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Bridging the vocabulary gap for English as an Additional Language learners: Establishing an EAL word list

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These results have a significant implication for the teaching and assessment of EAL learners. By highlighting the challenges EAL learners face with regards to vocabulary, we hope that this study will make it easier to both assess and provide EAL learners with the support they require.

This study investigated the academic and reading comprehension challenges faced by English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. Over the past few years of this study, we have examined a participant group of 178 students (136 EAL, and 52 First Language English (FLE)) learners at the middle school and high school level studying at two different international school in Japan. We assessed the participants according to four factors shown to influence reading comprehension: vocabulary knowledge, word decoding skills, reading fluency, and general linguistic ability. Our results show that differences in vocabulary knowledge illustrate more variance in reading comprehension scores and academic proficiency, highlighting the importance of vocabulary knowledge, especially important for EAL learners. We also compiled a corpus of academic texts that this group of students would likely to encounter in their academic studies to address these issues.

Applied Linguistics

EAL　Vocabulary　Applied Linguistics　Assessment

This research began with my interest in the importance of vocabulary knowledge for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. A paper published by my co-researcher (Trakulphadetkrai, Clenton, Treffers-Daller, & Tsakalaki, 2017) in the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism suggested that vocabulary was one of the key reasons why EAL learners' struggle in math. This mirrored the findings of other papers in this emerging field (e.g. Murphy & Unthiah, 2015; Coxhead & Boutorwick, 2018). These papers suggested a further need to examine the extent to which vocabulary knowledge affects the academic success of this group of learners. Research in the field also pointed to the need to better identify which words this group of learners needs to succeed academically. To date, research on EAL learners' vocabulary proficiency has made use of general vocabulary assessment tools designed for EFL or FLE (First Language English) learners. This has increasingly been shown to be problematic (e.g. Schmitt, Nation, Kremmel, 2019). Given the increasing importance of EAL learners, both in Japan and internationally, we, therefore, wanted to explore in greater detail the extent to which vocabulary knowledge affects EAL student's ability to succeed academically and identify which words were key for this group of learners.

The design of the research was to explore the extent to which EAL learners' vocabulary knowledge relates to their academic success. The research led to a study designed to explore this question using five factors shown to influence academic success: reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, word decoding skills, reading fluency, and general linguistic ability. The outcome of this pilot study led to us focusing on the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension, due to its importance for academic success across fields of study. We also began working with both partner schools and other researchers to develop a means of assessing the vocabulary knowledge of EAL learners across those different fields.

The research method consisted of partial replications of the earlier research paper (Trakulphadetkrai, Clenton, Treffers-Daller, & Tsakalaki, 2017) along with a study by Coxhead and Boutorwick (2018). Working with two international schools in Japan, we were able to give a battery of assessments to a participant group of 178 students (136 EAL, and 52 First Language English (FLE) learners) at the middle school and high school level. These assessments were then correlated with the participants reading comprehension and overall academic proficiency scores. At the same time, the residual data from the vocabulary assessments were examined to see how well the vocabulary assessments were working with this group of learners. Based on this analysis, we began to compile a corpus of materials from these students' learning environments to determine if the vocabulary profiles of this new corpus would better match the data we were getting from the participants.

Consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014), our results show that one reason that EAL learners struggle academically is their reading comprehension. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension. A multiple regression analysis using reading comprehension as the criterion variable. The first regression models were calculated using the participants' adjusted reading comprehension scores as the response variable with a single explanatory variable. While these models showed that each of the explanatory variables was a significant predictor of reading comprehension, the nVLT scores were able to explain more variance in reading comprehension than the other explanatory variables and were shown to be the best predictor of the participants reading comprehension scores findings from the current study support and underline the importance of vocabulary for the academic success of EAL learners. A hierarchical regression analysis with the YARC reading comprehension scores as the response variable was then used to determine if the inclusion of other explanatory variables could improve the model fit. Of these possible models, the only model that both explained more of the variance in the response variable and was statistically significant was the model that included fluency as an additional explanatory variable, and the addition of fluency to the model only accounted for an additional 5% of the variance in reading comprehension scores.

The results of this study are in line with earlier research that has shown vocabulary knowledge correlates strongly to English reading comprehension (e.g. Laufer, 1989; Lervåg & Aukrust, 2010). Furthermore, when the EAL learners were separated from the bilingual and FLE group, vocabulary knowledge was not as an important predictor of performance on the reading comprehension task for the bilingual and FLE learners, when compared to their EAL counterparts. The higher mean of these learners' nVLT scores may indicate that many of these learners already possess the vocabulary knowledge required to complete the reading comprehension task that they were given. Further highlighting the importance of identifying the vocabulary gaps that exist with EAL learners' vocabulary knowledge, and providing them with the support that they need to learn those words.

Closer inspection of the residuals from this study also showed that while the uVLT was a good statistical predictor of success at the higher frequency bands, this relationship was weaker at lower frequency bands, highlighting the need for a word list that better represents the vocabulary such learners are likely to encounter. In order to bridge this gap, the researchers have been working on compiling an EAL specific corpus and developing a set of EAL word lists from this corpus (following Coxhead, 2000 and Greene, 2008).

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