

## **English Vocabulary Knowledge of Saudi EFL Students**

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EFL students are required to learn sufficient vocabulary as it is highly associated with being a good communicator in the target language (Milton and Alexiou, 2009). Vocabulary knowledge is central for successful English language learning because it allows EFL students to better comprehend and produce the target language in both oral and written modes. The term “vocabulary knowledge” has been described in the literature in different ways. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary is divided into four classes: high frequency, academic, technical and low frequency. Henriksen (1999) illustrated the meaning of lexical knowledge from three different perspectives: partial to precise knowledge, shallow to deep knowledge and receptive to productive knowledge. Various vocabulary issues are still under-researched, especially in an EFL setting. Among the largely unstudied aspects of vocabulary is the receptive/productive vocabulary knowledge. This might be attributed to the broad nature of vocabulary as a multidimensional aspect of language comprised of a several categories and sub-categories (Laufer and Goldstein 2004; Nation 2001; Schmitt et al. 2001). Additionally, many factors might affect the process of learning a language and particular vocabulary such as individual differences, aptitude and motivation.

Receptive vocabulary knowledge indicates students’ ability to comprehend a word when they listen or read foreign-language texts, whereas productive knowledge is the ability to produce a word when the students write or speak. It is widely believed that words are known receptively first, and only after intentional or incidental learning do they become available for productive use (Coxhead, Nation and Sim, 2015). Most L2 learners can understand a considerable number of vocabularies which they cannot produce in their speaking or writing. Hence, vocabulary knowledge must be perceived as a continuum on which words develop from receptive to productive status (Zhou, 2010). According to Laufer and Goldstein (2004), “Learners of English as a foreign language need a vocabulary size of at least 3,500 high-frequency used English words to be able to cope with university reading tasks” (p.399). In order to measure the vocabulary size of EFL students, a test is used to measure both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. The receptive vocabulary size measure tests the learners’ ability to understand the words’ meanings, whereas the productive measure tests the ability of learners to produce appropriate words (Zhou, 2010).

The relationship between vocabulary size and the mastery of language skills is closely correlated. For instance, Stæhr (2008) examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the skills of reading, listening and writing for 88 EFL learners who were at lower levels. The study demonstrated a substantial relationship between vocabulary size and reading, writing and listening skills. Similarly, Mehrpour and Rahimi’s (2010) study showed vocabulary knowledge had a major role in reading comprehension while there was no significant impact on listening comprehension. Furthermore, writing skill, which is one of the challenging skills for learners, is highly associated with their vocabulary knowledge. This is asserted in a study carried out by Olinghouse and Wilson (2013) who

examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing in three writing genres (story, persuasive, and informative writing). Results showed that high frequency vocabulary was essential to achieve a high competence in writing. Reading skills, on the other hand, have a strong correlation with vocabulary size as Schmitt et al. (2011) showed by employing a vocabulary test on the vocabulary mostly used in reading as well as a reading comprehension test to examine 661 participants from 8 countries. The researchers concluded that 98% lexical coverage was an adequate percentage to reach the level of reading comprehension. To conclude, 95%-98% lexical coverage is necessary to comprehend the skills of both reading and listening, whereas a high vocabulary frequency level is a must to generate high quality writing.

Various studies have been conducted to gauge undergraduate students' English vocabulary knowledge. For instance, research by Nurweni and Read (1999) was conducted to measure the vocabulary size of freshman Indonesian university students. They found "a mean vocabulary size of 1,226 words and concluded that the students' total vocabulary size was very small, although they had spent six years studying English in junior and senior high school" (p.9). Moreover, Tanyer and Ozturk (2014) concluded that most of the Turkish university students majoring in English language teaching (ELT) had a receptive vocabulary of between 3,000 and 5,000 words whereas Spanish ELT students had a receptive vocabulary of around 5,100 words, as found by Miralpeix and Muñoz (2018). However, Chinese students didn't show similar results regarding their receptive vocabulary knowledge. Liu's (2016) findings revealed that Chinese university students' receptive vocabulary knowledge was only around the 2,000-word level, which suggests a very limited vocabulary knowledge. In addition, a recent study by Heidari (2019) examined the role of one kind of individual difference which is willingness to communicate (WTC) in the receptive/productive vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. The results showed that "high and low willingness to communicate learners had almost the same receptive lexical knowledge and learners with high level of willingness to communicate had more productive vocabulary knowledge than those with low level of willingness to communicate" (p.903).

Less has been done with regard to measuring Saudi EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. A recent study by Sonbul et al. (2020) explored factors that might outline Saudi EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of 100 polysemous

phrasal verbs. It was revealed throughout this study that participants knew roughly a third of the 100 polysemous phrasal verbs productively but half of these receptively. Furthermore, El-Dakhs (2015) investigated the receptive and productive lexical knowledge of 150 university students from different levels and majors at a Saudi University. Due to their significance for lexical competence in English, she assessed their knowledge of the General Service List (GSL) and the Academic Word List (AWL) using a quantitative methodology. Findings of this study showed that “the lexical competence of EFL Arab university students is below the required level for coping with the demands of studying in an English-medium university” (p.32). El-Dakhs has also highlighted significant implications regarding vocabulary knowledge in Saudi universities:

First, it is very important to assess the vocabulary knowledge of EFL students at school and university levels in order to improve the educational and support services offered to them. It is clear that exposure to English during school years is not a reliable predictor of language competence. Vocabulary knowledge may serve as a better predictor, and, hence, vocabulary instruction and assessment need careful consideration. Second, high school and university students in Saudi Arabia need extensive language support due to their unsatisfactory vocabulary scores noted in the present and earlier studies. It has been noted that the students require further language training even towards their graduation. An important part of the training will be to enhance their vocabulary size, and to support them to use the newly acquired lexis in real language production. Third, continuous language exposure seems to enhance lexical competence. Hence, the present study does not recommend the teaching of university courses in the first language. The study, however, highlights that students may need stronger linguistic support with language and content courses, a recommendation that university professors need to be aware of and develop effective instructional strategies to address it. Finally, the results of the present study regarding the influence of pushed output on lexical competence are not conclusive. However, they suggest that emphasis on quality output may accelerate vocabulary development at initial years of university education. (pp.45-46)

Clearly, the issue of vocabulary knowledge is of a great significance and the level of Saudi students is still below the expected standard. This claim was supported by Alqarni (2019) who measured 71 Saudi male and female university students’ receptive vocabulary knowledge using Nation’s Vocabulary Levels Test. He found that Saudi students are “generally still below the level of the desired vocabulary competency as EFL learners, and are in fact, in need of more support and concentration in their undergraduate study with regard to their vocabulary learning” (p.111). Likewise, Altalhab’s (2019) study also showed that Saudi EFL tertiary students’ achievements were low at the low frequency vocabulary level, and some students couldn’t even provide a correct answer at other levels of the test. Although those students are capable of communicating and reading simple English texts, getting them involved in authentic English texts would be challenging. Such conclusions present an example of the level of Saudi university students’ English vocabulary.

Unfortunately, “Saudi students who complete secondary school seem to have a poor level of English, despite having spent on average six years studying it, with a limited English vocabulary (500-700 words)” (Al-Nujaidi, 2003, P.5). This suggests how challenging the teaching and learning of vocabulary in Saudi Arabia is. Moreover, the reasons behind such weakness were addressed in a study by Al-Seghayer (2017), who attributed such weakness to decontextualized vocabulary teaching methods that affected the students negatively. To sum up, despite the limited research in this area, especially in the Saudi EFL context, the available studies demonstrated the limited vocabulary size of Saudi university learners, something that puts into question current methods of English language vocabulary teaching and suggests an urgent need for improvement. Besides, such findings indicate that the vocabulary size of Saudi students needs to be increased in order to reach a high level of comprehension and to deal with the four skills efficiently and effectively.