

THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: *This article aims at examining the impact of vocabulary knowledge on listening comprehension. Helping learners to gain a wide range of vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental issue for improving their general language proficiency globally. The study revealed a substantial correlation between listening comprehension and the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. The study used a quantitative method to collect data from 103 English-majored students at HUIT. The paper highlighted the particular methods for learning vocabulary which can assist students to learn more vocabulary in English and broaden their vocabulary at the same time. Additionally, it might increase students' motivation to learn the language and make the process simpler.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary, Listening comprehension, vocabulary learning strategies, proficiency, listening, instruction, focus on form*

Introduction: The role vocabulary plays in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching is highly valued. It is one element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. In order to communicate well in a foreign language, learners should acquire an adequate number of words and should know how to use them in different contexts as well as for different purposes. Yet, studies in this area have focused primarily on the link between reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Though there is a considerable number of studies suggesting that vocabulary knowledge is an important determinant of success in reading comprehension in second or foreign language education, not many studies focus on the importance of vocabulary knowledge in listening comprehension.

It is generally acknowledged that understanding an aural text requires the listeners to use two major sources; linguistic and non-linguistic. Similarly, there is "a complex interplay between top-down and bottom-up processes in the listening modality, an interaction of sensory input and past knowledge". No matter through which method (top-down or bottom-up) the listener constructs meaning in listening comprehension, lexical competence plays an important role in these processes.

On Vocabulary Knowledge

The scope of vocabulary knowledge is so broad that reaching an ultimate understanding of what a word is may sometimes be rather difficult. As Read (2000) puts it, there are some points to be considered in understanding the nature of vocabulary knowledge, such as; what a word is, whether vocabulary consists of only single words or larger lexical items, what it means to know a word or an item, and what the nature of the construct is to measure vocabulary. In its broadest sense, Cameron (2001) argues that knowing about a word involves knowing about its form (how it sounds and how it is spelled, the grammatical changes that can be made to it); its meaning (conceptual content and its relation to other words and concepts); and its use (patterns of occurrence with other words). Similarly, Hatch and Brown (1995) describe five essential steps in vocabulary learning based on research about learner strategies; having adequate sources to encounter new words, getting a clear image of the new form, learning the meaning, making a memory connection between form and meaning and finally, using the words. Furthermore, Read (2000) believes that the number of words recognized and understood is rather greater than the number of words used either in speech or writing. Therefore, he emphasizes the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary. Harmer (1991) defines receptive vocabulary as words which the students will recognise when they see them, but not necessarily be able to produce. This distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary is important since vocabulary knowledge is defined as receptive knowledge of the words in this study.

Another important aspect of vocabulary concerns the way it is taught. Meara (1996) mentions the problems in teaching vocabulary stating that "our ideas about how to teach vocabulary, and how to develop lexical competence in foreign language learners, are based on rocky assumptions" (p. 2). She emphasised the fact that there was not, at the time, a sound theory of the factors contributing to lexical competence; thus, arguing that a theory was obviously needed to be able to make sensible suggestions for teaching vocabulary in a foreign language. In the same sense, Sökmen (1997) pointed out that "our perspective on teaching vocabulary was greatly influenced by the top-down, naturalistic, and communicative approaches of the 1970s and 1980s; and the emphasis was implicit, incidental learning of vocabulary" (p. 237). These ideas led to many different techniques and approaches to teaching vocabulary (the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper).

The approaches and techniques to teaching vocabulary determine the place of vocabulary in language assessment. As Read (2000) argues, even advanced learners are aware of the limitations in their knowledge of words in learning a second language. They might experience lexical gaps or concepts that they cannot express in the same way they would do in their first language. Therefore, measuring learners' knowledge of words is of great importance. For this purpose, some researchers emphasize the importance of designing and developing tests to measure vocabulary knowledge specifically. From an assessment perspective, the fundamental question to be asked is whether the particular

words included in a vocabulary test are interesting in their own right or whether they are actually measuring learners' vocabulary knowledge. Meara (1996) believes that one can only develop models of lexical competence if they have a complete model of semantics and a complete specification of the syntactic and associational behavior of the words the speakers have in their lexicon. The present study is making use of a Vocabulary Levels Test which meets the above criteria.

On Listening Comprehension

Aural comprehension establishes a base for the development of oral language within the speech chain of listening and speaking (Denes & Pinson, 1993, as cited in Morley, 2001). Morley (2001) stresses the importance of listening comprehension with the claim that "listening comprehension lessons are a vehicle for teaching elements of grammatical structure and allow new vocabulary items to be contextualized within a body of communicative discourse". Listening comprehension is also seen as the primary channel for language input and acquisition (Peterson, 2001) providing the learners with both linguistic and non-linguistic sources. Thus, helping them construct meaning through these sources to identify the phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic knowledge as well as the knowledge of the content, topic or general knowledge of the world (Rost, 2002). On the other hand, as Rost (2002) states, word segmentation and recognition form the basis of spoken language comprehension which implies that if the learners are not able to recognize a certain number of words in the input, they will fail to construct meaningful representations of any text. As a result, they might be deprived of any access to relevant contextual information.

However, as Stæhr (2009) states, "knowledge of a word is no guarantee that the word will actually be recognized in continuous speech. Moreover, recognizing most of the words in the input, does not guarantee comprehension, as many other factors also affect L2 comprehension". These additional factors are first language listening ability, text type, background knowledge and topic familiarity and purpose of listening. Therefore, it is important to note the following points; research on listening comprehension shows that any listening comprehension test should cover a wide range of topics and text types; the background knowledge of the learners is to be considered while preparing a listening text and, thereby, the listening construct needs to be defined well. Mecarty (2000), in his study on the role of lexical items on comprehension, suggests that both lexical and grammatical knowledge are significantly correlated to both reading and listening comprehension, though in different strengths. Though he presents lexical knowledge appearing to be more crucial for reading than it is for listening comprehension, he concludes that the factors related to listening comprehension are complex ones and that "in an L2 context, one can see the surmounting difficulties in isolating variables specific to L2 listening and of researching them" (Mecarty, 2000, p. 338). Yet, Stæhr's (2009) study about the role of lexical knowledge on L2 listening comprehension suggests that vocabulary knowledge is important for successful listening comprehension in EFL contexts. In a study with 115 Danish EFL learners, Stæhr (2009) investigated whether the dimensions of depth and

breadth of vocabulary knowledge plays a role in listening comprehension. Even though the study does not seem to support the hypothesis that depth of vocabulary knowledge (as measured by a Word Associates Test) plays a separate role in listening, he presents a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension in an EFL context and concludes that receptive vocabulary knowledge is almost as important for listening as it is for reading. Teng (2016) also found that vocabulary knowledge is highly correlated with academic listening comprehension, stating that vocabulary size and lexical coverage needed for listening comprehension have a tendency to vary in accordance with the type of spoken texts used.

In order to test this, learners were given two tests; a Vocabulary Levels Test that tested learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge in five different levels and an advanced listening comprehension test, namely, the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE). These tests are discussed in detail in the following sections of the paper.

Listening Comprehension Test

For the purpose of testing the participants' listening comprehension, a standardized listening test from the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) was used. The CPE listening test was designed for the C2 level according to the classifications of proficiency levels by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. The test includes different target language situations that address a wide range of skills involved in listening comprehension such as listening for gist, detail, stated and non-stated opinion, as well as making inferences. There are 28 questions in the test which are divided by four different parts covering a variety of different text types. These task types are; multiple choice, sentence completion, and three-way matching. At the beginning of each part, the test gives time for the participants to have a look at the questions and each piece of text is played twice. Additionally, the test makes use of a variety of accents.

This test was used to assess participants' listening comprehension in this study for two reasons. First, it belongs to a widely known and well-validated examination; and secondly, the test covers a wide range of text types and target language situations, which was believed to decrease the negative effects that might be caused by the test itself.

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