An Exploratory Study of the English Vocabulary Size of Hong Kong Primary and Junior Secondary School Students

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There is growing evidence to show a strong and positive correlation between language proficiency and vocabulary size. However, the study of vocabulary size of ESL learners and the implications for developing language proficiency is limited. This paper reports an exploratory study which aims to a) find out the English vocabulary size of the ESL primary and junior secondary school students, and b) evaluate the extent of perceived vocabulary gap among these students with reference to the school levels and types of school. Two primary schools and two secondary schools, with a total of 449 students, took part in the L_Lex of the Lingua Vocabulary Tests v2.01 (Meara, Milton & Lorenzo-Dus, 2001) and the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990). Results have shown that these ESL learners have small vocabulary size and impoverished vocabulary knowledge. Although perceived vocabulary gap does exist when measuring the vocabulary size, students at higher level of schooling, i.e. with longer English learning experience, do not necessarily possess a larger vocabulary size than those at junior levels. Systematic vocabulary development and curricular and instruction measures which take into the account of vocabulary size and knowledge of the ESL learners are suggested in order to tackle individual differences observed across school levels or between school types.

There is no denial that English language subject is priced highly in the

Asian education system and school curriculum. It is a compulsory school subject in most Asian countries. It is the medium of instruction in many schools and universities. In recent years, the continuous complaints about the declining English standard of Hong Kong students have alerted the policy makers and led to a number of new initiatives on teacher education, reform in English curriculum and stringent language policies, for example, the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT), the school-based assessment (SBA), the medium of instruction (MOI) policy, etc. (see Standing Committee on Language Education and Research 2003, available at http://cd1.emb.hkedcity.net/cd/scolar/html/ilangedreview_en.htm).

The recommendations to raise English standard of Hong Kong students have revealed government's primary concern of the issue at the peripheral, structural and administrative levels and their negligence of such at the basic language skills level. In the last decade or so, there is growing evidence to show that there is a strong and positive correlation between language proficiency and vocabulary size. The importance of vocabulary can be seen from studies showing the close relationship between vocabulary size and success in reading and writing (Biemiller & Slomin, 2001; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1995; Fraser, 1999; Laufer, 1997; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999), as well as in learners' general language proficiency (Laufer, 1986; Nation, 1990; Richards, 1976), and academic success (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996). Laufer (1997) pointed out that lexical problems of insufficient vocabulary, misinterpretation of deceptively transparent words and inability to guess unknown words correctly are found to be impeding factors for reading comprehension. She asserted that learners must acquire a 'threshold vocabulary' in order to achieve reading efficiency and activate reading strategies. Alderson (1984, p. 20) commented that "some sort of threshold or competence ceiling has to be attained before existing abilities in the first language can begin to transfer." Although no optimum vocabulary size has been reached, researchers seem to agree that there is a "threshold" level for successful reading. Laufer (1997) further suggested that the only way to tackle lexical problems is to have a larger vocabulary.

WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

One assumption underlying this study is that the more extensive one's vocabulary, the higher one's language proficiency will be. Thus, in order to raise the English standard of the Hong Kong students, these students should have a large vocabulary size. Yet, research on the measure of vocabulary size and knowledge of the Hong Kong students has been scarce. Littlewood and Liu (1996), Cobb and Horst (1999) and Fan (2000, 2001) studied the vocabulary size and needs of the Hong Kong university students. Similar research on EFL learners can be found in Yu (1991), Katagiri (2000) and Gu (2002). However, the subjects of these studies were either university students or adults. The vast majority of the ESL populations who are at primary and secondary levels are neglected.

Another assumption of the present study builds on the belief of most English teachers, parents and other stakeholders in the society that students at higher level of schooling or from 'better' schools, such as schools using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) as in the Hong Kong context, should have better English proficiency and, therefore, should possess more extensive vocabulary than students at a lower level of schooling or from schools using Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI).[1] For example, it is generally believed that secondary school students will have a larger vocabulary size than primary school students. Or, students in the EMI schools will also have a larger vocabulary size than students in the CMI schools despite the fact that they are studying at the same level. In other words, most people perceive a vocabulary gap among students at different school levels or from different types of schools. However, the extent of this

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[1] In 1997, the Hong Kong government declared a strong policy on the use of either English or Chinese as a medium of instruction for secondary schools. Only a quarter of the secondary schools are permitted to be labeled as EMI schools and the rest are CMI schools. As the society and most parents rate EMI schools more highly, therefore, these schools often "have students of better quality" and are considered as "top schools in the local education system" (Man, Coniam & Lee, 2003).

"perceived vocabulary gap" across levels and among schools has never been studied nor constructed to show the possible range of language proficiency among students.

THE STUDY

This is an exploratory study which seeks to a) find out the English vocabulary size of the primary and junior secondary school students, and b) evaluate the extent of perceived vocabulary gap among these students with reference to the school levels and types of school.

Subjects

Two primary schools (Prim A and Prim B) and two secondary schools (Sec A and Sec B), with a total of 449 students, participated in this study. There were 297 male and 152 female aged 8 to 19 years old.

Prim A is an old-established school while Prim B is comparatively new. The former one is considered as a "good" school, referencing to the percentage of students admitted to the EMI secondary schools. In contrast, the latter one is considered as a "weak" school as the majority of the students were allocated to secondary schools using Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI). A class from Primary 3 (P.3) and Primary 5 (P.5) each were invited to take part in the study. The primary-school sample consisted of 142 students.

Sec A is an old-established EMI school. It is considered as a "good" school, referencing to the English results in the public examinations and the percentage of students admitted to the universities. Using the same yardsticks for comparison, Sec B, which is a CMI school, is considered to be "weak." Two classes from Secondary 1 (S.1) and Secondary 3 (S.3) each were invited to take part in the study. The secondary-school sample consisted of 307 students. Table 1 below summarises the distribution profile of the subjects.

TABLE 1
School and Level Distribution

		LEVEL				Total
		P.3	**P.5**	**S.1**	**S.3**	
SCHOOL	**Prim A**	37	37			74
	Prim B	32	36			68
	Sec A			81	69	150
	Sec B			76	81	157
Total		69	73	157	150	449

Test Instruments

There were two test instruments: L_Lex of the Lingua Vocabulary Tests V. 2.01 (Meara, Milton, & Lorenzo-Dus, 2001) and the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation 1990). They were chosen because of ease of administration and the validity and reliability of the tests. Both tests measure the passive vocabulary size and knowledge of the students.

L_Lex

L_Lex is a computer-based basic vocabulary size test based on a vocabulary of 5,000 words. Students click on the smiling face if they know the meaning of the word on the screen, otherwise they click on the unhappy face. There are 150 items. Imaginary words are also included. They are used to check how reliable the claims are and to adjust the raw score. The test result is reported in the form of percentage and is shown on the screen at the end of the test. Meara, Milton & Lorenzo-Dus (2001, p. 12) stated that "quasi-native speakers will score near 100% on this test but that students at lower levels of proficiency score very much lower." All participated primary and secondary school students took part in L_Lex.

Vocabulary Levels Test

The Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) has been a popular test

instrument for measuring passive vocabulary knowledge. This pen and paper test contained 90 word-meaning matching items divided into 5 levels. The original version includes: 2,000-word level, 3,000-word level, 5,000-word level, university word level and 10,000-word level. The version used in this study has been updated with the university word level being replaced by a random selection of words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 1998; Coxhead, 2000; Coxhead, 1998, 2000; Coxhead & Nation, 2001). The result is interpreted in the way that if someone scores 12 or less out of 18, i.e. less than two-third of the items, at a level of the test, then it is worth helping that learner study the vocabulary at that level (Nation, 1990, p. 262). For the sake of statistical interpretation in this study, "pass" or "fail" categories were assigned to differentiate those who attained or not yet attained the level.

The primary group was excluded from this test because it was less meaningful to find out their vocabulary knowledge across different frequency levels of words when their vocabulary needs is basically at the 2,000-word level.

Procedures

The classes were arranged to do the tests in the Multi-media Language Centre (MMLC) at their school with the companion of their English teacher. Students took about fifteen minutes to complete the L_Lex on computer. Scores were recorded immediately.

For the secondary-school subjects, they continued with the Vocabulary Levels Test as soon as they had completed the L_Lex. It took them another half an hour to finish the paper. The Vocabulary Levels Test paper were then collected and marked.

Analysis

Scores from the L_Lex and the Vocabulary Levels Test were entered and analysed using SPSS. To find out if significant differences existed between

independent variable, L_Lex result, and dependent variables, school level and school type, a one-way ANOVA was employed. Post hoc tests, using Tukey HSD, were performed subsequently to investigate various pairwise comparison among the four schools and the four different school levels. To further examine if there was interactive effect between dependent variables and independent variable, a two-way ANOVA was used.

For the secondary group, the independent-sample t-tests were used to check if there was any significant effect of the two variables, school level and school type, on the results of the Vocabulary Levels Test. Crosstab or chi-square tests were subsequently performed to determine if there were significant differences between the two variables and the five levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test. A series of two-way ANOVA was conducted to see if both school type and school level had influence on the results of the five different levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test. Finally, various bivariate correlation tests were conducted to investigate the relationship between L_Lex and the five levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test.

FINDINGS

School Level

As expected, primary school students had a smaller vocabulary size than secondary school students. According to the mean scores of the L_Lex shown in Table 2 below, a P3 student probably knew 18.49% of the basic 5,000 words with the vocabulary size of about 925 words; whereas, a S3 student could possess 57.83% of the 5,000 basic words with a vocabulary size of 2,891 words.

The results of the one-way ANOVA suggested that years of English learning significantly influenced students' L_Lex results (F = 66.572, p<.001). Mean scores of the L_Lex result increased progressively but not consistently across the different levels of schooling, with the smallest

increase observed between P5 and S1 levels.

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of L_Lex of Different Levels

School Level	Mean	S.D.
P.3	18.49	11.552
P.5	39.32	11.140
S.1	45.76	24.099
S.3	57.83	20.011
Total	44.55	23.328

Post-hoc tests (using Tukey HSD) were performed to investigate various pairwise comparisons between two different levels. Test results indicated that all the pairwise comparisons between the primary and secondary schools were significant at the level of $p<.001$ (Table 3). In other words, in each pair of comparison, students at higher school level performed better than those at the lower school level. However, the comparison between P.5 and S.1 does not indicate a significant difference as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons of Mean Differences
in L_Lex Between School Levels Using Tukey HSD

Level	Primary 3	Primary 5	Secondary 1	Secondary 3
Primary 3	0	20.82*	27.27*	39.33*
Primary 5	20.82*	0	**6.45**	18.51*
Secondary 1	27.27*	**6.45**	0	12.06*
Secondary 3	39.33*	18.51*	12.06*	0

*The mean difference is significant at $p<.001$.

Secondary three students, who obtained the highest L_Lex results, significantly outperformed the students from the other three levels. Although S.1 students performed significantly better than P.3 students (mean difference = 27.27, $p<.001$), it is relevant to note that there was no significant difference between S.1 and P.5 students.

As reflected by the standard deviations in Table 2, perceived vocabulary gap did not simply exist across levels indicated by the mean scores, it could

also be found within the same level of schooling, particularly at the secondary school level. It appears that individual difference in vocabulary size among secondary school students cannot be neglected.

The Vocabulary Levels Test conducted with the secondary group also suggested that higher form students obtained significantly better results than lower form students (Table 4). Results of the independent-sample t-tests showed that years of English learning was a significant factor affecting the mean scores at all levels of the test. However, the mean scores of S.1 and S.3 students were all below 12, suggesting that even at S.3 level after learning English as a compulsory school subject for 12,500 hours in 9 years, Hong Kong students still need help with the basic 2000 words.

TABLE 4
Independent-sample T-tests Showing the Effect of School Level
on Students' Performance in Vocabulary Levels Test

	S. 1		S. 3		
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean difference**
2000-word	7.82	4.737	10.00	5.582	2.18*
3000-word	6.31	4.233	8.17	5.075	1.85**
5000-word	3.87	2.911	4.95	3.412	1.09**
AWL	3.16	2.419	5.00	3.860	1.84*
10000-word	2.23	1.971	3.21	2.148	.98*

*Significant at $p<.001$.
**Significant at $p<.01$.

Crosstab or chi-square tests showed significant differences were found between S.1 and S.3 students in the performance in three levels of the test: 2000-word ($\chi^2 = 4.811$, $p<.05$), 3000-word ($\chi^2 = 13.694$, $p<.001$), and AWL ($\chi^2 = 11.364$, $p<.01$). If scoring two-third of the items at each level is considered as a "pass", slightly above half of the subjects at S.3 level could not even attain the basic 2000-word level (Table 5). This observation does not contradict with the comment made earlier in the mean scores as the discrepancy only implies a large vocabulary gap among students within the same school level.

TABLE 5
Students' Performance in Vocabulary Levels Test With School Level as Variable

	S.3		S.1	
	Pass	**Fail**	**Pass**	**Fail**
2000-word ***	44.7% (67)	55.3% (83)	32.5% (51)	67.5% (160)
3000-word *	30.0% (45)	70.0% (105)	12.7% (20)	87.3% (137)
5000-word	4.0% (6)	96.0% (144)	1.9% (3)	98.1% (154)
AWL**	8.7% (13)	91.3% (137)	0.6% (1)	99.4% (156)
10000-word	0% (0)	100% (150)	0% (0)	100% (222)

The figure in bracket indicates the absolute number of students.
*Significant at p<.001.
**Significant at p<.01.
***Significant at p<.05.

School Type

The results of the one-way ANOVA revealed that school type was a significant factor affecting students' L_Lex performance (F = 165.714, p<.001) (Table 6). "Good" schools in the primary and secondary groups scored a relatively higher percentage than the "weak" schools. In the secondary group, students from Sec A, which is a EMI school, had a mean of knowing 68% of the 5000 basic vocabulary, whereas, students from Sec B only knew 36% of the 5000 basic words, implying that students from this CMI school could possibly possess half of the vocabulary size of the students in Sec A.

TABLE 6
Means and Standard Deviations of L_Lex of Different Schools

School	Mean	S.D.
Prim A	32.20	15.711
Prim B	25.93	14.443
Sec A	67.99	16.964
Sec B	36.05	16.068
Total	44.55	23.328

Post hoc tests (using Tukey HSD) showed that Sec A obtained the highest L_Lex results (Table 7). Sec B performed significantly better than Prim B (mean difference = 10.12, p<.001). However, there was no significant difference between Sec B and Prim A.

TABLE 7
Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons of Mean Differences
in L_Lex Between Schools (using Tukey HSD)

	Prim A	Prim B	Sec A	Sec B
Prim A	0	**6.28**	35.79*	**3.85**
Prim B	**6.28**	0	42.07*	10.12*
Sec A	35.79*	42.07*	0	31.94*
Sec B	3.85	10.12*	31.94*	0

*The mean difference is significant at p<.001.

According to the students' L_Lex results, the post hoc tests categorized the four schools into three groups or homogeneous subsets: (1) Prim B; (2) Prim A and Sec B; and (3) Sec A. Interestingly, Prim A and Sec B are different from each other in terms of the level of education, but they were grouped together based on the L_Lex results of their students.

Although the L_Lex results have shown that the vocabulary size of the students increased by years of English learning, the perceived vocabulary gap across levels of schooling was unpredictable. First, a wide vocabulary gap was noted within the same level of schooling, particularly at the secondary school levels. Second, some primary school students had a larger vocabulary size than some secondary school students. Third, the perceived vocabulary gap between P.5 and S1 was relatively narrow. The findings suggest that a wide language ability range is likely to be found among students of the same age and in the same class. However, their vocabulary or language needs and learning difficulties might have been ignored as they were taught under the same English curriculum and were using textbooks with similar quantity and nature of lexical input (Tang, 2005).

A closer examination of the results of the independent-sample t-tests in the Vocabulary Levels Test also showed that school type was a significant factor affecting the mean scores. Sec A significantly outperformed Sec B at all levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test (Table 8). However, a closer look at the mean scores revealed that students from this EMI school did not project a promising picture of their overall vocabulary knowledge. First, the mean score at 2000-word level is only 13.49, suggesting that they barely knew just

about two-third of the words at this basic word level. Second, their knowledge of academic words did not seem to be particularly well-off than their counterpart when these EMI students should have a greater exposure to the English academic words while attending other content subjects.

TABLE 8
Independent-sample T-tests Showing the Effect of School Quality on Students' Performance in Vocabulary Levels Test

	Sec A		Sec B		
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean difference**
2000-word	13.49	3.016	4.48	2.435	9.01*
3000-word	10.90	3.727	3.70	2.336	7.20*
5000-word	6.17	3.383	2.70	1.820	3.47*
AWL	5.67	3.861	2.52	1.627	3.14*
10000-word	2.99	2.212	2.44	1.985	.55**

*Significant at p<.001.
**Significant at p<.05.

Crosstab or chi-square tests were performed to determine if there were significant differences between students from Sec A and Sec B and their performance in the Vocabulary Levels test. Significant differences were found at 2000-word ($\chi^2 = 200.617$, p<.001), 3000-word ($\chi^2 = 86.307$, p<.001), 5000-word ($\chi^2 = 9.704$, p<.01) and AWL ($\chi^2 = 15.353$, p<.001) levels. If scoring two-third of the items at each level is considered as a "pass", then none of the Sec B students could get a pass at the five levels (Table 9).

TABLE 9
Students' Performance in Vocabulary Levels Tests With School Type as Variable

	Sec A		Sec B	
	Pass	**Fail**	**Pass**	**Fail**
2000-word *	78.7% (118)	21.3% (32)	0% (0)	100% (157)
3000-word *	43.3% (65)	56.7% (85)	0% (0)	100% (157)
5000-word **	6.0% (9)	94.0% (14)	0% (0)	100% (157)
AWL*	9.3% (14)	90.7% (136)	0% (0)	100% (157)
10000-word	0% (0)	100% (150)	0% (0)	100% (157)

The figure in bracket indicates the absolute number of students.
*Significant at p<.001.
**Significant at p<.01.

Interactive Effect Between School Type and School Level

The results of two-way ANOVA in L_Lex showed that both school type (F = 218.242, p<.001) and school level (F = 79.371, p<.001) were found to have influence on the L_Lex results. However, no interactive effect between the two variables was observed.

A clearer picture of the extent of perceived vocabulary gap was shown when students were classified into eight groups according to their school type and school level (Table 10). It was noted that S.1 students from Sec A had higher mean score in L_Lex than S.3 students from Sec B. Likewise, P.5 students from Prim A and Prim B obtained higher L_Lex than S.1 students from Sec B.

TABLE 10
Ranking of Eight Student Groups According to Mean Scores in L_Lex

Rank	School & Level	Mean
1	Sec A, S.3	73.725
2	Sec A, S.1	63.111
3	Sec B, S.3	44.284
4	Prim A, P.5	42.676
5	Prim B, P.5	35.861
6	Sec B, S.1	27.276
7	Prim A, P.3	21.730
8	Prim B, P.3	14.750

However, when only the secondary group was examined, results of two-way ANOVA showed that school type and school level had significant interactive effect on students' performance at all five levels of the test (Table 11). The higher form students in the EMI school seemed to have no problem at 2000- and 3000-word levels. However, all other students disregard of the school type and school level, failed to attain any levels of the test. A big gap in vocabulary knowledge between schools, Sec A and Sec B, was noted.

TABLE 11
Means of Different Levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test

School & Level	2000-word **	3000-word **	5000-word **	AWL*	10000-word **
Sec A, S.1	10.048	8.007	4.658	3.521	2.233
Sec A, S.3	15.391	12.609	7.304	7.797	3.928
Sec B, S.1	3.500	2.974	2.434	2.421	2.263
Sec B, S.3	5.407	4.383	2.951	2.617	2.605

*The interactive effect between school quality and level is significant at p<.001.
**The interactive effect between school quality and level is significant at p<.01.

Relationship Between L_Lex and Vocabulary Levels Test in Secondary Group

In order to find out if there was any relationship between the results of the two tests taken by the secondary group sample, correlation analysis was conducted. Results showed that L_Lex was positively correlated with the performance in all of the five levels of the Vocabulary Levels Test. Students who scored higher in L_Lex could also attain higher in the progressive level of the Vocabulary Levels Test (Table 12). It is noted that L_Lex is a vocabulary size test which based on the vocabulary of 5,000 words. Thus, stronger correlations between L_Lex and Vocabulary Levels Test were expected at 2,000-, 3,000-, 5,000-word levels and AWL[2] but not at 10,000 word-level. The analysis further supports the validity and reliability of the two test instruments.

TABLE 12
Bivariate Correlations Between L_Lex and Vocabulary Levels Test

	2000-word	3000-word	5000-word	AWL	10000-word
L_Lex	.759*	.711*	.555*	.483*	.175**

*The bivariate correlation is significant at p<.001.
**The bivariate correlation is significant at p<.01.

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[2] According to Nation and Coxhead (2001), most words from AWL fall into the 3,000- and 5,000-word levels.

DISCUSSION

This study sets out to explore the vocabulary size and the extent of perceived vocabulary gap of a selected sample of primary and junior secondary school students in Hong Kong.

In general, students from a "good" school had bigger vocabulary size than students from a "weak" school. After nine years of ESL learning in the formal context, a S.3 student would probably have a vocabulary size of less than 3,000 basic words. The difference in vocabulary size between students from a "good" school and a "weak" school was found to be huge. In terms of the years of English learning experience, secondary school students do not necessarily have a larger vocabulary size than primary students. Although secondary group sample scored a higher percentage of knowing the 5,000 basic words than the primary group sample, there is no significant difference between S.1 and P.5 in the results of the vocabulary size test.

In examining the nature of words that the secondary school students know, students from the "good" school did much better than those from the "weak" school at different word levels. However, the mean scores of the students from this "good" school were not outstanding. In fact, the mean scores suggested that these EMI students could probably have no learning need at the basic 2000-word level, but with the wider exposure to the academic words in school subjects, it is disappointing that they did not perform particularly better in the AWL level than the CMI students who used Chinese medium and textbooks in learning school subjects.

The results of the Vocabulary Levels Test demonstrated that students with longer years of English learning performed better in the test. However, it is crucial to note that the great majority of the junior secondary school students in the study did not even know enough basic and simple words. If an ESL learner has to know 5,000 word families or 8,000 lexical items to read for pleasure with 98% coverage (Hirsh & Nation, 1992), or a sight vocabulary of about 5,000 word families to understand 98% of the words in the text for successful contextual guessing (Coady *et al*., 1993; Hirsh & Nation, 1992;

Laufer, 1997), or a minimal sight vocabulary of 10,000 word families to understand the coverage of 99% - 100% of the university level texts (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996), then the findings of this study has clearly shown that the Hong Kong students have to work much harder to increase their vocabulary size from very young age.

These ESL students, disregard of the school level and school type, have small vocabulary size and impoverished vocabulary knowledge. The fact that there was a huge vocabulary gap between EMI and CMI school students in this exploratory study, that CMI students could be less proficient than primary school students, and that CMI students did not even know enough basic 2,000-word level at S.3, is worrying, as far as the great number of CMI students in the local school system is concerned. When the lack of vocabulary affects language proficiency, reading success and transfer of learning strategies, strenuous effort in promoting vocabulary teaching and learning through curriculum development seems to be particularly urgent and essential. In view of the role of vocabulary plays in developing language proficiency, it is suggested that a systematic record or assessment on vocabulary size and knowledge of different groups of students, and a clear direction or target for vocabulary growth should be considered in the English curriculum. It will be practical if the curriculum developers can identify the vocabulary needs of the Hong Kong students and incorporate them explicitly in the English curriculum, probably in the form of word list, which will then be transferred into the textbooks by the publishers for systematic vocabulary development throughout the primary and secondary education.

Extensive reading has always been encouraged in the English curriculum. However, for most secondary school students, the major source of extensive reading seems to be limited to local English newspapers only. A quick look at the words in the news or featured articles suggested that they are far too difficult for the ESL students if the students do not even possess the basic 2,000-word at S.3 level. Students should read materials which are of their vocabulary level. They can read more graded readers and simplified reading books intensively and extensively for basic vocabulary growth. They can also

study word lists based on graded readers to increase the vocabulary size and improve their word knowledge. When a sound vocabulary background is constructed, training in guessing words in context, learning prefixes and roots, raising awareness of the different meanings in different contexts and wide general reading on novels, newspapers, university texts, etc should then be recommended.

CONCLUSION

In most Asian ESL/EFL countries, like China, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, English is a compulsory school subject and is taught in a big class. The matrix of perceived vocabulary gap observed in this exploratory study suggested that individual difference in vocabulary size and knowledge should not be neglected as far as whole class teaching and school streaming are concerned. As such, this study shed lights to the English curriculum design and the teaching of English subject in meeting the vocabulary needs and difficulties of their students for the sake of developing the general language proficiency.

Although there is a consensus that a large vocabulary size will enable ESL/EFL learners to perform better in reading comprehension, transfer of strategies, language competence and performance and even academic success, to most teachers and learners, the core concern of how learners acquire vocabulary most effectively and efficiently remains unanswered. Most ESL learners still see vocabulary as the most difficult part of language learning. In addition to the support of pedagogy and strategies on handling vocabulary in resource books, research on how vocabulary is actually treated in the ESL classroom and how ESL learners acquire vocabulary intentionally and incidentally will be helpful to identify ways of effective and efficient vocabulary teaching and learning in the formal ESL context.

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