

An Inquiry on the Lexical Competence of Grade 8 Learners: Limitations and Ambiguities in Focus

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Abstract— This phenomenological study involves an inquiry and deeper understanding of the lived experience on how lexical limitations affect the learning of the grade 8 learners in English as a second language in general. The goal of this study is to understand the significance of learning vocabulary in the acquisition of second language. This study is seen through the lens of Segler (2001) in his study on Second Language Acquisition, he considers vocabulary as an essential element in the acquisition of a second language; as a result, lexical items have to be learned with precision in order to understand and be understood in the target language. There were (10) students who participated in the In-depth Interview (IDI) and another 6 participants for Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to extract credible information. With the participant's experiences, five (5) major themes emerged: unfamiliarity of words, lack of focus, consider English as a difficult subject, dependency, strategies. They also cited their coping mechanisms: resourcefulness, read, discipline. Upon further analysis, I found out that, majority of the learners do not excel well in any vocabulary assessments in general. Given this low level of lexical knowledge among students, it is no wonder that they grapple and struggle in coping with their academic and core subjects in school and face perennial problems with learning and using the English language.

Keywords— Education, Lexical Limitations, Grade 8, Quantitative, Qualitative-Phenomenology, Thematic Analysis, Philippines

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary or lexis refers to the semantics of the language. Quite simply, a lexical item means an item of meaning. Lexical knowledge, that is, the ability to comprehend, acquire, retrieve and recall vocabulary items with relative success, is seen to occupy a key position in learning a second language (L2) and hence is the foundation of language learning. With adequate lexical knowledge and competence, learners are able to cope with the English language because vocabulary acquisition is a requisite and determinant of the extent of learners' language literacy via the four language skills. With this, it is indeed necessary that all learners should be equipped with lexical competence since this is a vital component in the process of learning a language for them to cope with the academic tasks at senior high school level.

Further, it aims to understand and inquire the lived experiences of the grade 8 learners of La Filipina National High School, in terms of their lexical limitations and vocabulary competence.

The results of this study will be significant for the students, educators, administrators, Policy makers, and researchers as this will give more insights and be informed that the main goal of teaching is not to fail students but to nurture and help them.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed method that applied both quantitative and qualitative research employing the phenomenological design. As defined, quantitative research is a type of research wherein data are usually gathered using structured research instruments. This was used to know the students with lexical limitations. On the other hand, qualitative research is a type of research that examines and reflects some less tangible aspects of research and it provides direct information of groups and individuals. This was used to discuss the lived experiences of the students with lexical limitations. Feslson and Tedeschi (1993) and Liefoghe and MacKenzie Davey (2001) strongly recommended the use of a phenomenological approach to explicate our understanding about lived phenomena.

In this study, the participants were the grade 8 Students of La Filipina National High School, as it employed universal sampling. A vocabulary test was administered where they were required to answer the 100-item standardized vocabulary questions containing the different types of vocabulary which were the context clueing, word analogy, word relations (antonyms and synonyms) and words semantics (connotations and denotations).

The selection criteria for the key informants for the qualitative questions included the top 10 students who

got the lowest scores from the assessment. The selection is based on the tabulated result and consultation from a statistician. Further, the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews were conducted during their free time

or vacant days. They were not forced to answer the question and can also refuse to be a research participant. They participated in a 1-hour focus group discussion and 20-30 minutes in-depth interview.

III. RESULTS

Table 1. Learner's Vocabulary Competence (Context Clueing)

Area of Vocabulary	Range of Score per % N=100	Frequency (f)	Mean Score (\bar{x})	Parameter		Description
				Variance	SD	
Context Clueing	81-100	30	$\bar{X} = 18.06$ Description: High	$\sigma^2 = 21.54$	$\sigma = 4.35$	Very High
	61-80	46				High
	41-60	17				Moderate
	21-40	5				Low
	0-20	2				Very Low

Table 1 shows the average mean of the scores obtained by the learners in context clueing area. It also revealed the vocabulary competence at which the students' performance was very high, high, moderate, low and very low. It can be observed that most of the students (46% of the total population) got a high score while 2% got a very low score. The computed mean also was

presented which reached to 18.06 and has a descriptive equivalent of high. Moreover, the computed standard deviation which is 4.35 explained that the scores of the students are scattered and most of the scores are far from the computed mean score. However, it doesn't imply that the scores are very low; it is such that the scores are varied.

Table 2. Learner's Vocabulary Competence (Analogy)

Area of Vocabulary	Range of Score per % N=100	Frequency (f)	Mean Score (\bar{x})	Parameter		Description
				Variance	SD	
Analogy	81-100	0	$\bar{X} = 5.24$ Description: Low	$\sigma^2 = 5.522$	$\sigma = 2.35$	Very High
	61-80	0				High
	41-60	0				Moderate
	21-40	37				Low
	0-20	63				Very Low

Shown in the table 2 is the computed mean of the student's vocabulary competence under the word analogy area. This study shows that none of the students reach a moderate and high score. Most of the scores fall only from the 0%-40%. It also shows that 63% of the total population scored only from 0-20%, while the

remaining 37% percent obtained a score from 21%-40%. The computed mean as well was only 5.24 thus categorizing it to a low performance. Moreover, the computed standard deviation was 2.35 which means that the scores were varied and low.

Table 3. Learner's Vocabulary Competence

Area of Vocabulary	Range of Score per % N=100	Frequency (f)	Mean Score (\bar{x})	Parameter		Description
				Variance	SD	
Word Relation (Synonyms & Antonyms)	81-100	0	$\bar{X} = 14.01$ Description: Moderate	$\sigma^2 = 21.75$	$\sigma = 4.66$	Very High
	61-80	3				High
	41-60	20				Moderate
	21-40	65				Low
	0-20	12				Very Low

Table 3 shows the vocabulary competence of the learners in the word relations area in synonyms and antonyms. It can be implied from the table that a maximum of 65% of the total population got a score ranging from 20%-40% which has descriptive equivalent of low while others were described as very

low (12%); moderate (20%) and high (3%). The table also showed the computed mean of this area which was 14.01 falling into moderate. It implied that the competence of the students in word relation is just average or moderate.

Table 4. Learner's Vocabulary Competence

Area of Vocabulary	Range of Score per % N=100	Frequency (f)	Mean Score (\bar{x})	Parameter		Description
				Variance	SD	
Word Semantics (Connotations & Denotations)	81-100	0	$\bar{X} = 3.94$ Description: Low	2.856	1.69	Very High
	61-80	8				High
	41-60	29				Moderate
	21-40	44				Low
	0-20	19				Very Low

Table 4 shows the results obtained from the study under the area of vocabulary competence which was the word semantics, connotation and denotation. The study found out that almost half of the population got a score ranging from 21%-40% which was then described as low. The computed mean as well was only 3.94 which were described as low. The computed standard deviation was 1.69 which means that the results were not concentrated

thus making the scores diverse and has been perceived that the population experienced difficulty upon answering the assessment.

It can be clearly observed from the results that most of the students failed to get high score in most of the items

The overall results were summarized as follows:

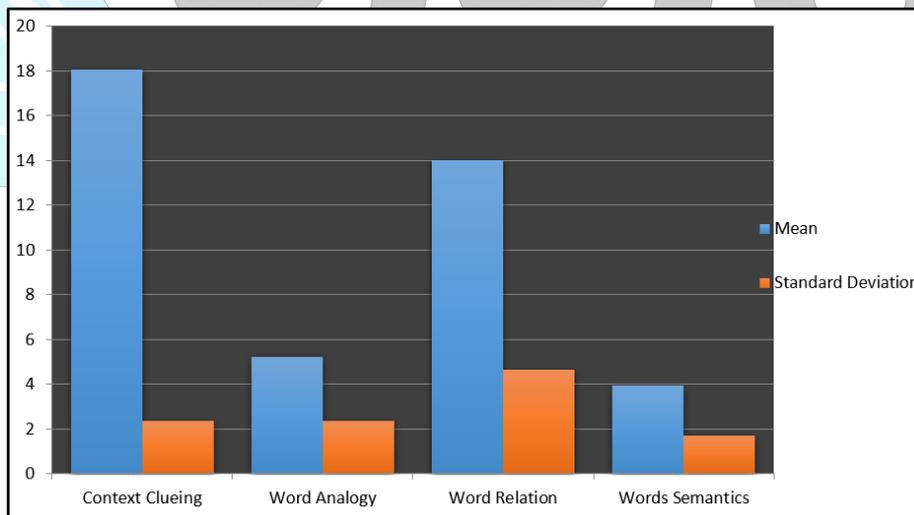


Figure 1. Summary of the Results of Learners' Vocabulary Competence

The Reasons Behind Lexical Limitations among Students

As soon as I conducted the interview to my ten (10) grade 8 student-participants from La Filipina National High School, I can see their eagerness to participate in this activity. Participants were given the full assurance that whatever results will come out, it will be kept with

utmost confidentiality, thus keeping their identities as well. The participants were oriented first with regards to the main purpose of this study, and when they were asked about the lived experiences with regards to their lexical limitations, different responses were gathered thus classifying into different themes.

Table 5. Themes and Core Ideas of the Reasons Behind Lexical Limitations of the Students

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Unfamiliarity of Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The words were not encountered before • Words are not familiar • Disregarded the importance of learning uncommon terms
Lack of Focus in Their Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students didn't pay much attention on their studies • Not so fond of reading books • Didn't listen during discussion • Just focus on activities and skills of the students and not on the academic subjects
Consider English as a Difficult Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they read, it is not written in English so it will be easier to comprehend • Using English is awkward
Influence of Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solely rely on the technology • Spend most of the time on facebook, youtubes, etc. • Social media contribute to vocabulary deficit • Rely on google translates • Only wants pleasure and entertainment
Issues on Teachers and Their Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers used basics and vernaculars during discussions • Teachers will not explain the meaning. • Not all lessons were clearly explained or taught

Table 6. Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanism of the Learners Towards their Lexical Limitations

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Developing Resourcefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for the meaning on dictionaries • Jut down those unfamiliar terms and search it in dictionaries after • Read books and watch foreign movies • Refer the answer on dictionaries • Practice speaking English • Use Google translate • Explore different words • Guessing technique • Look for similar sounds • Will just rely on their own • Look for context clues • Will use the IQ • Use our own instincts
Engaging in Reading Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read more books • Read the subtitles of the movie • Read English stories
Limited Involvement to Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should have discipline on using social media

Table 6. Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights of the Learners Towards their Lexical Limitations

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Improving Learning in Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve more my learnings • Still have the chance to enhance and improve my knowledge • Will be proficient in speaking English • Can still improve the IQ • Construct essays with correct sentences and grammars. • Can compete with those other developing countriesconstruct essays with correct sentences and grammars. • Can compete with those other developing countries
Empowering Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should guide the students on what to do. • Teachers should teach the students with regards to the words that better fit in one’s level. • Teacher should address politely to the concerns. • Teachers should not dwell only on the basics. • Teachers should give motivations • The learnings of the student’s will reflect on the teacher. • Teachers should be consistent in imposing English Only Policy (EOP). • Teacher should introduce new words that are uncommon to students.
Ensuring Suitability of the Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students should already be taught about constructing sentences using English language during high school level • Topics are just limited and based on the competency of learners

III. DISCUSSIONS

Through the quantitative and qualitative strategy, data were analyzed and group according to different themes. For the reasons behind lexical limitations, five themes have emerged: Unfamiliarity of words; lack of motivation to their studies; consider English as a difficult subject; fluency on technology; and issues on teachers and their strategies.

Further, for the coping mechanisms used by the students, three major themes have emerged: developing resourcefulness; engaging in reading activities and limited involvement to social media. Lastly, with regards to the insights of the learners four major themes emerged: improving learning in vocabulary; empowering teachers; ensuring suitability of the curriculum and giving importance of the basics.

This study found out that learners as well scored low in the area of word analogy and word semantics. Given this low lexical knowledge, it is no wonder that they grapple

and struggle in coping with their academic tasks and core subjects and face also perennial problems with learning and using the English language. Hence, if these results reflecting vocabulary knowledge among learners of different language ability are anything to go by, it is clear that learners seriously lack the word-knowledge necessary to cope with academic courses.

Moreover, the context clueing shows the highest average score obtained by the learners in vocabulary assessment, followed by the word relation. It also shows that in the area of word analogy and word semantics, learners performed low.

This This tendency, lower levels of word frequency present higher scores at all levels of communicative competence, can be explained by the fact that words specific in register are more problematic than general ones, since general words are more common than specific lexical items, therefore more frequent (Segler 2001).

IV. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

For Teaching Practice

This study will serve as an avenue for students that in spite of the difficulty they experienced, they are still hoping to improve their knowledge on vocabulary. Parents as well may be informed that proper guidance is needed by their children for them to be more motivated to learn. For the teachers, this may serve as an indicator for adjustments that students are not yet that proficient in terms of speaking English since they have lots of factors to be considered as to why they did not see learning English important.

Moreover, this study can be used to gain awareness of the different instructional strategies employed by the language teachers. While it is good to teach the students the proper enunciation, grammar and the likes, the academe must see to it that the minds of the students are not automatic that all the information taught were absorbed directly. Moreover, this study serves as a reflective guide in order to study on different strategies to use to better teach students in terms of vocabulary competence. Through careful analysis of the language, learners may develop a critical mind in being a mature learner equipped with competence about lexical or vocabulary manipulations.

For Future Research

Based from the results of the study, I would recommend that scholars who may wish to continue study about the lexical limitations of the learners shall study similar topic that will focus not just on the learners but also with the teachers and the curriculum planners as well. This is to give emphasis on the perspectives of the teachers towards their learners who experienced difficulty in understanding texts due to their lexical limitations.

Further, I would also suggest to the researchers who wish to conduct parallel studies to get the views of the curriculum planners, in order to know about the set parameters and basis upon crafting the instructional guides.

Going into further details on the different aspects of vocabulary may also be suggested to the future researchers for them to know the reasons why students tend to disregard and chose not to answer any vocabulary assessments. Lastly, it is highly recommended that this study shall be replicated to assure more of the validity and reliability of the result. Also, employing another method of study may be added to further validate the data.

VII. CONCLUSION

Through this study, I realized that there was a strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension because having a wide vocabulary is important in any language class. It contributed to higher achievement of the students in their course. A student's weak vocabulary could result in his/her inability to perform well in class activities as well as examinations. Therefore, it was frustrating both for the learners as well as their language teacher when the majority of the students do not have a wide vocabulary. Through this study, low ability learners admitted that their limited vocabulary made communicating in English a chore, one that they would rather avoid if possible. The lecturer felt that the students perceived speaking in class as a risk, owing to their confidence level. Some of them could be laughed at, ridiculed or be made to feel and look stupid in front of the rest, some of whom they perceive to be better. The weaker students are made to feel self-conscious of their shortcomings. Knowing the fact, that most of the students have difficulty in vocabulary (as shown in the result), it is indeed a dilemma which every language teacher should look at.

The mean scores: 18.06, 5.24, 14.01, 3.94, it shows that students struggle more in word analogy and words semantics, and they do not excel well in any vocabulary assessments in general. Given this low level of lexical knowledge among students, it is no wonder that they grapple and struggle in coping with their academic and core subjects in school and face perennial problems with learning and using the English language. Hence, if these results reflecting vocabulary knowledge among learners of different language ability are anything to go by, it is clear that learners at institutions of higher learning seriously lack the word-knowledge necessary to cope with academic courses at the university and other tertiary institutions. Hence they lack language ability to cope with academic courses. This in turn, explains the lack of language skills among the graduates, which is a major hindrance in seeking employment.

In addition, this study has given me much opportunity to discover the different unheard sentiments why students tend to do "code-switching" when asked to explain something using English language. Further, this became an avenue for me as a language teacher, to know the details why most of the grade 8 students got low scores during assessments. I thought, it is only because they just simply do not want to read long passages and answer written text, but I proved myself wrong, because it is the word that made them unmotivated since they did not

know its meaning. That is why I can say that, words are crucial component for communication and comprehension, and made me realized that when a learner has an impoverished vocabulary, it may lead to a detrimental implication for comprehending language and miscommunications and in learning English as a second language in general.

Also, through this study, I realized that language teachers play an integral role in guiding students to become proficient communicators. Our role is not to fail students but to help them reach their maximum potentials. We must integrate vocabulary activities that fit to their level so they will not be left with those performing ones. We must not expect too much that all our students are already competent; we must start assessing their proficiency level, for us to give proper remedy when needed.

DEDICATION

This work is a fruit of countless and arduous sacrifices. Through the researcher's effort, this work is heartily and proudly dedicated to the people who serve as an inspiration. To my husband, Dan Arvin V. Almero, my little ones Rain Axsen and Winter Dale, my parents, Mario D. Dumalag and Arlene D. Dumalag and my siblings, to my classmates and circle of friends whom extended their help in the midst of limitations and challenges while doing this work.

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