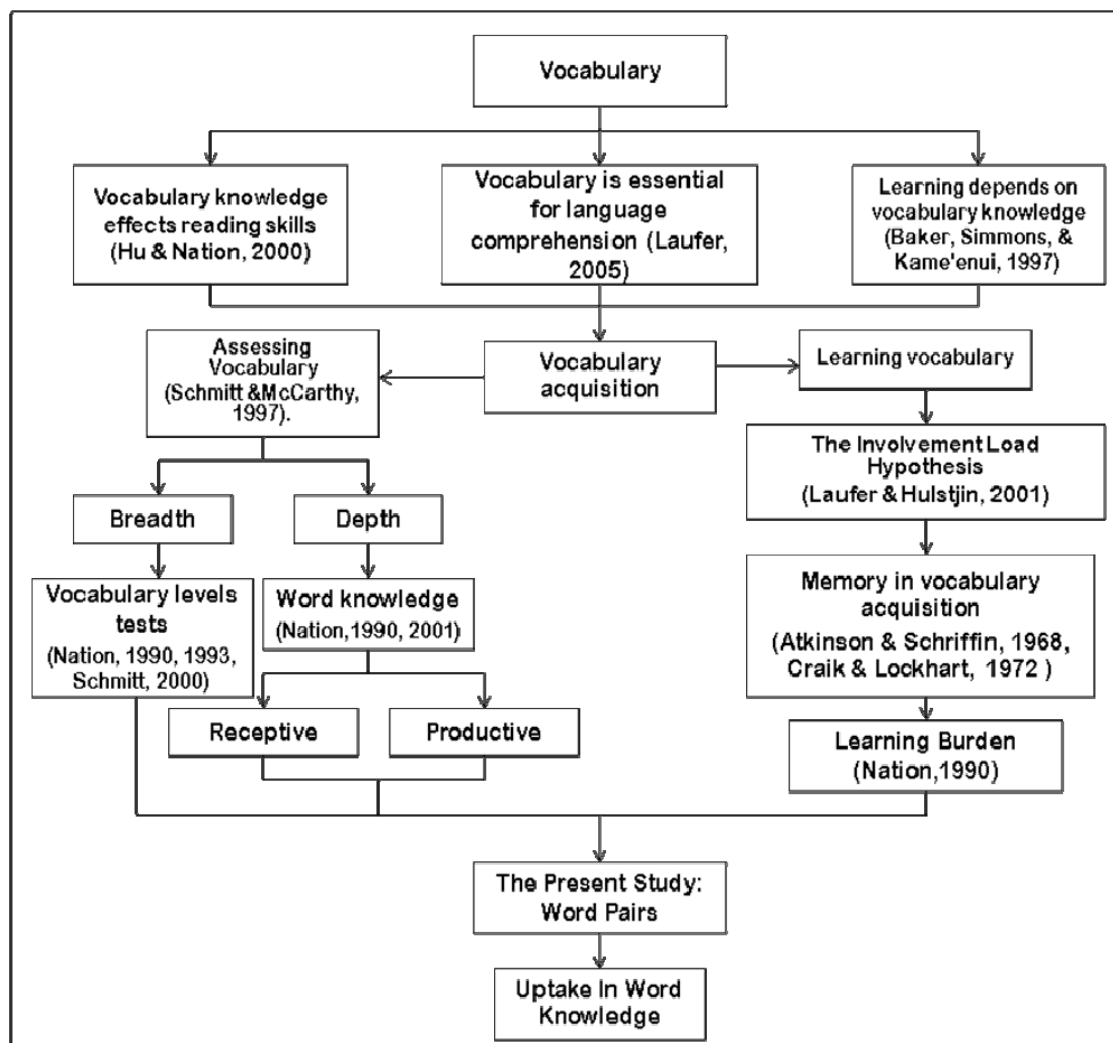


Figure 1.2: Theoretical framework

1.9 Definition of Terms

In this research, there are a number of terminologies used. To avoid confusion, the researcher will provide the definition based on the context used in this study.

1.9.1 Receptive Knowledge

Receptive knowledge is a learner's ability in recognizing and understanding a word (Nation, 2001). In other words, it includes words that learners recognise when they see or hear them.

1.9.2 Productive Knowledge

Productive knowledge is a learner's ability in using a word in written and spoken contexts (Nation, 2001). When a learner knows a word productively, he should be able to speak and write using that word.

1.9.3 Word knowledge

Word knowledge contains several aspects of what a learner needs to know in learning vocabulary. The aspects are spoken form, written form, word parts, form and meaning, concepts and referents, associations, grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on use (Nation, 2001). The term vocabulary knowledge is used interchangeably with the term word knowledge.

1.9.4 Word pair

Word pair is the task given to the students before they answer the word knowledge test. The term word pair is used interchangeably with the term treatment and task.

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