An Analysis of the Relationship between Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating the relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability. That is, it tries to see whether there is a positive correlation between students’ vocabulary size and their ability to write effectively. The researcher studied 464 students from seven universities; the participants were administered two tests: vocabulary size test and a writing test. Findings showed that both variables, vocabulary size and writing ability are significantly associated.

Key terms: Vocabulary size, Writing Ability

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Rishards (2008), language mastery is said to be dependent on vocabulary knowledge. Any competent language user must be familiar with the most frequent words in that language. In other words, vocabulary development plays a salient role in moving learners from a lower level to a more advanced one of language proficiency. In this regard, many researchers like Wilkins (1972); Anderson and Freebody (1981), Nagy (1988), Thornbury (2002) see vocabulary items in a language as its backbone.

When a language learner knows a word, he/she knows many aspects of that word. Kelly (1985) describes the process of learning a new word as first linking its form with its meaning then instilling them in the mental lexicon. This means that when one knows a word one knows its form and meaning. Milton (2009) took a further step; he divides word knowledge into two types: the receptive knowledge and the productive knowledge. In other words, when an L2 learner can recognize a spoken or a written word but cannot produce it, then it is said that this learner “owns” the receptive knowledge and not the productive one, whereas the productive knowledge of a word refers to the L2 learner’s ability to retrieve and produce that word. Similarly, Dugan (2004: 4) claims that word knowledge is categorized as follows: receptive and expressive. The term “expressive” in this context means productive.

For Qian (2002) word knowledge involves knowing a bunch of aspects like pronunciation, spelling, and collocation. In this respect, Qian (2002) asserts that it is very essential for a language learner to be cognizant of how a word is pronounced by native speakers, how it is written, and how it is used or combined. This definition of word knowledge by Qian is similar to the one given by Kelly (1985); that is, spelling and pronunciation are related to the form of a word while collocation is linked to the meaning of a word, because we combine words on the basis of many criteria among which we find meaning. Similarly, Milton (2009) and Nation (2001) define word knowledge in the light of receptive knowledge and productive knowledge with the addition of a third characteristic: word use.

For Nation (2001: 21), knowing a word involves:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Receptive knowledge</th>
<th>Productive knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Spoken</td>
<td>What does the word sound like?</td>
<td>How is the word pronounced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>What does the word look like?</td>
<td>How is the word written and spelled?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>word parts</td>
<td>What parts are recognizable in this word?</td>
<td>What word parts are needed to express the meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>form and meaning</td>
<td>What meaning does this word form signal?</td>
<td>What word form can be used to express</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Word knowledge aspects

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>concepts and referents</th>
<th>What is included in this concept?</th>
<th>this meaning?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>associations</td>
<td></td>
<td>What items can the concept refer to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>In what patterns does the word occur?</td>
<td>What other words could people use instead of this one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammatical functions</td>
<td>What words or types of words occur with this one?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collocations</td>
<td>Where, when, and how often would people expect to meet this word?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constraints on use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(register, frequency . . )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extracted from Nation (2001, p. 27).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Writing

This part deals with the definition of the term writing, particularly academic writing by different scholars in the field of language teaching. The thesis deals with this type of writing in this part, for the targeted subjects of the research will be tested in terms of their ability to write an academic essay with appropriate word combinations.

Indeed, one of the most significant functions of a language is communication (Hughes & Lavery: 2004). The achievement of communication relies on many aspects, among which, we can mention writing as a considerable element. In other words, “writing is only a minor form of communication. [Yet], It’s not risky to call writing the single most consequential technology ever invented” (Aristotle, 1938: 115). In this framework, Aristotle deems writing as a great invention which has a very critical impact on human life, as it best serves the function of communication. Besides, this aspect of language means the ability “to communicate relatively specific ideas by means of permanent visible marks” (Sampson, 1985: 26). Similarly, Coulmas (2003: 1) sees writing as “a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks”. In tandem with this, Alamargot and Chanquoy (2001: 1) define writing as the translation of abstract concepts into concrete linguistic entities. This process is not a mere transfer of thought into separate words but it involves logically related sentences forming a coherent language discourse. This definition sheds light on the complexity of writing for it entails a careful choice of words suitable for the topic being discussed. It also gives much importance to the smooth transition from one idea to another with convenient use of grammatical and syntactic structures.

Writing an essay would behoove the writer to cover four elements: a) grammatical skills, the production of grammatically correct sentences. b) Stylistic skills, the appropriate use of words. c) Mechanical skills include many rules, like punctuation, capitalization and spelling. d) Judgment skills. It involves the ability to write appropriate language bearing in mind the readers’ background (Heaton, 1975 appeared in Pestaria, Sinurat, and Napitupulu, 2014: 28-29).

In the same vein, Leki (1998: 3) compares the procedure of writing to that of riding a bike for the first time. Both of these experiences are challenging and involve a plethora of steps to be taken concomitantly. Riding a bike requires some processes like pedaling, keeping balance and paying enough attention to others. Writers are like bike riders, to write a simple paragraph they have to respect all the necessary mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in addition to coherence and cohesion of ideas within a passage.

In short, writing can be looked at as the visible and permanent communication of ideas turned into words on paper in contrast to the ephemeral version of communication in speaking. However there are different types of writing. To state all of them is far beyond the scope of this thesis. Thus, a suitable type of writing to discuss in this research will be the academic writing because this research’s participants will be tested on their academic writing.

Academic Writing

Practically speaking, an academic essay is characterized by systematicity and organization. Besides, the writer within this type of writing should bear in mind the readers’ anticipations while writing (Bailey, 2003; Ravelli & Ellis, 2005; Soles, 2009; Greene & Lindisky, 2014).

The academic essay is systematic in the sense that it goes through a systematic process. According to Soles (2009: 1), the process of writing involves a number of steps: first, one should think about the subject of
writing. Second, researching the topic gives enough information to write. Third, stating a blueprint for the essay writing makes the task easier. After stating an outline, it is high time to write the first draft as the fourth step in this process. The fifth step is reviewing what is written and the sixth phase is correcting and editing the whole work.

In line with this, Soles (2009: 6) describes a good academic essay as having “ISCE” (Intelligence, Substance, Clarity, and Energy). An essay is said to be intelligent if it has a handful of astute ideas extracted from authoritative references. Substantial writing should have well elaborated and developed ideas for the reader to comprehend a passage. Furthermore, for a text to be clear, the writer should make use of grammatically correct and appropriate sentences in addition to punctuation and organization. Finally, a good essay should be energetic in the sense that it has smooth transitions between ideas and paragraphs. Another distinctive feature of academic writing is that it is not written in a way to show apparent judgment on something or someone, but it is characterized by neutrality and objectivity (Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990).

Eventually, academic writing is governed by a number of rules and norms. An academic essay is meticulously written by means of writing mechanics: how well a word is spelled, how appropriately it is combined with its collocates, and how grammatically and syntactically it is correct and fits in a coherent language discourse. Besides, this type of writing is characterized by so many features like the formality, the neutrality, objectivity of language and collocational appropriacy.

To sum up, this part has tackled some points related to writing. It first started by defining writing in general and academic writing in particular. This section tried to look at this type of writing since this dissertation deals only with the relation between collocation, vocabulary and academic writing. According to the abovementioned researchers, EFL learners face serious problems in writing coherent and appropriate essays due to a lack of collocational competence.

The Mutual Effect between Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability

Solati-Dehkordi. & Salehi (2016) investigated the effect of teaching vocabulary on the writing ability. The main study was conducted on 30 Iranian EFL female learners. Some of these students were exposed to vocabulary via reading passages while the control group was taught writing per se. The experimental group outperformed the control group, as it has been shown that direct instruction of vocabulary helped the participants produce efficient writings. Moreover, results showed that explicit vocabulary instruction changed receptive vocabulary into a proactive knowledge.

For Coxhead (2012), vocabulary size is a good predictor of the writing ability. Large Vocabulary size causes high performance in writing. Laufer (1998) claims that as the relationship between vocabulary and reading is mutual that is without vocabulary students cannot read a sentence, the relationship between vocabulary and writing is reciprocal. According to these researchers, there is a mutual effect between vocabulary size and writing ability.

Karakoç & Köse. (2017), studied 175 students to explore the relationship between vocabulary size and reading & writing ability of EFL students. The researchers also studied the relationship between receptive vocabulary knowledge and reading and the relationship between the productive vocabulary knowledge and writing. Results indicated that a significant contribution to general language proficiency was made. Furthermore, results showed that vocabulary knowledge influences writing ability and vice versa. It was also found that there was a positive correlation between the productive vocabulary knowledge and their writing ability.

According to the previously mentioned studies, findings revealed that there was a mutual effect between vocabulary size and writing ability, and collocational knowledge and vocabulary size. However, up to the researcher’s knowledge there was no study dealing with the effect of writing on the collocational knowledge.

Graph 1: The mutual impact between Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability.
III. METHODOLOGY

This study aims at exploring the relationship between the amount of vocabulary a student knows and his or her ability to write effectively. To this end, this paper deals with two tests: a vocabulary size test and a writing test. The latter were administered to 464 Moroccan EFL students enrolled in the third year in the English department from seven universities.

Research Question
Is there a positive relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability?

Objective of the Study
Identify the relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability.

IV. RESULTS

The Relationship between Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability

Table 2: The relation between vocabulary size and writing ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vocabulary size test</th>
<th>Writing test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary size test</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.797**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing test</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.797**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Graph 2: The Relationship between the Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability
The relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability is shown to be strongly correlational. The amount of vocabulary a student has internalized has an impact on language production, particularly writing. More importantly, the participants who write effectively have a rich vocabulary size in reserve for their use, yet the others who cannot manage to write well their vocabulary is relatively poor. This can best be confirmed by the findings in figure (2) and table (2). That is, the correlation is highly significant \( r = 0.797 \). That is to say, there is a significant relationship between writing ability and vocabulary size. For these universities to improve their students’ writing, they can adopt a language approach or a method that advocates and highlights the teaching and learning of vocabulary such as the lexical approach. It is proved that good writers are good vocabulary learners and users. Generally, in these universities English is not taught as a language for the sake of communication, but as a subject; students study and know everything about English except English itself. Teaching programs are not made in a way that gives importance and priority to language communication. These findings show that these participants lack basic words; consequently, they produce relatively poor writings. Good writers have bigger vocabulary size and tend to regularly learn more words.

**Vocabulary size and writing ability**

This research question is meant to delve into the relationship between the size of vocabulary and writing proficiency. A vocabulary size and a writing test were administered to 464 students to highlight this relationship. The resulting findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing proficiency \( r = 0.797 \). Furthermore, these findings indicated that students with high scores in vocabulary tests are more likely to be proficient writers. In other words, successful vocabulary users can write fluently and correctly since they are equipped with the necessary lexical materials to express themselves and articulate their ideas serve their needs regarding writing. Accordingly, EFL students should be encouraged to learn sufficient frequently used vocabulary items to produce correct and fluent writings.

It was hypothesized that there is no relationship between vocabulary size and writing proficiency, assuming that the students who know a large number of words are not necessarily good at writing; in the sense that they learn words out of context. Yet, in the light of this current study it looks like the size of vocabulary is part and parcel of the writing proficiency. Commanding a large number of words enables EFL students to know the word and its natural occurring collocates so that they can write a naturally flowing discourse. To conclude, there is a significantly positive relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability with \( P = 0.000 < 0.01 \).

**V. REFERENCES**


