Assessing UiTM TESL Students' Knowledge of Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Learning the vocabulary of a language is vital in the process of acquiring the language because it serves several functions which assist learners to be good at the language, even though learning can be complicated and burdening for learners (Jiang, 2004; Cobb & Horst, 2004). The aim of the study was to investigate the English vocabulary levels of the TESL mainstream students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). This research study also examined the differences in vocabulary levels between the male and female students. The study involved 90 respondents that were enrolled in the TESL programme at the Faculty of Education in UiTM, Shah Alam. The findings revealed that most of the UiTM TESL students scored an average of 15 correct answers in the 2,000 word-level, 12 for the 3,000 word-level, 8 for the 5,000 word-level, 10 for the University Word Level and 6 for the 10,000 word-level. The study also revealed that even though the students were highly engaged with listening, reading, speaking and writing activities, these involvements did not correlate with the mastery of vocabulary knowledge.

Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language involves not only learning the rules that govern the grammar but also the vocabulary of the language. A majority of second language (L2) researchers (Hughes, 1989; Jiang, 2004; Nation, 2001) acknowledge the fact that having a good grasp of vocabulary knowledge of a language is both essential and vital in the

process of acquiring a language. Hughes (1989) emphasizes that one's knowledge of vocabulary is vital for the development and demonstration of other related linguistic skills. Researchers (Jiang, 2004; Cobb & Horst, 2004) highlight that though the learning of new vocabulary can be rather complicated and seen as a burden by learners, it serves several functions which can assist an individual to be good language learner. Nation (1999, 2001) adds that the need to develop L2 learners' vocabulary is not a goal in itself, but it is to help them to listen, read, speak, and write more effectively. Thus, any deficiency in vocabulary may affect L2 learners' language skills since L2 learning is predominantly correlated to vocabulary or word knowledge.

Possessing limited or insufficient vocabulary can hinder the learning process for university students especially when they have to listen to academic lectures, give presentations, read and comprehend texts and write papers. Parry (1997) adds that many non-native college and university students encounter many new and unfamiliar words that are related to the academic fields when they join courses that are designed for the native speakers. According to Valcourt and Wells (1999) international students who plan to enrol for their academic programmes at tertiary institutions are likely to be anxious upon the types of lexis they will encounter upon joining the field and a lack of vocabulary knowledge may eventually hinder them from progressing in their academic studies.

Nation (1999) uncovers that L2 learners with advanced proficiency in English may generally be expected to have acquired a minimum productive English vocabulary of 2,000 to 3,000 word families for use in speaking and writing along with a slightly larger receptive vocabulary of 3,000 to 5,000 word families. According to Read (2000) and Nation (1990), a 'word family' refers to a set of word forms that consists of a base word, its inflected forms and a variety of derived forms, which are common in meaning. They further pointed out that for L2 learners enrolling in higher institutions, the university word level with a vocabulary of about 5,000 to 10,000 words is a more realistic minimum size. Hence, anything below the university word level would probably handicap the learning process. These figures are however only an estimation.

Literature Review

Anyone investigating vocabulary acquisition must first be aware of some basic concepts in this field of study. First and foremost, we need to ask

the question. "What is a 'word' and what is considered knowing a word?" According to Read (2000), the 'word' is not an easy concept to be defined, whether theoretically or for multiple applied purposes, but can be referred as a variety of lexical units. Nevertheless, Carroll et al. (1971) cited in Nation (1990) point out that words are differed based on their form. To this Nation (1990) adds that even if two same words are used as to apply different meanings they are considered as two words. For example, the word *society* (as a noun) and *Society* (as a proper noun) are perceived as two words as they carry different meaning in different context.

The second question, we need to ask is "What is considered knowing a word?" Qian (2002) points out that over the years lexical researchers have come out with numerous criteria of how to understand the idea of what is involved in knowing a word. Segalowitz, Watson & Segalowitz (1995) and Read (2000) propose that vocabulary knowledge involves knowing the meanings of words. This idea is also supported by Wallace (1982) and Read (1988) who agreed that knowing a word refers to the ability to recognize the multiple meanings of a word, use the word appropriately and grammatically within context and relate the word with other words which are semantically similar.

In addition to this, Read (2000) adds that if L2 learners are able to match words of that second language with an equivalent word in their first language or mother tongue, or with the second language synonym, this is considered to be adequate to show their understanding of the words. The learners' vocabulary will develop in accordance to their development of proficiency in the second language especially when they begin to make use of these words in their productive tasks.

Qian (2002) defines the concept of knowing a word based on two main classes. They are:

• knowledge of word meaning (generalization, breadth of meaning, and precision of meaning) and
• levels of accessibility to this knowledge (availability and application).

According to Qian, Read, Wesche & Paribakht (1996) cited in Qian, (1999), some proposals have been made concerning dimensions of vocabulary knowledge, which are breadth and depth. Breadth of vocabulary knowledge refers to the size of vocabulary or the number of words with at least superficially known meaning, while depth of vocabulary knowledge relates to how well one knows a word. This idea was also supported by Read (1988) who proposed that differentiation between breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge is useful to suit the purpose

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of a particular study related to vocabulary knowledge. For example, breadth of knowledge is more focused when estimating the number of a learner's vocabulary, in a way that how many of the words are known. However, for other purposes, such as achievement testing, depth of knowledge will be far more essential in determining the learner's actual knowledge of the words (Qian, 1999).

Lexical researchers have classified vocabulary under two different categories: receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. Fan (2000: 105-119) has classified receptive vocabulary knowledge as the "understanding of the meaning of the words and storing the words in memory". Nation (1990: 5) however has classified receptive or passive vocabulary as "the ability to recognize a word and recall its meaning when it is encountered". Generally, the basic idea that Fan (2000) and Nation (1990) proposed is that receptive or passive vocabulary are words which are initially encountered, learned, comprehended and accumulated in one's memory accordingly via reading and listening. In addition, receptive or passive vocabulary can also be defined as the way the meaning of a word is retrieved and understood by the learner when he or she is exposed to written or oral input (Nation, 2001).

Productive vocabulary is also known as active vocabulary. It refers to the ability to retrieve the needed vocabulary from memory by using them at appropriate time and in appropriate situations (Nation, 1990, & Fan, 2000). Nation (2001) further explains productive or active vocabulary as the process of retrieving (receptive/passive knowledge) and producing the appropriate written or spoken language form to get meaning access. It involves knowing how to pronounce the word, how to write and spell it and how to use it in correct grammatical patterns along with the words it usually collaborates with. This process will occur when one is engaged in writing or speaking.

According to Henning (1973) cited in Nation (1990) different learners with different proficiency levels have different ways of accumulating vocabulary. ESL learners possessing a low proficiency store vocabulary according to the sounds of the words (Nation, 1990, & Read, 2000). For instance, they tend to accumulate words that have similar sounds like *horse* and *house*. On the other hand, high proficiency ESL learners store words according to their meaning (Nation, 1990; Read, 2000). Read (2000) highlights that the ways of organizing and storing vocabulary in the memory of native speakers and ESL learners will be upgraded as they become better at the target language.

Nonetheless, second language vocabulary learning is rather difficult for learners as it is influenced by learners' first language. Nation (1990) points out that it is almost impossible to keep these two languages apart. Therefore, learning a new second language word will be much easier if the word is predictable and if the learners know a few words of the second language (Nation, 1990). A number of researchers (Wallace, 1982; Nation & Coady, 1988; Nation, 1990; and Paribakth & Wesche, 1996) propose that the most effective way to learn vocabulary is to learn it within the context. This is because when a word is used in a context, the meaning of the word is better understood as a single word may carry various meanings (Nation & Coady, 1988). This is probably to say that if a word is learned per se, learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge will not be depicted.

In addition, frequent exposure could lead L2 learners to learn the words better (Wallace, 1982; Nation & Coady, 1988; Nation, 1990; Paribakth & Wesche, 1996). If they regularly encounter the words, they will learn and understand them better. However, another study by Kachroo (1962) cited in Nation (1990) revealed that there is a relationship between learning and repetition. Kachroo reveals that Indian students after being exposed to a word occurring seven times in the English course book, learnt the English words, while over half of other words that occur only once or twice were not known by the students (Nation, 1990). In agreement with Kachroo's finding, Salling (1959) suggests that six to seven repetitions are necessary while Saragi et al. (1978) mentions 16 and more repetitions are necessary (as cited in Nation, 1990). Yet, students feel that words are very important and are eager to learn them (Coady & Huckin, 1996).

Besides learning through context and repetitions, there are quite a number of suggestions made by other researchers in vocabulary learning. For example, Coady & Huckin (1996) propose that vocabulary and spelling are attained by reading, association and particularly mnemonic techniques, and also diversity of learning strategies. Paribakth & Wesche (1996) and Pulido (2003) also shared similar view regarding the role played by reading activities in vocabulary learning. This is due to the findings of previous studies by Griffin & Harley (1996) and Waring (1997) who found that learning receptively, either listening or reading, leads to a significant amount of productive knowledge (as cited in Mondria & Wiersma, 2004).

Newton (1995) suggests an interesting point that apart from receptive learning, vocabulary can also be learned through communicative activity.

This idea is obviously in line with Krashen's theory of auto-input. He explains how learners treat their language production as the input for their L2 learning (Ellis, 1997). In addition, Nation & Coady (1988) and Pulido (2003) also highlight the substantial impact of learners' background or prior knowledge on vocabulary learning, especially if they are familiar with the topic learned. Moreover, most adult learners can cope with direct vocabulary instruction (Coady & Huckin, 1996).

Nation (1990) and Adolphs & Schmitt (2004) emphasize the vital role of vocabulary instruction in language learning. Based on the meanings of the words, teachers need to enable students to differentiate which word is used in formal situation, and which word is colloquial, and therefore it is necessary for teachers to teach word according to its appropriateness (Nation, 1990 and Fan, 2000).

According to Nation (1990), since a word that is used in different context carries different meaning, teachers should teach meanings of words based on their concepts. He added that using a word in sentences can teach word meanings inductively while deductive teaching of word definitions can be done by showing or explaining their meanings. Since there is a lot of individual variation across learners, teaching them vocabulary learning strategies is essential (Coady & Huckin, 1996).

There is no denying that learning the vocabulary of a language is vital in the process of acquiring a language. Carrell (1988), Koda (1989) and Laufer (1992) find that vocabulary knowledge in second language contributes significantly to reading comprehension in second language (as cited in Clark & Ishida, 2005). Laufer (1989) and Hsueh-chao & Nation (2000) find that learners will be able to read comprehensively if they know 95% and 98%, respectively, of the running words used in the text (as cited in Clark & Ishida, 2005). This is agreed by Clark & Ishida (2005) who conducted a study on vocabulary knowledge that all learners with lowest lexical coverage (approximately 80%) condition showed invariable low comprehension scores. Read (2000) added that sufficient knowledge of vocabulary is the fundamental requirement for effective use of language.

Learners will have difficulties in transferring their first language reading strategies to their second language reading contexts until they reach the 5,000 word-level (Clark & Ishida, 2005). This is because their inadequate knowledge of vocabulary would prevent them from fully understanding the reading materials and make sense of the materials efficiently. Segalowitz, Watson & Segalowitz (1995) suggested one of the vocabulary learning goals is to expand the word size. In relation to

this, Coady et al. (1993) found a link between vocabulary size and reading performance that is the more high frequency vocabulary one possesses, the higher the reading proficiency (as cited in Clark & Ishida, 2005).

So the next pertinent question we may need to ask ourselves is why test learners' vocabulary knowledge? A study conducted in the context of TOEFL (2000) highlighted that vocabulary knowledge plays a great role in assisting academic reading comprehension (Qian, 2002). This is because vocabulary knowledge test will "validate roles of breath and depth" of one's vocabulary knowledge. In addition, Nation (1990), Read (1988, 2000) and Fountain & Nation (2000) emphasized the importance of vocabulary test as to serve the purpose of tracking learners' proficiency. It is used to identify the extent to which learners have achieved, by far, in learning the language. The results of the vocabulary test can disclose learners' levels of proficiency and obliquely provide information for teachers about the learners' strengths and weaknesses in that language (Read, 1988; 2000, & Nation, 1993). Thus, with such information, teachers can take actions to set intended learning outcomes, plan vocabulary activities and improve teaching pedagogy to ensure vocabulary development (Nation, 1993, & Read, 1988).

Read (2000) points out that L2 learners should possess the 2,000 and 3,000 word-levels. This is to ensure L2 learners can operate effectively in the language. In earlier Dutch studies a range of 3,000-5,000 word bases was identified to be adequate for a university student. However, Hazenberg & Hulstijn (1996) prove a contradicting finding in their study that a minimum of 10,000 word base is needed for university studies.

With regards to active and passive vocabulary knowledge, a study was conducted by Fan (2000) to address the relationship between active and passive vocabulary knowledge as well as students' proficiency levels. The results of the tests showed no consistent relationship between students' proficiency in English and the two types of vocabulary knowledge. Proficient students were found to have large passive vocabulary knowledge as compared to the less proficient students. However, only some proficient students scored well in the Active Vocabulary Test, while some others did very badly. In short, when a productive skill is concerned (speaking or writing), a learner's proficiency cannot be the determiner of whether he or she is able to recall or produce more words than a less proficient learner.

This extensive research based on vocabulary learning and teaching, points to the fact that vocabulary is at the heart of all language acquisition.

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Harmon & Wood (2008) succinctly summarize the following as the six key understandings of vocabulary learning and teaching for all teachers across age levels and content areas.

1. Firstly, word knowledge is important for all learning as a large vocabulary base is an asset to readers.
2. Secondly, word knowledge is complex and it involves several processes that need to be taken into consideration when providing instruction. For example, teachers need to realize that word learning is incremental and that learners learn words gradually. They later internalize these words through repetition and other forms of successive encounters.
3. Thirdly, metacognition is an important aspect of vocabulary learning as learners need to be aware of what they know and do not know and be able to employ suitable strategies to enhance their vocabulary acquisition
4. Effective vocabulary instruction moves beyond the dictionary / definitional level of word meanings.
5. Vocabulary learning occurs implicitly in classrooms across disciplines. Learners learn words incidental through context and through other encounters such as reading and listening
6. Finally, vocabulary learning occurs through direct and explicit instruction. In such a case, learners need to be made aware of new words, the importance of wide reading and vocabulary building strategies.

Realizing the importance of vocabulary acquisition in the success of one's academic achievement, it is thus pertinent to investigate learners' lexical knowledge for both practical and diagnostic purposes. Numerous studies (Nation, 1990; Laufer 1992) and explorations in ESL vocabulary research are continuously being conducted in institutions worldwide. Therefore, this exploratory case study examines the vocabulary knowledge of future L2 trainers – i.e. TESL teacher trainees undergoing a B.Ed (TESL) programme at a local public university in Malaysia.

The Study

This study was initiated by the researchers' observations concerning certain instructional practices of UiTM TESL teacher trainees undergoing their teaching practicum exercise in Malaysian Schools. Moreover the researchers felt that there was scant empirical research conducted in

the area of measuring students' vocabulary knowledge in the local Malaysian setting.

The TESL teacher trainees' poor vocabulary knowledge was identified by the researchers via observations in the classroom. Among the weakness that the students portrayed was their inability to perform well particularly in their written work. The content of their written assignments indicated that they lacked word precision and often used inaccurate words to describe what they wanted to express. Furthermore, due to their limited vocabulary they were unable to provide definite meanings of words and a majority of them repeated the same lexis resulting in their inability to express their thoughts accurately. Besides writing, the students also faced difficulties in delivering academic presentations in classes due to insufficient or inadequate vocabulary. The TESL students' poor performance in both oral and written assignments due to their limited vocabulary knowledge, served as a catalyst for the researchers to embark on this study. Specifically, this collaborative effort among the researchers investigated the TESL students' productive vocabulary knowledge with a focus on words that students are able to retrieve and use them in their writing.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the UiTM TESL students' knowledge of vocabulary levels. Secondly, the study also aimed at examining the relationship between students' vocabulary levels and the frequency of involvement in four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Finally, this study set out to provide suggestions on how to enrich the students' existing vocabulary levels and give recommendations for future research in the related field.

The following were the three main research questions of the study:

1. What are the vocabulary levels of UiTM TESL students?
2. What are the differences of the vocabulary levels of male and female TESL students?
3. Is there a relationship between students' vocabulary levels test scores and the frequency of involvement in four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing?

The subjects chosen for this exploratory study were the mainstream TESL teacher trainees studying at the Faculty of Education in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) located in Shah Alam. These students were undergoing the 4-year degree programme under the B.Ed (TESL) programme. A total of ninety respondents (*n=90*) were randomly selected for the study. The sample consisted of 45 male and 45 female respondents.

Since this study was confined to UiTM TESL students only, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other TESL students from other universities in Malaysia.

The instrument used for the study was the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Paul Nation and Batia Laufer (1999). This diagnostic testing of vocabulary knowledge measures the students' vocabulary knowledge, which is based on words from 5-word-frequency levels (2,000, 3,000, 5,000 word-level, the University Word List level and 10,000 word-level). According to Laufer (1998), the test displayed a reliability of 0.82 using the Kuder-Richardson 21 formula when administered among two groups of L2 learners who are the native speakers of Hebrew in a typical comprehensive high school.

The 90 respondents in the study were required to respond to a questionnaire which consisted of three sections, namely, Sections A, B and C. Section A of the questionnaire looked into the demographic data of respondents' such as gender, age and current semester.

Section B consisted of the five different sections of the Productive Vocabulary Level. Each level of the test consisted of 18 items and the total number of items for all sections was 90 items. The respondents as test-takers were required to fill in the blanks in sentences (one blank per sentence) of the correct word based on the clue given (Read, 2000), as the following example:

Question: She wanted to call her brother but the **tele** _____ didn't work.

Answer: She wanted to call her brother but the **tele** phone didn't work.

All the 90 test items were marked and scored. A score of one mark was given to every correct word that fit the sentence. Only words that were written grammatically and with correct spelling were considered as the right answers. The total score for each of the five levels was recorded. The score of the test for each level was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{total number of items with correct answer}}{18}$$

The mean scores for every vocabulary level were calculated based on the number of male and female students. Results were compared between male and female test-takers. The mean score for each gender was calculated as follow:

$$\text{Mean score} = \frac{\text{total score of each level of all male\textbackslash female students}}{\text{number of male\textbackslash female students}}$$

The respondents were expected to answer all questions within forty-five minutes. The test was conducted and assisted by a research assistant in a classroom setting.

Section C consisted of a set of questions which was used to measure the learners' frequency of involvement in four language skills in a form of Likert Scale. The four language skills were classified into two dimensions; Productive Dimension (writing and speaking) and Receptive Dimension (reading and listening). This section comprised of 12 self-constructed items and respondents answered based on a 5-point Likert Scale of: Never (1), Rare (2), Moderate (3), Often (4) and Always (5). These self-constructed items were validated by an expert in the area. In addition, the basic statistical data revealed that this set of questions displayed a reliability of .72 on the Cronbach Alpha coefficients.

Findings

Section A of the questionnaire investigated the TESL teacher trainees' demographic data. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the demographic data. The findings indicated that the respondents of the study included 45 (50%) male respondents and 45 (50%) female respondents. With regards to age (Table 1), a large majority (43) of the respondents (47.78%) fell into the 20-21 year-old group, while 35 (38.89%) respondents were in the 22-23 year-old age group. Only 9 (10%) of the respondents were in the 24-25 year-old group, and the remaining 3 (3.33%) respondents were aged 26 and above.

Table 2 reveals the distribution of the respondents according to semester. Among the respondents, 30 (33.33%) of them were in Semester 3 and 9 (10%) were in Semester 4. In addition, 8 (8.89%) were from Semester 5, and 8 (8.89%) were from Semester 6. The other 8 (8.89%) were from Semester 7 and the remaining 27 (30%) respondents were eighth semester. There was no respondent from Semester 1 and 2.

One of the main aims of this study was to investigate the respondents' current vocabulary level. The findings in Table 3 reveal the overall scores and mean scores of each vocabulary level of all respondents (n = 90). For the 2,000 word-level, all respondents scored 1,331 marks with a mean score of 14.79. This is followed by the 3,000 word-level, the overall

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Table 1: Distribution of Respondents According to Age

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age	n=90	100%
20-21	43	47.78
22-23	35	38.89
24-25	9	10
26 & above	3	3.33

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents According to Semester

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Semester	n = 90	100%
3	30	33.33
4	9	10
5	8	8.89
6	8	8.89
7	8	8.89
8	27	30

score was 1,049 with a mean score of 11.66. In the 5,000 word-level, the whole score of all respondents was 734 marks and the mean score was 8.16. With regards to the University Word List level, all respondents scored 940 with a mean score of 10.44. The lowest overall score of 505 was for the 10,000 word-level and the mean score was only 5.61.

The findings revealed that a majority of the respondents who managed to score approximately 14 to 15 correct answers out of 18 items have mastered the 2,000 word level. A considerably high score between 11 to 12 items was also observed in the 3,000 word level. This exhibits that the respondents have mastered this level well. However, a decline was seen in the 5,000 word level (mean = 8.16). The findings displayed that a majority of the respondents have not been able to master even half of the words at this level, which is merely 8 items out of 18. Surprisingly, the average score of the University Word List level is 10 correct answers. This score, which is close to the average score of 3,000 word level, displays that the respondents can actually master this word level if more conscious effort is taken to learn and master vocabulary at this level. On the average, the respondents scored the lowest at the 10,000 word level (mean = 5.61). The findings revealed that the respondents were only able to answer correctly a maximum of one third (1/3 of 18 items = 6 out

Table 3: Overall Results of the Vocabulary Levels Test

Word level	Total score $(n = 90 \times 18 \, \text{items})$	Mean score $\left(\dfrac{n = 90 \times 18 \, \text{items}}{90} \right)$
2,000	1,331	14.79
3,000	1,049	11.66
5,000	734	8.16
UWL	940	10.44
10,000	505	5.61
Total	4,559	50.66

of 18 items) of the entire items at this word level. In addition, the findings tend to suggest that most probably the students face difficulty to answer the vocabulary questions posed in the 10,000 word level group.

Another aspect explored in this study was to investigate the vocabulary test levels of male and female UiTM TESL students. The findings are displayed in Table 4 given below.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents' Mean Scores of Each Word Level According to Gender

Word Level (WL)	Total Score (Male)	Mean Score (Male)	Total Score (Female)	Mean Score (Female)
2 000 WL	678	15.07	653	14.51
3 000 WL	506	11.24	543	12.07
5 000 WL	341	7.58	393	8.73
UWL	448	9.96	492	10.93
10 000 WL	230	5.11	275	6.11
Total	2203	48.96	2356	52.36

The findings revealed that the total score at the 2,000 word-level of 45 male respondents at this level is 678, and the mean score is 15.07, while the total score of the 45 female respondents is 653, with a mean score of 14.51. The female respondents, however, showed a better performance at the 3,000 word-level. The mean score of the male respondents at this word level was 11.24 while the females recorded a mean score of 12.07.

The female respondents also exhibited a better performance at all other levels. For example the mean score for the male respondents at the 5,000 word-level was 7.58 in comparison to their female counterparts who revealed a mean score of 10.93. Furthermore the overall score at the UWL level of the male respondents was 448, with a mean score of 9.96. On the other hand, the total score of the female respondents was 492, and the mean score for this level was 10.93. The mean score of the male respondents at the 10,000 word-level was 5.11 while the females recorded a mean score of 6.11.

Based on the overall findings on the vocabulary levels test, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to investigate whether there exist differences in the vocabulary levels test scores between the genders. The findings reveal that there is no statistical difference between genders was observed on the overall vocabulary levels test marks even though female scores are higher ($M = 52.36$, $SD = 14.50$) than male ($M = 48.96$, $SD = 11.59$). The t-test between the male and female students was $t (88) = -1.23$, $p = .223$. The summary of the vocabulary levels test according to gender is shown below in Table 5.

Table 5: Vocabulary Levels Test According to Gender is Shown

	Mean	SD	*T*	*t* sig
Gender				
Male	48.96	11.59	−1.23	−.223
Female	52.36	14.50		

N = 90
*p < .05 two tailed

The following findings provide information in response to the last research question; are there relationships between students' vocabulary levels test scores and the frequency of involvement in the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to investigate the relationship. In order to interpret the strength of the relationship, the researchers decided to set the alpha level (α) at 0.01 level of significance. In order to examine the correlation between students' vocabulary levels test scores and the frequency of involvement in four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), the researchers used the 5-point ordinal scale categories of Davis (1971) from 'very strong' to 'negligible' as shown in the table below.

Table 6: The Correlational Strength of Davis (1971)

	Range
Very strong	.70 - 1.00
Strong	.50 - .69
Moderate	.30 - .49
Weak	.10 - .29
Negligible	.00 - . 09

Table 7 displays the results on the relationships between students' vocabulary levels test scores and the frequency of their involvement in the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to investigate if any relationships exist. Firstly, the results from Table 7 reveal a strong negative correlation between students' productive vocabulary levels test scores and the scores obtained in the frequency of involvement in speaking. This indicates that the relationship was significantly related, (r (88) = -.60, p = .00) whereby a strong negative correlation means the lower scores the students obtained in the productive vocabulary levels test, the higher scores of frequency involvement in speaking as claimed by the students.

Secondly, the results from Table 7 also reveal a moderate negative correlation between the students' productive vocabulary levels test scores and the scores obtained in the frequency of involvement in reading skill. This moderate negative relationship was significantly related, (r (88) = -.40, p = .00). This supports the claim that the lower scores the students obtained in their productive vocabulary level test, the moderate scores of frequency involvement in reading skill were reported by the students.

Table 7: The Correlational Matrix for Students' Vocabulary Levels Tests and the Frequency of Involvement in Four Language Skills; Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Productive Vocabulary levels test	-	-.60**	-.07	-.40**	-.15
2.	Speaking		-	-.32**	.52**	.20
3.	Writing			-	-.32**	.20
4.	Reading				-	.47**
5.	Listening					-

**.Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Finally, the results also display that there was no relationship between students' vocabulary levels tests and the frequency of involvement in language skills; both in listening skills (r (88) = -.15, p = .16) and writing skills (r (88) = -.07, p = .53).

Despite the fact many researchers propose that familiarity and frequency of encountering words will lead to better learning of the words (Wallace, 1982, Nation & Coady, 1988, Nation, 1990, Paribakth & Wesche, 1996), the results of this study have drawn a contradicting idea. The findings of this study regarding students' involvement in the four language skills reveal that students are highly engaged with a variety of language activities. Surprisingly, students do not show any vocabulary growth even though they frequently encounter words through the four language skills from various language activities. Nevertheless, there is a high possibility that a situation like this occurs because there is no reinforcement in the academic setting. They might come across various words from various levels but in terms of meaning, their knowledge and familiarity is doubted.

In relation to the productive test, students are not able to perform well because they are more engrossed with reading and listening (receptive skills) as compared to speaking and writing (productive skills). However, Paribakth & Wesche (1996) and Pulido (2003) propose that reading activities have a significant role in vocabulary learning. Mondria & Wiersma (2004) further agree that if vocabulary is learned receptively, either through listening or reading, the learner's productive vocabulary will boost up significantly. In contradiction to these ideas, this study has divulged distinguishing evidence regarding the role of receptive learning. Although a large number of students claimed that they constantly listening to English-based radio programmes such as songs on the radio and English movies on television and at the cinema and reading English materials, these activities did not affect their vocabulary acquisition.

Additionally, Newton (1995) suggests that vocabulary learning can also take place through communicative activity and this study has proven the reliability of this idea. UiTM TESL students have a moderate use of English language for communicative purposes. They often speak in English language while presenting academic tasks. Knowing that this is part of the requirements for presentations, students only make an effort to speak in English when they find it is necessary for them to do so. As for informal daily communication itself, it is observed that the students prefer to converse using their first language.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend Productive Vocabulary Levels Test be given to students at a few significant stages throughout the TESL degree. Programme. Instead of constraining interview session to question-and-answer and essay writing only, interviewees for Pre-degree TESL programme should also sit for the vocabulary test. At this point, the interviewees as L2 learners must master at least the 2,000 and 3,000 word-levels to enable them for entry into the programme. This can be considered as the preparation for the students for the degree programme. If students are unable to perform at the 10,000 word-level, it is suggested that UiTM should design a vocabulary intensive programme for TESL students. Hazenberg and Hulstijn (1996) propose that 10,000 word base is the minimum requirement for university studies.

In addition, it is also recommended that UiTM should conduct a diagnostic test to investigate the vocabulary levels of all UiTM TESL mainstream students from semester one to eight. The findings of this study may be used to design appropriate vocabulary activities for the students. These activities can be included into the four main language skills. Besides that, the results of the study may also be used as a yardstick to evaluate the extent of the effectiveness of the existing syllabus. It is highly recommended that all the persons involved in curriculum design could collaborate, investigate this matter and design a suitable vocabulary enrichment programme so that the content can help to enrich and enhance students' vocabulary accordingly.

As for further research related to this topic, it is recommended that a bigger sample should be used to gain more accurate findings. The sample should include not only TESL students of UiTM but also TESL students from other universities and colleges in Malaysia. This is to enable academics in the field of education to investigate the extent to which TESL students have mastered vocabulary knowledge. From this, appropriate steps can be taken to help TESL students to improve both their language skills as well as to master vocabulary knowledge. This is very important to ensure that even though English is a second language, yet Malaysian universities and colleges can produce effective and knowledgeable English language teachers.

It is also strongly recommended that Productive Vocabulary Levels Test be given to students at a few significant stages throughout the years of the TESL Degree programme studies. Instead of limiting the interview

to question-and-answer and essay writing, interviewees for Pre-degree TESL programme should also sit for the vocabulary test. At this point, the interviewees as L2 learners must posses at least the University Word List level to enable them entry into the programme. Before students complete the Pre-degree TESL programme, they should take the vocabulary test again and score up to the 10,000 word-level. If such increment is seen in their vocabulary levels, it will qualify the students to further their studies to the bachelor's degree level. Nevertheless, if students are unable to perform at the 10,000 word-level, it is suggested that UiTM should design a vocabulary intensive programme for these future English Language teachers.

Conclusion

Vocabulary is undeniably essential knowledge for all language learners as it helps learners to understand utterances and the content of reading materials. This study provides an insight to the levels of the vocabulary knowledge of UiTM TESL students and it hopes to create an awareness among the TESL students to upgrade their acquisition and mastery of vocabulary in second language particularly English.

With regards to the pedagogical implication, the findings of this research can be seen as guidelines for educational officers and administrators to design vocabulary enrichment programmes for TESL students. Such programmes may provide a great deal of assistance for students in empowering their vocabulary knowledge. This research can also create awareness among English language teachers in schools on the value of emphasizing vocabulary teaching to their students. This in the long run may help students to posses a good vocabulary level (at least mastery at the 2,000 and 3,000-word level) before they consider joining a TESL programme for their university study. In addition, sufficient vocabulary knowledge may render to effective production of spoken and written forms especially among TESL students. This would lead to a better preparation of L2 teachers in future.

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