

Second language acquisition: students' vocabulary size and their strategies for retaining it

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Abstract

The success of the second language acquisition by students is determined by the second language vocabulary mastery as vocabulary is the words that make up a language. The present study aimed at investigating the vocabulary mastery level and vocabulary learning strategies of students majoring in English. The participants were 46 students of the third-year English Education Department at the University of Lampung for the 2020/2021 academic year. This study applied a descriptive quantitative research design, with data collection instruments of test and questionnaire. A vocabulary size test was utilized to identify the students' vocabulary mastery level. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was employed to explore the learning strategies used by the students to enhance and retain their vocabulary knowledge. The researcher analyzed the data statistically, then described the data so that a reliable finding could be obtained. The results revealed that most of English Education Department students at the University of Lampung were above the median of vocabulary mastery level. Furthermore, in learning vocabulary, *using English media* was the most preferred strategy, while *talking to native speaker* is the least used strategy by the students.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, vocabulary mastery, vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary size.

Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in acquiring a language. In acquiring a second language, it is almost impossible for someone to master any language without mastering vocabulary. Vocabulary is a crucial aspect of acquiring English as a second or foreign language (Zhi-liang, 2010). Vocabulary is one of the things that needs to be considered in acquiring language because without adequate vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. This assumption was supported by several previous studies, where second language vocabulary is found as one of the best predictors in assessing students' ability in mastering second language skills. Therefore, it can be concluded that mastering English vocabulary is a very important component which not only helps students to comprehend English reading material, but also to enhance their English proficiency in receptive and productive skills, i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

In determining someone's vocabulary mastery, there has been a test named Vocabulary Size Test which has advanced to bestow a credible, meticulous, as well as comprehensive measure of a learner's vocabulary size from the first 1000 to the 14th 1000-word families of English. In the SLA context, this test is used to peer how close the language learner is to have enough vocabulary mastery in order to perform certain tasks which include reading a book, newspapers, watching movies, doing conversations, etc. The more vocabulary mastered, the better the students' performance in applying their second language. Another use of this vocabulary size test is to classify learners' vocabulary growth. Measuring learners' vocabulary requires a test that is competent in measuring a large range of vocabulary sizes both longitudinally and across a group of learners. In addition, this test is also beneficial in confronting growth rates in second language learning settings whether non-native speakers are increasing their vocabulary knowledge at a faster, slower, or similar rate to native speakers.

In second language acquisition, the learner relies on and requires the development of a steady vocabulary as well. Hamzah, Kafipour, and Abdullah (2009) stated that second language vocabulary acquisition as a second language acquisition sub-discipline that focuses on the needs of second language learners to optimize their vocabulary knowledge. They also added that vocabulary learning strategies are a subset of language learning since there must be a way to achieve the learning objectives. Their research provides the processes that learners use to expand their capabilities in second or foreign language acquisition. The strategy used by students is a strategy that will work for them in developing their vocabulary and skills effectively and efficiently. In obtaining the L2, students certainly need a stable and increasing vocabulary mastery so that their second language acquisition can be maximized. Nation (2001) proposed some factors into account when defining vocabulary learning strategies, which means that strategies require choices, that is, there are numerous strategies to learn and choose from, require knowledge and benefits, also enhance the use of vocabulary and vocabulary learning efficiency and effectiveness.

Referring to the explanation above, it is interesting for the researcher to identify the vocabulary mastery of undergraduate students majoring in English and to explore the strategies they apply in learning English vocabulary in order to acquire their second language. Therefore, the researcher formulates research questions as follows:

1. How is English Education Department students' vocabulary size level?
2. What are the most frequently and the least used vocabulary learning strategies by English Education Department students?

Methods

This study used a descriptive quantitative research design. It is intended to identify a certain phenomenon (Ary, et al., 2010) by using instruments such as test and questionnaire. The data were collected online through tests and questionnaires in the form of google form. The vocabulary size test was

distributed to identify students' vocabulary size level; meanwhile, the questionnaire was administered to explore the most frequently and least used strategies in vocabulary learning by students.

Participants

Forty-six third-year students majoring in English Education at the University of Lampung in the 2020/2021 academic year were involved in this research virtually.

Instruments

An online vocabulary size test and vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire were employed as the instruments to gather the data. There were 140 questions for the vocabulary size test to identify students' vocabulary mastery level. The questionnaire has 15 items containing statements related to vocabulary learning strategies to acquire and retain their vocabulary knowledge. In answering the questionnaire, students were required to rate each statement on a five-point Likert scale indicating 1 for *always*, 2 for *often*, 3 for *sometimes*, 4 for *rarely*, and 5 for *never*.

Data analysis

The first step in collecting the data was distributing the vocabulary size test website link to the students. A set of vocabulary learning strategies with 15 items in google form was distributed in the second step to the students to discover the most frequently and the least used strategies. The data collection was done online and the time allotted was 2 days for students to fill out the test, as well as the questionnaire.

The data that have been gathered from both the test and the questionnaire were processed and analyzed statistically by using formulas. Firstly, the scores of the vocabulary test were summed up, then the total score was divided by the number of participants to get the mean score. After getting the mean score, the researcher determined the number of students who got scores above and below the mean score. After analyzing the average score among the students, the researcher then compared the students' scores to the mean score of overall test items. The median score used to determine whether the students get scores below or above the average of test items is gathered by dividing the number of test items by 2. If the test-taker could answer all the items correctly, then it can be assumed that the student knows the most frequent 14000-word families. Secondly, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed using data percentages made into a clustered column chart.

Results and Discussion

Results of Vocabulary Size Test

Firstly, to find out the students' level of vocabulary mastery, the researcher used mean scores of the students' vocabulary mastery results. The mean score was gathered by summing up the scores of the vocabulary test, then the total score was divided by the number of participants. The description is as follows: The sum of the scores is 371.400, while the number of students is 46. Thus, the mean score would be: $371.400:46 = 8.074$.

Table 1. The number of students compared to the mean score

Below mean score	Above mean score
25 students	21 students

As shown in Table 1, there are 25 students whose scores are below the average score, while there are 21 students whose scores are above the average score of all students.

Secondly, the researcher then compared the students' scores to the mean score of overall test items. The median score is used to determine whether the students get scores below or above the average of test items gathered by dividing the number of test items by 2. The description is as follows:

The sum of the test items is 14.000, then it is divided by 2. So, the median score would be: $14.000:2 = 7000$

Table 2. The number of students compared to the median score

Below median score	Above median score
18 students	28 students

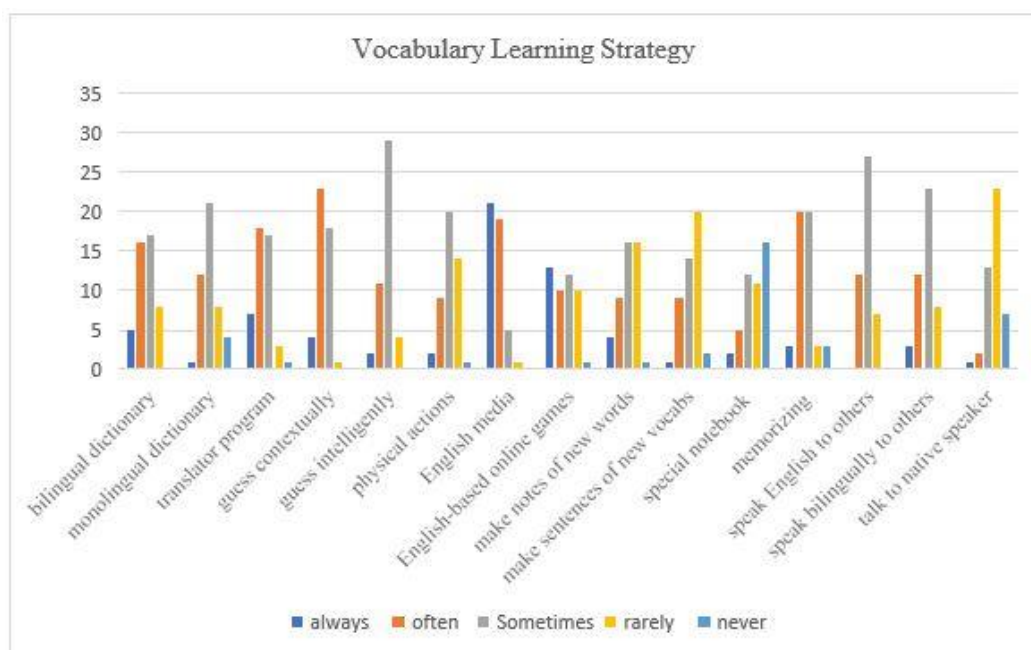
As shown in Table 2, there are only 18 students whose scores are below the median, while there are 28 students whose scores are above the median of the test items.

In addition to the results above, the researcher then compared the students' mean score to the median score of test items which is described as follows: Students' mean score= 8.074, the median score of test items= 7000 (8:7)

Although there are some students who have a vocabulary size below the average, by comparing both scores, the students' mean score of vocabulary size test is still above the median score of the test item. Results of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Based on the results of the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire, the researcher analyzed the data to find out the strategies that students frequently most and least used to acquire and retain their English vocabulary. The results are shown in the graph below:

Figure 1. Students' vocabulary learning strategy



To be more precise, the number of students for each strategy is presented in the table below:

Table 3. Students' vocabulary learning strategy

No.	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	I use bilingual dictionary.	5	16	17	8	0
2	I use monolingual dictionary.	1	12	21	8	4
3	I use translator program.	7	18	17	3	1
4	I guess contextually.	4	23	18	1	0
5	I guess intelligently.	2	11	29	4	0
6	I use physical actions when learning words.	2	9	20	14	1
7	I use English media (song, movie, etc).	21	19	5	1	0
8	I play English-based online games.	13	10	12	10	1
9	I take notes every time I come across new words.	4	9	16	16	1
10	I make sentences for every new vocabulary.	1	9	14	20	2
11	I create a special notebook for vocabulary.	2	5	12	11	16
12	I memorize every new word.	3	20	20	3	3
13	I speak English to others.	0	12	27	7	0
14	I speak bilingually to others.	3	12	23	8	0
15	I talk to native speaker.	1	2	13	23	7

Table 3 shows that VLS no. 7, *I use English media (song, movie, and etc.)* is the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy with 21 out of 46

students who are *always* use the strategy and 19 students who are *often* use the strategy. The number is significantly different compared to the students who chose the other options—*sometimes*, *rarely*, and *never* use English media such as songs and movies. This strategy is believed to be able to control and evaluate what has been learned or gained through an overview of the learning process. According to Fitriani, Nasir, Pertiwi, and Fajrina (2019), English-language media has always been considered as a good way to influence someone's foreign language improvement. Medina (2002) proposed that there are various benefits of using songs as authentic examples of second language acquisition, for example, to enhance target vocabulary and grammar. Also, English songs or movies could enhance and improve learners' pronunciation skills.

In contrast, statement number 15, *I talk to native speaker* only has 1 student that always does it, and two students that often do it. Meanwhile, the students who are rarely doing it are 23 of them, and the students who never talk to native speaker consist of 7 students. Even though *creating a special notebook for vocabulary* strategy has more students who *never* do it, that is 16 students, the comparison of the number of students who chose *rarely*, *often*, and *always* between *talking to native speaker* and *creating a special notebook for vocabulary* still shows the significant evidence that the students are most rarely use *talking to native speaker* strategy in vocabulary mastery.

Discussion

The findings from the students' vocabulary test shows that most of the students' vocabulary mastery level is still below the average of the overall total score; however, there is no significant difference between the students who are below and above the mean score. Moreover, it could be seen visibly that there is a significant difference between the students who are below and above the median of the total score of test items. In addition to the findings, English department students are considered to have good vocabulary mastery by looking at the comparison between the students' mean score to the median score of test items.

The findings of current study related to the students' vocabulary learning strategies support the findings of previous similar research conducted by Fitriani, Nasir, Pertiwi, and Fajrina (2019), that the students mostly used English media such as *songs*, *movies*, and *magazines* to learn vocabulary, while *asking native speakers for help* becomes the least used vocabulary learning strategy. Therefore, it can be concluded that the present study provides evidence that the use of English media is the most used strategy to enhance and maintain vocabulary mastery and the access to native speaker is the least used strategy.

Conclusion

This study focused on the vocabulary size measurement of English Education Department students and the strategies used in learning English vocabulary. Based on the results and discussion, the researcher concluded that the third-

year students of English Education Department, University of Lampung in the 2020/2021 academic year, were mostly above the median score of vocabulary mastery. Moreover, the students' most preferred vocabulary learning strategy was *using English media*, while *talking to native speaker* was the least frequently used strategy in enhancing and retaining their vocabulary mastery.

The findings of this study recommend the teaching-learning a second language to enhance vocabulary mastery. This can be done by applying the most effective strategies in learning vocabulary and measuring the vocabulary size by having Vocabulary Size Test. Further research can be conducted to discover the relation between vocabulary size and the strategies used in learning vocabulary. It can also be discussed further regarding the reasons behind the vocabulary learning strategies that are most frequently and least used by students.

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