

**THE VOCABULARY DEFICIENCY OF SOME ESL IN READING SKILLS: A
STUDY OF PRE-ND AND GENERAL STUDIES STUDENTS S. M. S KANO
STATE**

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Abstract

The research work studies the respondent's level of comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. The core of this study is to find out why Pre-ND students of the School of Management Studies Kano State Polytechnic, could not score high in reading comprehension test. However, the research seeks to find answer to the following questions. Is there a minimum level of vocabulary that L2 learner needs to comprehend below which comprehension is not possible? Can an L2 learner be taught how to acquire a wide range of vocabulary for different purpose? The theoretical framework for the study is the productive and receptive theory (Stuart 1973). To clear the doubt, sample subjects were obtained from a larger population to serve as the test respondents. Where tests of comprehension and vocabulary conducted on to the students. The study employs a quantitative base approach (Nunan 2001). Simple percentile used in the analysis to achieve the desired result. However, one of the findings suggest that the respondents were deficient in vocabulary knowledge, lack strategies and other mechanics of reading skills. It was recommended that students be exposed to the culture of rigorous reading, inculcate extensive reading habit.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Threshold, Comprehension, Knowledge, Deficiency

Introduction

The knowledge of vocabulary is inevitable in reading achievement and more specifically to reading comprehension. Chall (1983), "Knowledge of word meanings and the ability to access that knowledge efficiently is required as important factors in reading and listening comprehension, especially as students' progress in school and beyond"

The place of English in Nigerian context is significant as an official language and language of education, (instructions). This makes it compulsory on the students to acquire a rich repertoire of vocabulary to attain certain level of comprehension competence and

proficiency in the use of the language. There can never be such an achievement without proper knowledge of vocabulary as a building block of language acquisition. McCarthy (1990) as quoted in Abdu (2007:4) says that, The single biggest component of a language course is vocabulary .No matter how well students learn grammar, no matter how successful the sounds of L2 are mastered , without words to express a wide range of meaning , communication in second language just cannot happen in any meaningful way .This clearly shows the need for vocabulary acquisition in the analysis, perception and interpretations of any given utterance whether written or spoken as communication.

Aim

The aim of this study is to assess the level of Pre-ND student's vocabulary knowledge in reading achievement.

Objectives

- i) To examine the student's level of vocabulary in reading skills
- ii) The research work would at the end determine the student's level of vocabulary knowledge.
- iii) The study will suggest ways of improving student's vocabulary.

Statement of the Problem

It had been establish that reading comprehension is one aspect of language learning and the most important tool for an ESL learner (Chall, 1983). The necessity for this research work is premise on the assumption that, English as a Second Language Students' have been observe to lack the skills to cope with reading comprehension. Such students did not have the tool to achieve high scores in reading comprehension; neither do they have effective strategies to guide them on their reading comprehension.

Research Questions

- I. Can ESL learner be taught how to acquire wide range of vocabulary for different purpose?
- ii. Does any kind of reading enhance and improve the student's reading skills?
- iii. Is there a minimum level of vocabulary that L2 learner needs to comprehend below, which comprehension is not possible?

Literature Review

Language consist of words having different importance in terms of use, some belong to the open class system while, others to the close class. To acquire words and use them effectively, one has to read a great deal. Sources of receptive and productive vocabulary are usually dictionaries, novels, magazines, newspapers and the like. Knowing the words and acquiring them is not enough but equally knowledge of the word class, pronunciation and different usages in context connotatively and denotatively. Possession of these skills enhances effective comprehension of what is read.

L2 Reading Models

Reading researchers, scholars and language specialist have been studying the reading process based on their interpretation of the reading process developed models for reading and defined the process in an attempt to depict how an individual perceives a word, processes a clause, and comprehends a text (Singer and Ruddell, 1985).

Goodman (1968p.126) explains the reading process as a “psycholinguistic guessing game”. in which the reader uses “general knowledge of the world or a particular textual component to make intelligent guesses about what might come next in the text and samples only enough of the text to confirm or reject these guessing” (Barnet, p. 13). Researchers classify the models of reading into three categories:

1. Top-down
2. Bottom-up
3. Interactive

These models are used in first language (L1) reading, as well as second or foreign language (SL/FL) reading (Barnett, 1989.). The top-down model suggests that comprehension begins in the mind of the reader, who already has some idea and prior knowledge about the meaning of the text. This model considers the readers and their interest, world knowledge and reading skills as the driving force behind the reading comprehension (Barnett, 1989; Goodman,1968), as they construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge, as the text has no meaning of itself (Carrel and Eisterhold, 1983; Rumelhart, 1980). According to the bottom-up model, comprehension begins with the processing of the smallest linguistic units, working towards larger units. This model focuses mainly on the written text, rather than the readers themselves. In this model, the reading process considered as a text driven decoding process wherein the role of reader is to construct the meaning found in the text (Carrell, 1983; Gascoigne 2005; Gough, 1972). The text is a “chain of isolated words, each is deciphered individually”, and the reader is someone who “approaches them by concentrating exclusively on the combination of letters and words in purely linear manner” (Martinez-Lang, 1995, p.70).

While the top-down model focus on reader variables (such as background knowledge, strategy use, reading purpose, and interest in the topic) as the main source of reading comprehension and the bottom-up model places emphasis on text-based variables (vocabulary, syntax and grammatical structure), the interactive model, which is the most recent of reading model, combines the top-down and bottom-up variables. The interactive model is an interaction between the top-down and bottom-up. This model suggests that reading is, a result of interaction between the reader and the text (Bernhardt, 1991; Eskey, 1988; Grabe, 1991).

Barnett (2017p. 29), describes this interaction as, when “the reader interacts with the text to create meaning as the reader's mental processes interact with each other at different levels to make the text meaningful”. Nation (2001, p. 26), there are nine aspects of knowing a word, which includes form, meaning and use, as follows:

- 1) Spoken form
- 2) Written form
- 3) Word parts
- 4) Connection of word and meaning
- 5) Conceptual meaning
- 6) Association with related words
- 7) Grammatical function
- 8) Collocation behaviours
- 9) Word usage constraints; appropriateness

Ruddell (1994) also divides the knowledge of a word into six categories:

- 1) Knowing the word meaning aurally
- 2) Knowing the word meaning but not expressing it
- 3) Knowing the meaning but not the word
- 4) Knowing the partial meaning of the word
- 5) Knowing a different meaning of a word
- 6) Not knowing the concept or the level.

Thus, one's knowledge does not have to include both receptive and productive control to perform certain tasks. Schmitt and Meara (1997) argue that native speakers do not master all types of word knowledge, they only master a limited number of word knowledge categories for most of their lexicon and have only the receptive knowledge of some low frequency words. Second language learners, like the native speakers, do not have to have a full knowledge of all vocabulary to function in a language. This knowledge varies depending on the task the person is performing (Mazynsky, 1983; Qian, 2004). Some activities involved only receptive knowledge while others require productive as well. In reading task, only receptive knowledge is required. L2 learners do not need full knowledge of a word meaning for every reading comprehension task; partial knowledge may suffice. Through this partial or incomplete knowledge, learners can gain additional knowledge about a word, as suggested by Henriksen (1999) He proposed three components for vocabulary development thus partial to precise knowledge, depth of knowledge and receptive to productive ability. This shows that a second language learner needs to very much develop his/her receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge to achieve a good comprehension of what is read. A larger vocabulary one earns enhances other language skills. Second language most acquire as much vocabulary as possible in order to effectively read in the language (Barnhardt and Kamil, 1995). In the light of the above argument, Calfe, et, al. (2001) list five stages of vocabulary knowledge to second language namely:

- 1) Learning to read a known word
- 2) Learning new meanings of known words
- 3) Learning new word that represent known concept
- 4) Clarifying and enriching meaning of known words.
- 5) Moving words from receptive (listening and reading) to expressive (speaking and writing) vocabulary (p.81).

Richard (2004) identifies seven aspects of word knowledge: syntactic behaviour, associations, semantic value, different meanings and underlying form and derivations. In line with Richards, Nation (2001), distinguish eight types of word knowledge: form, grammatical pattern, meaning, and function, relation with other words, which specify both

for receptive and productive knowledge. Contrary to the above categorisations, Chapelle (2004), argued that a trait definition of vocabulary should contain four dimensions: vocabulary size, knowledge of word characteristics, lexicon organisation, and process of lexical access. In support of, Henrickser (1999), proposed three separate but related vocabulary dimensions partial precise knowledge dimension, a depth of vocabulary knowledge and a receptive productive. While Qian (2004), developed on the collective strength of earlier models of vocabulary knowledge, opines that, vocabulary knowledge, comprises four intrinsically connected dimensions: vocabulary size, depth of vocabulary knowledge, lexical organisation and automaticity of receptive productive knowledge. In all these dimensions, there is a clear consensus that vocabulary knowledge should at least comprise two dimensions, which are vocabulary breadth, or size, and depth, and/or quality of vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary breath refers to the number of words the meaning, which a learner has at least some superficial knowledge. Depth of vocabulary knowledge is define as, learner's level knowledge of various aspects of a given word, or how well the learner knows this word. The above definitions of vocabulary knowledge strengthen the argument that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Four perspectives on the vocabulary reading connection

Several models to describe the significance of having sufficient vocabulary knowledge in reading achievements as suggested. Anderson and Freeboody (2004) offers three hypotheses labelled: instrumentalist, aptitude and knowledge.

The instrumentalist view sees vocabulary knowledge as being a major prerequisite causative factor in comprehension. The aptitude view sees vocabulary knowledge as one of many outcomes of having a good brain. Good reading comprehension is also one of these outcomes. Other outcomes might include skill at nonverbal puzzle and the ability to understand oral explanation. The knowledge view sees vocabulary as an indicator of good world knowledge. This world knowledge supports reading comprehension because the reader must bring as much information to the text as reader expects to get from it. Mezynski ((2004) suggests the fourth, access hypotheses. The access view of the importance of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, like the instrumentalist view, sees vocabulary as having a causal relationship with comprehension provided that the vocabulary can easily accessed,. Access can be improved through practice. This access can involve several factors including fluency of lexical access, speed of coping with affixed forms, and speed of word recognition.

Linguistic threshold

“Threshold” is an entrance or doorway, or a level point or a value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not. Smith (1995) sees language threshold as a sort of passport or gateway through which L2 learner got entrance into the

premise. He added that one could not become a member until he/she is acquainted with the language and cannot learn the language until he/she became a member. Nation (2001p. 144); comes up with two different definitions of the lexical threshold. Considering the first, as traditional meaning, which sees the threshold as “an all or nothing phenomenon. If a learner has not crossed the threshold, then adequate comprehension is not possible”. If a learner has crossed the threshold, comprehension became possible. Second, if a learner has not crossed the threshold, the possibility of comprehension is low and “if the learner has crossed the threshold, the chances are on the side of the learner gaining adequate comprehension” what he referred to as a “probabilistic boundary”.

The notion of linguistic threshold

The notion of a second language threshold was initiated by Clarke (2012), concluded, insufficient language vocabulary results in a sort of short circuit. Cummins (2015) conduct a research on the threshold hypothesis with a particular focus on lexical threshold, and its effect on L2 reading comprehension. The nature of the language threshold is largely lexical while the level of vocabulary threshold emphasises that a reader has to have a high level of vocabulary for other skills to function such as the background knowledge of the learner, reading strategies to affect reading comprehension

Threshold for L2 reading comprehension

Coady (1997) believes that 3,000 word families make up the minimum vocabulary knowledge an L2 learner should possess, before reading strategies are very effective. Nation (2001), learner needs not less than a vocabulary knowledge of 5,000 word families, which is typical of at least 98% threshold of vocabulary coverage in a given text, to comprehend complex texts.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this work is anchored on the receptive and productive theory. Receptive knowledge is important for recognising the meaning of a word without the need to produce the word again. On the other hand, productive knowledge is the knowledge that learners need to produce language forms by speaking and writing to convey a message to others. Nation (2001) and Laufer (1990) the threshold consist of 3,000 word families approximately 5,000 lexical items for a good comprehension, this provides the 95% text coverage for minimum acceptable comprehension of 55%.

Research Design

The research work was conducted in the students' respective classes, where comprehension tests, vocabulary tests and interview administered to the students, at different intervals. The subjects of the research were informed about the tests and no compulsion on any student, the response was solely at their own volition, the test administered in two days Monday and Tuesday to give the students' ample time to prepare for the tests. The two tests were conducted in two hours.

Population

The population of the research work is the pre- ND Students of the School of Management Studies Kano, in the five streams of pre-ND Banking and finance (180 students), pre-ND Business studies(200 students), pre-ND Accounting (160 students), pre-ND Public Administrations(230 students) and pre-ND Secretarial Studies (130 students) total 900 students.

Adopted Sampling Technique

The researcher use random sampling to suit the purpose of the research work. The respondents grouped into five classes; this made it mandatory to include each class in the sampling. Random selection is use to obtain fair data and allow equal chance for students' participation. The researcher picked the sample of 269 students randomly statistically proposed by Kreycie and Morgan (2006).

Classes	Students' Population	Sample Size
Pre-ND Accounting	180	54
Pre-ND Banking/finance	200	58
Pre-ND Business Admin	230	62
Pre-ND Public Admin	160	50
Pre-ND Secretarial/Studies	130	45
Total 5 classes	90	269

Research Instruments

The instruments used for data collection are sets of two tests on reading comprehension, two vocabulary tests and an interview that served as the tools for obtaining the desired result from the subjects. This type of instrument give the learners opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, analysis and mastery of the details of what is contained in the passage. The comprehension test consists of five questions, which had a wider coverage of the entire text. Each question in the test is scored based on four marks each (4 marks) total of (20 marks). Nation (2000) proposes a minimum mark expected for adequate comprehension which accommodate what he referred to as the degree of human error, a minimum score of 15/20.

Data Presentation

Test on Comprehension One

The essence of this comprehension passage is, to assess the respondents' level of understanding, as the passage is simple and contain high frequency words. The result shows higher percentage of the respondents had a poor understanding of the passage. ten (10) out of the 269 scored 5/5 equals 3.71%, 109, scored 2, 40.52%. To interpret the following

scores into a percentile, the researcher compare the figures of the respondents score with the sum total of the sampled subjects to determine level of pass and failure.

Scores	No of sampled subjects	Percentage
5	10	3.71%
4	17	6.32%
3	41	15.24%
2	109	40.52%
1	60	22.30%
0	32	11.89%
	269	100%

17 respondents scored 4/5, which is encouraging. Nation (2001), 75% is a good result, which is a minimum mark expected for adequate comprehension, referred as the degree of human error. Lack of good comprehension of the passage could be as result of the respondent's limited vocabulary knowledge coupled with English grammatical and syntactic compositions. The higher scores, range between 22.30% and 40.52 %, those scored 1 and 2 are below the average and far below 11.89%. Additionally, second comprehension test was conducted same as the first, two hours given to the respondents to read the passage then answer the questions, to be precise each passage was accompanied with a vocabulary test. The passage was also a narrative but a bit difficult than the first, essence of this was to be certain whether the kinds of vocabulary, grammar and syntactic composition hinder successful comprehension.

Comprehension Two

Scores	Number of Respondents	Percentage
5	10	3.71%
4	22	8.17%
3	32	11.89
2	50	18.59%
1	101	37.54 %
0	54	20.07%
	269	100%

From the above result, a small number of the respondents, 3.71%, scored 5/5, while a higher number scored 1 out of 5. This passage, seems a bit difficult than the first, the fact that some low frequency words appeared in the text might have contributed to the lack of understanding of the passage by the respondents despite that, answers to the questions were explicitly stated in the passage. The respondents had limited vocabulary some of them solely depend on guessing, Nation (1990) as cited in Richards and Renandy (2000:262), Guessing from the context is a complex and often-difficult strategy to carry

out successfully, to guess successfully from the context learners need to know about 19 out of 20 words (95%) of the text.

Test on Vocabulary One

Scores	Number of Respondents	Percentage
12	10	3.72%
11	8	2.97%
10	5	1.86%
9	6	2.23%
8	5	1.86%
7	6	2.23%
6	10	3.72%
5	11	4.09%
4	20	7.43%
3	31	11.52%
2	63	23.42%
1	60	22.30%
0	34	12.64%

From the above results, a higher percentage of the respondents, did not understand the whole of the vocabulary required of them to provide other word or phrase that would mean the same as used in the passage, therefore, had some difficulty in understanding the text. 10 of the test subjects were able to score 12 out of 12 equals 3.72% of 269 and 8 students scored 2.97% while 20 scored 7.43% the highest scores ranged between 23.42% and 22.30% for those who scored 1 and 2 only. 12.64% did not answer or supply another word. This proved that vocabulary level of the students was very low, that was why the respondents could not understand the passage.

Test on Vocabulary Two

Scores	Number of Respondents	Percentage
12	3	1.12%
11	1	0.37%
10	1	0.37%
9	6	2.30%
8	14	5.20%
7	8	2.97%
6	12	4.46%
5	18	6.69%
4	32	11.90%
3	28	10.41%
2	34	12.64%
1	50	18.59%

information from different types of sentence. Consequently the research work suggested that the test subjects were deficient in their comprehension, this could be the reason why high number of the students failed, and they could not answer the questions correctly despite the fact that answers to the questions were explicitly stated in the passage. The words in the passage were high frequency and no technical or special vocabularies used in passage (I) unlike the second passage.

Furthermore, the researcher found that, the students did not form the culture of reading extensively (genres) that will increase their vocabulary acquisition. Another finding was that, the test subjects lack the 3,000 words, which Nation (2001) refers to as the General Service Words, to the time the students gained admission into the pre-ND and General Studies Department to learn the English language. It was part of the discovery that a high number of the students could not read fluently, and pronouncing words correctly become problem, this seriously hamper the reading comprehension of the passages by the students. Furthermore, this research work confirm that , the students lack the skills of identification and interpretation , nor do they have strategies to read efficiently, to guess from the context, the skill to define expectations, skim and scan the text very well and make inferences. Consequently, the researcher discover that the students' attitude towards the target language, equally contributed immensely to the poor performance in the tests.

Finally, the study suggested that there is a minimum percentage of known words (Vocabulary), which serves as the lexical threshold for the L2 learner, to adequately, read and comprehend a text simple or complex.

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