



## HOW IMPORTANT ROLE THE VOCABULARY PLAYS IN READING COMPREHENSION AMONG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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### Article history:

**Received:** 1<sup>st</sup> June 2022  
**Accepted:** 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022  
**Published:** 4<sup>th</sup> August 2022

### Abstract:

In first language (L1) contexts, the importance of vocabulary knowledge for reading comprehension has long been acknowledged, and it also seems to be true in second language (L2) contexts. However, little is known about how students' vocabulary size could affect their reading comprehension in connection to a sociocultural environment like Singapore, where English is listed as an L1 in the school curriculum but the majority of students still study it as an L2. This study was conducted to examine the impact of vocabulary in reading comprehension since vocabulary is frequently mentioned by students and instructors as the major reading challenge. In this study, 37 fourth-year secondary students from a Singapore neighborhood school took part. According to the findings, pupils' reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge at the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels were connected. Only the short-answer questions produced a significant association, not the summary. Additionally highlighted are the pedagogical implications and suggestions for more study.

**Keywords:** Reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, L1,L2, reading materials.

### INTRODUCTION

In first language (L1) contexts, the importance of vocabulary knowledge for reading comprehension has long been acknowledged, and it also seems to be true in second language (L2) contexts. However, little is known about how vocabulary knowledge might impact reading comprehension in relation to a sociocultural context like Singapore, where English is designated as an L1 in the school curriculum but the majority of students still learn it as an L2 (Gopinathan 2004;). The issue of pupils' inability to manage "tough words" in reading comprehension has regularly plagued English teachers in secondary schools in Singapore. The majority of the time, children have poor comprehension scores.

Most kids' comprehension scores in several neighborhood schools are under 50%, and the school where our data was gathered is one of these. According to a poll we ran in 2002 with secondary year four Normal Academic Course students, they were unable to comprehend the passages they read since they were unfamiliar with the vocabulary. The majority of the students we profile in this research were English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with average to below average language skills as determined by the school's English Language Examination, yet they were Express Course participants.

The majority of their parents do not speak or read English at all, and they come from homes where

that language is not the primary means of communication. Only 40% of the children in this set of year 4 Express Course pupils were "readers," according to their English instructor, and their performance in terms of comprehension was ordinary to below average. The instructor identified language as the main cause of difficulty when asked about the potential causes of the students' understanding deficiencies. These pupils struggled to respond to questions that prompted the definitions of terms from the material because they did not understand many of the words in it.

The lexical suffering of L2 learners has been effectively described by Laufer and Yano (2001: 549). They claim that although L2 students are required to study a lot of material intended for native speakers in academic contexts, surveys from high schools and colleges show that their vocabulary knowledge "does not equal to a fifth of the vocabulary acquired by their native speaking classmates." L2 students will inevitably run upon a lot of new terms while studying. This issue affects ESL secondary school students equally, since they must manage the reading materials in subject areas like history, social studies, and geography in order to pass the reading comprehension test.

A compelling case for quantifying learners' vocabulary size is made by Curtis (1987). According to her, studies have demonstrated that readers' prior knowledge may have an impact on their



understanding. She continues, "Kids with low vocabulary scores are those who are lacking information that might impair their understanding and their ability to use reading as a method of obtaining new knowledge, with the exception of students who have extensive knowledge bases but struggle with word recognition." Tests of vocabulary can identify kids who require training in subjects they are unable to learn on their own (Curtis 1987: 48).

Measuring students' vocabulary size at the start of a course enables teachers to determine the language goals for the course within communicative language education, as advised by several scholars (e.g., Cameron 2002; Schmitt 2000). Given the insights it provides into the cognitive processes involved in reading and vocabulary acquisition, we think that examining vocabulary knowledge is a valuable endeavor in Singapore. This is true both for pedagogical reasons and because it helps us understand how people learn new words. Any study that makes an attempt to accomplish this may help us comprehend the nature of vocabulary knowledge and how it relates to reading comprehension.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of our study was to objectively examine the relationship between a group of secondary year-4 Express Course students' vocabulary knowledge and their performance on reading comprehension-related activities. Students in the same class may have various degrees of exposure to English due to the unusual bilingual policy that has been established in the educational system (i.e., all students are mandated to take English as an L1 subject and their individual mother languages as their L2 courses). But because the participants in the current study were secondary school students, it was shown that their six years in primary school allowed them to be on equal footing when they began their secondary school education, as evidenced by their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) scores.

Utilizing the statistical package for social sciences, correlation analysis was the primary technique utilized to analyse the data (SPSS). For the independent variables (Vocabulary Levels Test, means for the amount of challenging terms, and students' ratings for vocabulary difficulty), standard deviations, and correlation coefficients were calculated (Comprehension Scores, Short-answer Questions and Summary). We aimed to investigate whether or not the vocabulary size of these learners was connected with their comprehension ability as assessed by the short-answer questions and the summary question by

utilizing correlation statistics. In other words, we were able to answer the issue of whether the amount and complexity of students' vocabulary served as trustworthy predictors of their understanding ability.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Given a maximum score of 30, the group's mean scores for each vocabulary level test are exceptionally high. Given that there are a total of 25 available answers, the mean scores for short-answer questions are low, and the mean scores for summary questions are equally low. Given the highest potential score of 50, the total comprehension scores that are derived by summing the scores for the short-answer questions and the summary question are consequently low. The group possessed enough vocabulary understanding of high frequency terms, as evidenced by the high mean scores on the Vocabulary Levels Test at the 2,000-word and 3,000-word levels. Results at the 5,000-word level, however, indicated that this group might not yet have sufficient expertise at that level.

The 5,000-word level, according to Qian (2002: 525-26), "is a border level between high-frequency level and low-frequency level."

They may come across numerous difficult terms in their reading materials since they are "O" level candidates and reading materials at this level typically contain low-frequency vocabulary. This might negatively influence their understanding of the reading materials. This helps to explain why both the short-answer questions and the summary question had poor mean scores on the comprehension task. In the part after we provide the correlation findings, we will go into further detail on this subject.

The quantity of challenging terms as perceived by the students did not substantially connect with understanding. Although students claimed that there weren't many challenging terms in the passage, their performance on the summary and short-answer questions contradicted this. This may indicate that students misjudged the passage's challenging terms or that their assessment of vocabulary difficulty was flawed. Since various factors may affect reading comprehension, as correctly noted by Grabe and Stoller (2002), and Nassaji (2003), among others, this problem needs additional research. The results of the significant correlations between the vocabulary level scores at the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels and reading comprehension as assessed by the short answer questions seem to indicate that the performance in comprehension tasks is predicted by vocabulary knowledge at the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels.



## **CONCLUSION**

The main finding of this study lends credence to the idea that vocabulary plays a multifaceted function in reading comprehension. These pupils have, to some extent, appropriate knowledge of the high-frequency terms, according to the results of the Vocabulary Levels Tests. However, due to their relatively tiny vocabulary, they are unable to effectively navigate a text that is expository and contains low-frequency terms. For these pupils, vocabulary difficulties must be viewed from the standpoint of inadequate vocabulary knowledge, either in terms of depth or quality. The current study supports Qian's (1999, 2002) assertion that reading comprehension depends on a deep vocabulary base.

The pupils' incapacity to handle questions that test the depth of their vocabulary knowledge is demonstrated by their poor results on both the summary and the short-answer questions. Synonymy, polysemy, and collocation knowledge are all aspects of word quality. The comprehension questions and summary questions that these students must answer call for them to show that they can use the synonyms for the passage's words as well as infer the meanings of the passage's words. However, the study's participants did not demonstrate that they had the necessary vocabulary knowledge.

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