A Case Study Of Tertiary Learners' Capability In Lexical Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Lexical competence is crucial in ensuring academic success at all levels. At tertiary level, sufficient word knowledge and lexical comprehension ensure sufficient literacy of language skills as learners need to cope with challenging academic tasks in their respective field of study. This paper reports findings of a case study of pre-degree Malaysian learners enrolled at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis. The study was undertaken to find out if these learners have sufficient lexical ability before they embark on a degree programme. Nine learners of varying proficiency levels of high, average and low language proficiency were selected for this study. The data were collected in sequential two-phased procedure. The first phase involved diagnostic stage of probing learners' level of word knowledge with online *Vocabulary Levels Test* by Laufer and Nation. Subsequently, learners' capability within the scope of word form, spelling and pronunciation was explored through the *Academic Word List Test* and in-depth interviews with the participants. The findings revealed that the learners' word mastery level is only between 1,000 and 3,000 words, which is far below the minimum level required for tertiary education. These insights thus inform the researcher that urgent measures must be taken in order to redeem the situation. Hence, a structured vocabulary learning programme is deemed necessary in the Malaysian English language curriculum to help learners acquire sufficient lexis before embarking on tertiary education. This would also provide our tertiary learners with the avenue to make them employable and marketable graduates with firm language proficiency in general and lexical competence in particular.

Keywords: lexical; vocabulary; capability; Academic Word List; Malaysian tertiary learners

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary or lexis or lexical item refers to the semantics of the language. Vocabulary also appears as the headword in a dictionary entry (Jackson, 1998). It relates to knowledge of words as well as word meanings and thus, forms the basic building blocks of language learning experience. As the cornerstone of language proficiency, lexical knowledge is the key element as it enables one to respond to the four language skills effectively. With adequate lexical knowledge, a learner has sufficient input to partake in productive skills, namely, daily oral communication and written work. It is estimated that about 3,000 spoken word families are required to cover about 96% of one's daily communication lexicon use or about 2,000 words to maintain conversations (Schmitt, 2000). Similarly, lexical competence also ensures ability to cope with various types of reading (Nation, 2001). Possessing good knowledge of how the various systems inherent in a language may not necessarily enable one to communicate but it is usually possible to

communicate if one has the vocabulary. Vocabulary is thus, perceived to occupy a key position in second language (L2) learning.

In essence, vocabulary learning far transcends form-meaning correlation and is not the mere piling up of individual words (Nation, 2001). It encompasses two dimensions which are word knowledge dimension and word skill dimension. Word knowledge involves knowledge of word form, its meaning and its contextual use, both receptively (passive or recognised) and productively (active vocabulary). Word skill dimension on the other hand, refers to the ability to use the word in a wide range of contexts. It requires the understanding of appropriate grammatical functions, common collocations, appropriacy in different contexts and frequency of use. To sum up, it can be seen that knowledge dimension strategies include remembering form-meaning pairs (for example, mnemonic devices) while skill-oriented strategies relate to the meaningful use of words in different contexts as well as the automaticity in retrieving and producing those words. Both these dimensions are complementary and of equal importance, and should develop integratively. Hence, in order to know a word completely, it is essential for one to know key aspects of the word, namely its pronunciation, spelling, derivations and its range of meanings.

THE STUDY

At Malaysian tertiary institutions in general, it is observed that many learners do not possess the basic word knowledge necessary for successful tertiary education. For example, in reading authentic texts, comprehension of a minimum of 3,000 written word families is required including 83% of the Academic Word List (Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001), and 10,000-word knowledge ensures comprehension and computing ability of challenging academic texts. A native university graduate is estimated to have vocabulary knowledge approaching 20,000 words, which means that learners need to steadily acquire about 1,000 word families a year if they wish to attain native-like word knowledge. Although learners do pick up some vocabulary through incidental and explicit learning methods throughout their schooling years, they are unable to possess sufficient vocabulary knowledge to cope with studies across various disciplines. Various vocabulary intervention programme and research in the past concluded that in general, it is possible to teach learners about 8 to 10 words effectively each week (Lehr, Osborn, Hiebert, n.d.). Hence, in about 200 school going days (approximately 29 weeks) in Malaysia, we can realistically estimate that about 290 words can be learnt through direct classroom instruction, together with other expressions learnt outside class. This concurs with Stahl and Fairbanks' (1986) assertion that about 400 words can be learnt each year. With this equation, Malaysian learners ought to have learnt at least 4,400 words in their 11 years of education at primary and secondary school. Alas, this is not the case as it is found that by the time Malaysian learners reach tertiary level, they are nevertheless, far lagging in terms of word knowledge to cope with tertiary studies of various disciplines.

Studies conducted at the secondary schools as well as institutions of higher learning show that lexical paralysis is a major concern to be addressed. Diagnostic and exploratory studies conducted by Emily Jothee Mathai, Leele Susana Jamian and Suchitra Nair (2004), Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif, Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor and Harlina Yunus (2008) and Norzanita Othman (2009) at various institutions indicated that

Malaysian tertiary students are far below the university threshold level of vocabulary knowledge. The scope of inquiry of other studies include investigating speaking proficiency among pre-MUET (Malaysian University English Test) learners of Form Six (Saeidah Malek, 2000), where lack of vocabulary was found to be an obstacle, resulting in long pauses, hesitations and repetitions during speaking tasks. Other studies, namely on writing competence (Sarah Abedi Abdullah, 2004), speaking proficiency (Sharifah Sheha Syed Aziz Baftim, 2005) and reading ability (Naginder Kaur & Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Abdullah, 2007) also yielded findings of low lexical competence. For instance, in investigating writing competence among pre-medical undergraduates, Sarah Abedi Abdullah (2004) found that for the majority, the writing component was arduous due to "poor reading habits, lack of vocabulary and ignorance of basic grammar" (p. 123). This concurs with findings of several other studies, namely by Sharmillah Devi Ramachandran, and Hajar Abdul Rahim (2004), Nirmala Ramakrishnan Pillai (2004), Zulfa Zakaria (2005), and Josephine Lourdunathan and Sujatha Menon (2005). Other studies by Ahmad Mazli Muhammad (2007), Radha M. K. Nambiar (2007) and Zaira Abu Hassan Shaari (2008), also confirm that Malaysian tertiary learners have limited vocabulary knowledge and face difficulty in comprehending long sentences with difficult words.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study undertaken is a two-pronged approach (a) to diagnose learners' word knowledge and (b) to delve into learners' capability in using correct word form,   spelling and pronunciation. The study aimed at probing word acquisition in a comprehensive way by exploring both word knowledge and word skill dimensions. This would inform the researcher of the learners' capability in dealing with active and passive lexis and determine their readiness in coping with language challenges in general, and lexical challenges in particular, when pursuing degree programme at tertiary level. The objectives outlined led to the formulation of the following research questions which the study sought to answer:
1. What is the level of word knowledge among the participants of this study?
2. To what extent are the participants of this study skillful in using word forms, spelling, punctuation and pronunciation as determinants of lexical capability?

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The study was a case study of nine participants from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis, pursuing Diploma in Business Studies course. There were four males and five females, all of whom were in their third semester of study. They were of varying language proficiency, that is, of high, average and low language ability. The participants' language ability was determined based on their results in the English courses they had pursued in the previous two semesters at the university. High language proficiency learners were those who had scored A+, A and A-; average ability learners were in the range of B+, B and B- while low language ability learners were those who had managed C+ and C. Participants A, B and C were high ability learners while Participants D, E and F were average language learners. Participants G, H and I

were low language proficiency learners. All the nine participants were Muslims of Malay origin, and were 20 years old. They were from the northern states of Perlis, Kedah and Pulau Pinang, since the majority of students at this UiTM campus hail from these states. Hence, they were homogenous in terms of religion, culture, age and the course being pursued. The case study participants' profiles are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Case Study Participants

Participant	State of origin	Gender	Age	Number of years studying English	English language ability	
					Part One English Score	Part Two English Score
A	Perak	M	20	12	A	A
B	Perak	M	20	12	A	A-
C	Pulau Pinang	F	20	12	A+	A
D	Perak	F	20	12	B-	B
E	Pulau Pinang	M	20	12	B	B
F	Perlis	F	20	12	B	B
G	Kedah	F	20	12	C+	C+
H	Pulau Pinang	F	20	12	C	C
I	Perak	M	20	12	C	C

Data was collected in a sequential two-phased procedure. In the first phase, online *Vocabulary Levels Test* by Batia Laufer and Paul Nation (1999, http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/levels/index.html) was administered. The test is a well-established instrument, tested for its practicality, reliability and validity, with various attributes such as low chances of guessing and tests a large number of words (36 words for each level) and items which are unrelated to alleviate test takers' confusion (Minh, 2009). The test served as a diagnostic platform to probe learners' ability at six different levels of word knowledge.

Sequentially, the test was followed by analysis of learners' capability in using lexical items. This was explored within the parameters of knowledge of word form, spelling, punctuation and pronunciation. Passive word form knowledge was tested using the Academic Word List Test (AWL). The AWL was the preferred choice to ascertain learners' capability level since the study was carried out in an academic English (EAP) course. Besides, all courses in UiTM are taught in English and thus, learners need to draw upon the AWL to cope with tertiary studies. There are 570 words in the AWL, in 10 different sublists. The researcher used only Sublist 1 because it is acceptable to test learners' capability based only on the words they know. The researcher asked all the participants individually if they were sure of the meanings of all the words. In order to prove that they had adequate knowledge of a particular word, they were asked to explain its meaning in either English or Malay. They were then required to give a synonym of the word (where possible) and provide a sentence to show they knew contextual meaning of the word. Only then could their capability in various dimensions of the words be ascertained. The test consisted of 90 questions (based on 30 words in the AWL Sublist 1). The total score was 90; there were 30 words with 3 different word forms or derivatives.

Two rounds of in-depth interviews were also conducted with the nine participants. The interviews were aimed at obtaining further insights into their vocabulary experiences as well as to probe learners' capability in pronunciation in a natural setting, without any intervention or contrived contexts. The interviews were of informal conversational nature as the questions and dialogue emerged from the immediate context and ensued in the natural course of things. Question topics or wordings were left unstructured and were not predetermined by use of an interview guide. The participants' ability in spelling was analysed from the daily journals which they wrote for the researcher pertaining to their learning experiences for two weeks.

FINDINGS

PARTICIPANTS' WORD KNOWLEDGE BASED ON VOCABULARY LEVELS TEST ONLINE

In order to establish that a learner has attained possession of a particular word knowledge level, it is necessary to attain a minimum score of 83% at each level. The programme stipulates that a learner needs to gain a minimum score of 83% (less than three mistakes) for each level to be in full possession of the words of a particular level. The results obtained from the nine participants are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Levels Test Online Score in Percentages

Cases	Language Ability	Level 1,000	Level 2,000	Level 3,000	Level 5,000	UWL	Level 10,000
A	High	85	77	72	44	66	16
B	High	92	83	50	27	50	16
C	High	90	100	94	61	88	50
D	Average	74	100	27	27	72	27
E	Average	82	100	33	27	55	11
F	Average	85	77	38	27	22	11
G	Low	74	50	50	38	38	16
H	Low	72	55	50	22	44	5
I	Low	67	61	33	27	33	5

For 1,000 word knowledge level, the results show that all the high ability learners and two-thirds (66%) of the average ability learners are in full possession of 1,000 word level. None of the low ability learners have a minimum possession of 1,000 words, although all of them scored more than 50% at that level. Two-thirds of the high ability and average ability learners possess word knowledge of 2,000 words. Four out of nine participants, that is Participants B, C, D and E have knowledge of 2,000 words in the English language, as indicated by their scores exceeding 83%. The low ability learners gained scores of more than 50% at this level. Only one-third of high ability learners (Participant C) possess 3,000-word knowledge. The average and low ability learners do not pass the word knowledge of 3,000 words. Scores far below 83% obtained by the participants show that none of them is capable of handling the 5,000 and 10,000 word knowledge successfully. As for the University Word List, only one high ability learner (Participant C) is able to cross the 83% benchmark, while most of the other high and average ability learners gained more than 50% at this level.

Table 3: Vocabulary Mastery Level of the Case Study Participants

Word Level	1,000	2,000	3,000	5,000	UWL	10,000
Mastery Percentage	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%	0%	11.1%	0%
Mean Score	80.11	78.11	49.66	33.33	52.0	17.44

Some key observations obtained from the nine participants are:
- High ability learners generally have level of about 2,000-word knowledge and can (to a certain extent) manage tasks requiring 3,000-word knowledge.
- Average learners can manage tasks of 1,000 to 2,000 word knowledge only.
- Weak ability learners do not possess word knowledge of even 1,000 words and can barely relate to tasks revolving around the 1,000 word knowledge, at best.

The results derived from these nine participants concur with the findings obtained by studies mentioned in the preceding section which indicated that Malaysian tertiary learners lag in vocabulary knowledge. In comparison, vocabulary knowledge among undergraduates in other countries in this region have shown similar findings too.

For example, in Indonesia, Ari Nurweni and Read (1999) found that their respondents of first year learners to barely have half of the 2,000 most frequently used words in English according to the General Service List. Results of University Word List also yielded modest results, that is, the average learner knew about 240 (or 30%) of the 800 items of sub technical vocabulary occurring frequently in academic texts. The two Word Lists cumulatively showed that the Indonesian learners had a mean vocabulary size of 1,226 words.

CAPABILITY IN WORD FORM

Knowledge of word form and word meaning were analysed and the range was found to be from 35 (lowest) to 83 (highest) as seen in Table 3.

Table 4: Participants' Scores in Academic Word List Test

Participant	Gender	Academic Word List Test Score
A	M	63
B	M	61
C	F	83
D	F	45
E	M	42
F	F	46
G	F	42
H	F	35
I	M	41

From the total marks of 90 of the Academic Word List test score, the average score for the high ability learners (Participant A, B, C) was 69. Average ability learners

(Participant D, E, F) showed average score of 44.3 while low ability learners (Participant G, H, I) had average score of 39.3. Out of the 30 words tested, the highest and lowest scored are shown in Table 5. Word forms such as "concepts" and "response" had scores of 0, that is, none of the participants is capable of knowing these word forms, which are the plural word form of "concepts" and the noun form of "response". The abstract noun of the word "analysis" had the highest score of 9, that is, all the participants are able to use it.

Table 5: The Lowest and Highest Scored Words

Lowest Scored Word Form	Score	Highest Scored Word Form	Score
concepts	0	analysis	9
response	0	similar	8
analysed	1	sector	8
financially	1	economy	8
percentage	1	environment	8
structural	1	creative	8
occurred	1	major	8
reoccur	1	formula	8
processed	1	involved	8
conceptualise	1	percent	8
approached	1	process	8
		income	8
		specific	8
		distribute	8
		distribution	8
		concept	8

Table 5 shows that the most correct word forms were root words such as "environment", "major" and "income". On the other hand, the word "occur" had a score of 6, which means that only 20% of the responses given were correct.

Table 6: The Lowest and Highest Scored Word Forms

Lowest Scored Words	Score	Highest Scored Words	Score
occur	6	environment	22
approach	7	major	21
concept	9	income	21
consist	10	sector	20
individual	11	economy	20
finance	12	distribute	20
function	13	legal	19
principle	13	significant	18
formula	13	similar	18

Table 7: The Participants' Scores in Academic Word List Test

Category	Number of Items	Total Score	Average Score
Root Words	44		6.5185
Root Adjectives	8	56	7.0
Root Nouns	18	129	7.16666
Verbs	18	97	5.38888
Auxiliary Verbs			5.6
Verbs with Infinitive "to"			5.7142
Root Verbs which are Plural Verbs			4.8333
Inflected Words	46		3.8855
Verbs	12	30	2.5
Singular Verbs			4.0
Past Tense Verbs			1.5
Passive Verbs			2.75
Verb with Prefixes			1.0
Nouns	19	73	3.842
Adjectives	10	54	5.4
Adverbs	5	19	3.8
Total	**90**		

The participants' scores show that they have better grasp of root words (average score - 6.5185) than inflected forms (average score - 3.8855). This finding is similar to the findings by Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal and Kesumawati Abu Bakar (2008) who found affixes and plural noun inflections to be the most obvious mistakes due to the absence of these forms in the Malay language. Examples of root adjectives are "similar", "major" and "significant", and show the highest average score of 7.0. Root nouns have a score of 7.1666. The participants' scores show that 10 out of 18 root nouns had a commendable score of 8 to 9. For example, the participants gained a better score in the root nouns (such as "analysis", "economy", "individual") as compared to the root verbs. This is because root nouns are singular nouns which may be more easily understood and applied in the context of the sentences, whereas root verbs refer to plural verbs which many learners find difficult to decipher (such as "analyse", "specify", "conceptualise"). Lack of knowledge of grammar rules like the use of root words which are plural verbs (average score - 4.8333), auxiliary verbs (for example, "will approach"; "should function"; average score - 5.6) and infinitive "to" (such as "to formulate"; "to define"; average score - 5.7142) also caused learners to obtain low scores compared to the scores in root nouns and adjectives (for example, "similar", "major", "legal").

For inflected word forms, learners obtained the highest score in inflected adjectives (average score - 5.4) followed by inflected nouns (average score - 3.842), inflected adverbs (average score - 3.8) and inflected verbs (average score - 2.5). This shows that for both root forms and inflected forms, learners have a better understanding of adjectives and nouns as compared to the use of verbs. Inflected verbs include singular

verbs (average score - 4.), past tense verbs (average score - 1.5), passive verbs (average score - 2.75) and verbs with prefix (for example, "reoccur"; average score - 1). Past tense forms with the affix "ed" and those that required doubling of consonants, such as "occurred" had a score of 1 or 2 for all the four items tested. Hence, inflected verbs seemed particularly problematic. This was also reconfirmed in the interview, for example, Participant F admitted that:

> grammar that have a past tense, a present, that's why comes, a lot of mistakes … when make a sentence, I become a little pressure … because is it in the past tense, and then errr, which one I want to use, is it "ed", or "s", … it's very trouble.

This finding is similar to Talif and Edwin (as cited in Su-Hie Ting, Mahanita Mahadhir, & Siew-Lee Chang, 2010) who found verb errors to be the main problem, particularly among their rural respondents. Similarly, Su-Hie Ting, Mahanita Mahadhir, and Siew-Lee Chang (2010) also found verb-related errors comprising root words and inflected forms (verb forms, subject-verb agreement, tenses) collectively to be the highest number of errors (23.49%) committed by tertiary learners in an oral communication course. Likewise, studies carried out by Surina Nayan and Kamaruzaman Jusoff (2009), and Siti Hamin Stapa and Mohd Mustafa Izahar (2010) also noted subject-verb agreement as plaguing problems.

The problem faced with inflected nouns is in the use of suffix (*s, es, ies*) to denote plural nouns (for example, "approaches", "principles", and "concepts", which had scores of 2, 2, and 1 respectively) as well as other derivatives like *tion* (for example, "creation", "distribution", "definition"), *ment* (for example, "involvement", "requirement"), and *ity* (for example, "similarity", "individuality", "majority"). In some cases, learners used the wrong derivative form, for example, "approachment", instead of "approaches", "functioning", instead of "functional". The most problematic inflected adjectives were "structural" and "functional" while "financially" and "specifically" were the lowest scored of the inflected adverbs. During the interview, the researcher enquired whether the participants were able to use different forms of the word "rebel" that they had learnt. The response was somewhat negative, except for two forms: "rebel", "rebellious", which they had learnt in class. Interestingly, Participant A was able to use the word "rebel" in his conversation with his roommate.

CAPABILITY IN SPELLING

Spelling errors were also seen in the participants' notes in handouts and journal entries. In analysing the ability to spell, several words appear problematic. For example, the word "individual" posed a problem among six learners which may be due to first language (L1) interference and was constantly spelt as "individu". The repeated consonant "r" in "occurred" and the spelling of "definition" (mis-spelt as "defination") were also seen as challenges to four participants as they mis-spelt the word. An additional problem is doubling of consonants when using the "ing" form. For example, Participant G and I (weak learners) always made simple spelling errors of this rule when writing on the handouts. The weak learners obviously made more errors than the average and high ability learners. Some of the salient errors committed by these learners are presented in

Table 7. Among all the participants, the researcher found that Participant H committed the most number of lexical errors in spelling, possibly owing to lack of care or ignorance.

Table 8: Spelling Errors Made by the Nine Participants

Participant	Mis-spelt Words
A	"goverment", "juvenille", "unsatisfaction", "rationaly", "counselor" "advices", "gulliable", "deliquency"
B	"attrack", "strick", "concerntrate"
C	"preasure"
D	"deliquent", "strenght", "gengsterism", "asigments", "covenient", "futher"
E	"discipline", "ourself"
F	"colaps", "disatisfied", "advices", "promblematic", "successfuly", "scenary", "goverment", "curiousity", "fullfil", "writting"
G	"strick", "recretional", "counselor", "loves", "childrens", "sosial", "money laundring", "delinquent";
H	"sentense", "prepair", "therefor", "satisfactorilly", "dengerous", "money laundry", "pronography", "vandelism", "deliquent", "nuturing", "strick", "cooprate", "courses" (instead of "causes"), "to"(instead of "too"), "collaped" (instead of "collapsed"), "permonthly" (instead of "permanently"), "now" (instead of "know"), "strick", "cooprate", "therefor", "nuturing", "deliquent", "vandelism", "blakmail", "sosial", "themself", "messeges", "dengerous", "satisfactorilly", "creadit", "nevetheless", "prepair", "money laundry", "glambling", "pronography";
I	indisipline", "habbit", ""diffrent", ourself", "their self", "bos", "easyly", "anomynity", "accidently", "living" instead of "leaving", "gathed" instead of "gathered".

One of the causes of erroneous spelling among the participants was found to be lack of knowledge of homophones, such as, "causes" and "courses". Wrong diction was also intermittently present in the participants' handouts as well as their journal entries, for example, it was found that there were erroneous use of words such as "effect", "raise" (Participant A); "money laundry" (Participant B, H); "change opinions", and "effect their studies". The researcher also noted erroneous punctuation (such as capitalisation) in journal entries, such as "english", "internet".

CAPABILITY IN PRONUNCIATION

The researcher highlighted to the participants the frequent mispronunciation of words such as "develop" as [devələp] *(dare-were-lep),* "tourist" as [taʊrist] *(taa-oo-rist),* "ordeal" as [ordel] *(or-dale),* "lucrative" as [lɑ:krətif] *(laa-crative),* and "solace" as [sɔ:leɪs] *(saw-lace).* To this, the participants informed that their instructor did not emphasise on pronunciation of the words taught, and they would pick up pronunciation without much awareness of the different sounds, such as the difference between "th"[θ], sound and "t"[t] sound. In fact, they had heard their former lecturers pronouncing words, such as [devələp] *(dare-were-lep).* Also, the difference between American and British pronunciation made it confusing for them. Instead of confirming the pronunciations with the dictionary, they would instead ask friends and peers for the correct pronunciation. For example, how to pronounce the word "poem"; is it [pəʊjəm] *(pe-oo-em)* or [pəʊɪm] *(pe-oom).* Participant A informed that, "Starting from secondary school, until now, there's no teacher that focus on how to pronounce fluently and correctly." This situation

is echoed and reflected in many other studies carried out on the teaching of pronunciation among Malaysian learners (see Ramesh Nair, Rajasegaran Krishnasamy, & Geraldine De Mello, 2006; Stefanie Pillai, 2008; Kamalashne Jayapalan, & Stefanie Pillai, 2011). Participant A said that it was only in primary school that one of his teachers had made the learners bring a mirror (or the pencil sharpener mirror) to teach pronunciation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is noted that the nine cases at this site of learning lack word knowledge which is necessary in coping with academic courses at the university and other tertiary institutions. Data obtained from the nine participants shows that high ability learners at UiTM have vocabulary levels of only about 2,000 words and a little beyond, while the average and low ability level learners are still between 1,000-2,000 level of word knowledge and have not attained the minimum threshold level necessary for tertiary academic studies (see Emily Jothee Mathai, Leele Susana Jamian & Suchitra Nair, 2004; Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif, Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor & Harlina Yunus, 2008). Although the data is derived from a very small group of students and is not generalisable to the entire population of learners at Malaysian tertiary institutions, it nevertheless corresponds with findings obtained from various studies quoted in the preceding section of the lagging lexical ability among Malaysian tertiary learners.

In their capability in dealing with lexical items, learners seem to have better grasp of the root words in comparison to the inflected forms. The root adjectives and root nouns chart better scores than the root verbs. Of all the inflected forms, the inflected verbs are the most difficult for learners. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers pay particular attention in the teaching and drilling of the inflected forms, especially on inflected verbs. Besides word form errors, learners also lack ability to spell simple vocabulary items and often face L1 interference, thus commit gross spelling errors. Pronunciation also seems to be of a challenge to many of these learners, as a result of lack of attention and emphasis given to pronunciation practice and phonetic drills by language instructors.

The findings obtained from these learners show lack of word knowledge and capability in dealing with word forms, spelling and pronunciation. The findings are similar to many previous studies which show similar problems faced by Malaysian learners. Hence, the situation in Malaysian English language classrooms calls for a review of instructional methods and practices in helping learners learn vocabulary meaningfully and effectively.

It is hence postulated that a systematic and well-structured programme of lexical learning be established in the English language curriculum in schools. Existing English language courses (both at schools and tertiary institutions) need to incorporate a vocabulary learning programme for acquiring word knowledge. A mandatory lexical development programme with clear and measureable goals must be incorporated to ensure minimal word level acquisition among learners. With such a vocabulary programme firmly in place, there would be clear benchmarking of learners' entry level of word knowledge at tertiary education as they would be better equipped to cope with the language challenges at tertiary institutions. With sufficient lexis, learners would be able to relate to the different language skills and experience overall improvement in language

proficiency. Beginning learners should be helped to explicitly acquire the basic 3,000 word families, so as to acquire the fundamental lexical competence through explicit learning methods such as word list learning, vocabulary exercises, memorisation and vocabulary games. Within the programme too, teachers need to explicitly incorporate skills of spelling and pronunciation through drills, and phonetic practice. These aspects of learning are frequently trivialised or downplayed in the teacher's zeal to complete the syllabus or focus on other aspects of pedagogy.

With lexical competence, learners would have firm grasp of language proficiency and be able to perform various language functions. This ability will in turn make them employable and marketable graduates who can contribute to the betterment of the nation.

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