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A Study of Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension on EFL Chinese Learners

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Abstract
Vocabulary knowledge is an important aspect of second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition, and it is widely accepted as a fundamental component of L2 proficiency. A clear tendency in the field of L2 vocabulary acquisition study is that vocabulary knowledge is no longer viewed as a one-dimensional construct rather than as a multi-dimension alone. Many various but complementary vocabulary knowledge frameworks have been proposed, in which breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge occupy a primary and central position. Based on a number of previous researches and studies, in this passage, the author designed a series of tests to some Chinese university students to investigate the correlational relationship among vocabulary breadth, depth and reading comprehension. The major research findings of the study indicate that there exists a moderate, positive correlation relationship among vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth and reading comprehension.

Key words: Vocabulary knowledge; Vocabulary breadth; Vocabulary depth; Reading comprehension

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INTRODUCTION
We all know that vocabulary is one of the three elements of a language; it plays an important role in language study. Vocabulary is the core of English teaching and learning. British linguist Wilkins (1972) pointed out that without grammar, little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Similarly, Lewis (1993) claimed that Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar. In the process of second language acquisition, the expansion of vocabulary knowledge is regarded as one of the fundamental goals. The four traditionally basic language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are all based upon the foreign language learners' vocabulary knowledge (Barrow, Nakanishi, & Ishino, 1999).

As is well-known, vocabulary is basic in reading. Breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge are seen as two dimensions occupying a primary and central position in vocabulary knowledge framework. Breadth of vocabulary knowledge has been taken to refer to the quantity or number of words which learners know at a particular level of language proficiency. Most studies that form the breadth research perspective had attempted to quantify the number of words average native speakers know (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990); the number of words non-native speakers need to know (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996); the number of English words the Chinese college students have known (Zhou & Wen, 2000). Depth of vocabulary knowledge refers to the quality of one's knowledge about a word, and it relates to the question of how well one knows a word. Only a few studies had explored into the depth of individual word knowledge. Schmitt and Meara's (1997) study had examined how these two forms of word knowledge, grammatical suffix knowledge and word associations change over time both productively and receptively. Liu (2001) presented a cross-sectional quantitative research on L2 vocabulary depth across Chinese EFL learners of four different proficiency levels.

However, in terms of the empirical study of vocabulary acquisition, much attention has been paid to the study of

vocabulary breath or its measurement or acquisition in reading comprehension. Laufer (1992) had done several studies, which indicate relatively high correlations, ranging from .50 to .75 between the two factors. Meara (1996) stated that learners with big vocabularies are more proficient in a wide range of language skills than learners with smaller vocabularies, and there is some evidence to support the view that vocabulary skills make a significant contribution to almost all aspects of L2 proficiency. However, so far there have been a rather limited number of empirical studies of the relationship between vocabulary depth and reading comprehension. Qian (2004) is regarded as one of the most representatives conducting empirical study of such relationship in the second language context; nevertheless, Qian had conducted his studies mainly under the context of TOEFL.

The current study, based on a number of previous researches and studies, attempts to make an empirical exploration on evaluating the correlational relationship between L2 reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge from several new perspectives. Firstly, taking into account both vocabulary breadth and depth, this study tries to investigate their roles in reading comprehension. Secondly, the participants in this study are non-English majors whose English proficiency is at the lower-intermediate level. Thirdly, through the assessment of Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and its role in reading comprehension, this study identifies the important role of vocabulary depth and calls for explicit instruction of in-depth vocabulary knowledge to improve the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition.

1. THE PRESENT STUDY

The study of vocabulary knowledge depends much on the data gained from the tests. In this study, according to the previous researches and studies, the author designed three tests to assess the relationships among the breadth of vocabulary knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of non-English majors in the environment of English as a foreign language (EFL).

1.1 Participants

In total, 30 first year college students from Northeast Petroleum University in China participated in this study. They majored in Machinery and Electronics. At the time of this research, all the participants had experienced at least 6 years of English learning.

1.2 Instruments

The instruments that the author used in data collection are Vocabulary Levels Test (see Appendix I), Test for Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge (see Appendix II) and Reading Comprehension Test (see Appendix III). All of the collected data were processed by means of the software SPSS 12.0.

1.2.1 Vocabulary Breath Test

Vocabulary breath (VB) was evaluated through a new version of the Vocabulary Levels Test which was originally designed by Nation (2001). The vocabulary breadth test used in the present study consisted of four word levels. The participants were required to reach the first three according to Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2003) enacted by the Chinese Ministry of Education. The 5 words in level 1 represented a range of high-frequency 1,000 words; the 5 words in level 2 a range of 1,000 to 2,500; the 5 words in level 3 a range of 2,500 to 4,000; and the 5 words in level 4 a range of above 4,000 to 5,000. In scoring, the correct answer of each item was awarded five points. The maximum possible score of VB test was 100.

1.2.2 Test for Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

The Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge measure (DVK) adopted in this study was the version of Word Associates Format developed by Read (1998), which was designed to evaluate the depth of vocabulary knowledge in English. This test was composed of 25 items used to assess two aspects of depth of vocabulary knowledge: collocation and meaning. Each item consists of one stimulus word, which is an adjective, and two groups, each containing four words. The words on the left group are adjectival forms and the possible relationship between the target word and the words in the left group is paradigmatic. On the right there are four nouns, among which are associates that can collocate with the target word and thus have a syntagmatic relationship with it. In scoring, each item had four correct choices and each word correctly chosen was awarded one point. The maximum possible score of the DVK test was 100 points.

1.2.3 Reading Comprehension Test

The reading comprehension (RC) was a multiple-choice test taken from the reading comprehension section of Public English Test System Level 2 (abbreviated as PETS II, held in September, 2007). The reading part has 2 reading passages with 10 multiple-choice questions. Each correct answer was awarded 10 points; therefore, the maximum possible score of RC test was 100 points.

1.3 Procedures and Data Collection

The three tests of VB, DVK and RC were distributed to the participants. Before the all the tests were conducted, the researcher explained how to complete the test, and declared that they were not allowed to use any dictionaries. Some items might be difficult for the majority of average-level students, so they were told to leave blank and skip the words they could not recognize. The maximum time allotted to complete all the tests was 100 minutes.

The two-tailed Pearson Correlations was chosen as the main analysis instruments for the data from the RC, VB and DVK to determine the inter-correlations among the three tests.

2. RESULTS

2.1 Results of VB, DVK and RC Tests

First of all, the results of the three tests were reported and displayed in tables separately. The obtained results were summarized from the following aspects: mean, standard deviation, and reliability. Among the three corresponding parameters, the internal consistent reliability of VB and the DVK (WM and COL) was calculated by the Cranach Alpha Reliability according to the participants' performances in the tests. The results were displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Means (M), Standard Derivation (Std. D)and Reliabilities on VB and DVK

Variables	MPS	Min	Max	Mean	Std. derivation	Reliability(Alpha)
VB	100	55	95	78.81	10.23	.85
DVK	100	49	63	63.29	12.88	.71
WM	100	46	84	66.38	14.47	.74
COL	100	52	76	60.19	11.29	.70
RC	100	50	90	73.30	12.13	/

Note. N=30; MPS: Maximum Possible Score; RC: Reading Comprehension; VB: Vocabulary Breath
DVK: Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge; WM: Word Meaning; COL: Collocation

According to the data shown in the table, the index of reliability of the tested variables ranges from .70 to .85. The results indicate that they are all at the statistically acceptable level. As for the RC test, it was selected from the reading section of PETS 11 (2007), and its high reliability has been accepted. Therefore, its reliability was not shown when the descriptive data of RC scores were presented.

2.2 Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis

In this part, the interrelations among the results of the VB, DVK and RC scores are analyzed with the statistical techniques: Pearson Correlation (see Tables 2-5).

Table 2
Correlation Between Scores on VB and RC

		RC	VB
RC	Pearson correlation	---	.60(**)
VB	Pearson correlation	.60(**)	---

Note. **: *P*<.01 (2-tailed)

Table3
Correlation Between Scores on DVK and RC

		RC	DVK
RC	Pearson correlation	---	.61(**)
DVK	Pearson correlation	.61(**)	---

Note. **: *P*<.01 (2-tailed)

Table 4
Correlation Between Scores on WM, COL and RC

		RC	COL	WM
RC	Pearson correlation	---	.56(**)	.48(*)
COL	Pearson correlation	.56(**)	---	.20
WM	Pearson correlation	.48(*)	.20	---

Note. **: *P*<.01 (2-tailed); *: *P*<.05 (2-tailed)

Table 5
Correlation Between Scores on VB and DVK

		DVK	VB
DVK	Pearson correlation	---	.66(**)
VB	Pearson correlation	.66(**)	---

Note. **: *P*<.01 (2-tailed)

3. DISCUSSION

This empirical study attempts to find out the correlation relationship between the breadth, depth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Based on these data, the following sections will discuss these results shown in the previous tables.

3.1 Discussion of the Relationship Between VB and RC

The result (see Table 2) of the Pearson correlation analyses indicates a significant, positive and moderate correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension.

Generally speaking, learners who possess a larger vocabulary size are able to achieve higher scores in reading comprehension. This is possibly true on the condition that the reading materials available to these learners having larger word size should be relatively easy. On the contrary, learners who have small word size are likely to have much difficulty in decoding reading passages effectively, hence the lower scores. People are always expecting that an increase in vocabulary size will have noticeable and favorable effects on reading comprehension. However, some researchers argued that there does exist a close relationship between the VB and RC; whether or not it is a cause-and-effect one has not been clear yet. A variety of studies have failed to show this relationship consistently. Bensoussan, Sim & Weiss (1984) studied the effect of allowing learners to use dictionaries while doing reading tests. They found no significant difference between learners using a dictionary and learners not using a dictionary; and the temporary increase in vocabulary size provided by the dictionary did not result in a measurable increase in comprehension proficiency. This study again shows that, although sufficient vocabulary size can, to some extent, facilitate learners' quick and easy recognition of most or all of the words in a text, comprehend and process more information from the text, vocabulary size alone does not account for the whole story-superficial knowledge of a

large number of words will not carry a language learner very far in his or her L2 language learning.

3.2 Discussion of the Relationship Between DVK and RC

As indicated by Table 3, the correlation coefficient between the scores on the DVK and RC is .61, indicating a significant, positive and moderate correlation between the DVK and reading comprehension. For further investigation into the relationship between the DVK and RC, the scores of DVK were divided into scores for word meaning (WM) and collocation (COL), and computed respectively on the basis of Pearson correlation analyses. As shown in Table 4, the correlation coefficient of the COL-RC is statistically significant and positive. This confirms again that the results of Table 3, in other words, there is a significant, positive and moderate correlation between the DVK and reading comprehension proficiency.

In reading comprehension, depth of vocabulary knowledge, as measured by a word association test in this study, can provide L2 readers with richer lexical knowledge by means of which the readers can integrate knowledge of individual words with sentences and comprehend the text as accurately as possible. Depth of vocabulary knowledge was assessed on the stratums of lexical meaning and collocation. And collocation plays an important role in the prediction of the scores on reading comprehension. This result verified the belief which was proposed by Nation (1990) that knowing the meaning of a word may include being able to make various associations with other related words. The reason for this point was that the associations attached to a word affect the way that it is stored in the brain, and this will affect the availability of the word when it is needed. Nation (2001) clearly points out again that, the strongest position taken on the importance of collocational knowledge is that it is necessary for the stored orders of words are the foundations of learning, knowledge and use.

3.3 Discussion of the Relationship Between VB and DVK

According to Table 5, the correlation coefficient between scores on the VB and the DVK is .66, indicating a significant, positive and moderate correlation between vocabulary size and depth. The significant correlation between the scores of DVK and VB might be because of the partial overlap of structure in the two tests. The VB test evaluates the primary meaning of words, while the DVK test evaluates the knowledge of polysemy, synonymy and collocation. Apparently, the DVK test measures deeper and more parts of vocabulary knowledge than the VB test. However, the primary meaning of a word is, to some extent, part of polysemy, and synonymy. In addition, knowing the word meaning often influences on knowing the collocation of words, whose meaning, for example, can be inferred from the words as components. The reasons for the significant and positive correlations of the DVK and VB may also be based on other factors which need further studies in the future.

The Pearson correlation coefficients between the VB and DVK implied that the scores of learners on the depth and size of vocabulary knowledge are positively and closely related. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the progress of these two dimensions of vocabulary is interconnected and interdependent. This result also reveals that learners with a larger vocabulary size are very likely to accumulate better quality of word knowledge. However, the results do not suggest that word size is the unique factor influencing learners' depth of word knowledge. The complexity of individual words may also have a great impact on learners' vocabulary depth. Some English words are intrinsically difficult, because they may be polysemous words with too many meanings and usages, or the words represent complicated concepts that are not readily understood by the EFL learners. As Nation (1990) claimed that owing to the different learning burden of words, different words may pose various difficulties for L2 learners and every part of vocabulary knowledge could lead to its learning burden. Therefore, those words with heavy learning burden will have a great impact on the quantity and quality of such words learners are learning.

CONCLUSION

According to the empirical evidence presented above, it reveals that, though meaning is still of great importance, vocabulary knowledge could no longer be viewed as a simple matter of recognition of the primary word meaning. To put it another way, the two dimensions of vocabulary are strongly related, and especially vocabulary depth is also an important predictive parameter when we evaluate the role of vocabulary knowledge L2 reading comprehension. Thus the findings from this study have positive implications for both L2 education and research especially in the field of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language).

The present study has shown that for EFL learners, especially non-English majors, both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge possess positive correlation with reading comprehension. And depth of vocabulary knowledge is also an important factor in the prediction of reading comprehension. In terms of language use, this dimension possesses more importance on the basis of vocabulary size than vocabulary size does alone. One of the most important perceptions taken from the present study is that vocabulary superficial teaching and learning do not mean just concentrating on the meaning and form of an individual word. Requirements and strategies should be made in teaching syllabus to guide EFL learners'

vocabulary development from two dimensions of breadth and depth.

The present thesis cannot be free from limitation because of the writer's limited academic theories and inexperience in conducting empirical study. The participants are EFL learners from only one college and the sample size is not large. Furthermore, their English levels are slightly lower than that of college students in other key universities. It remains unknown whether some different results will be produced with different samples. So, it is worth further testing whether the conclusion of this study can be applied to the participants with different English proficiency, and more studies based on samples of broader range are strongly suggested in the future to get a much clearer picture of the role of vocabulary in reading performance.

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APPENDIX I: ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEST

Directions: There are 20 words in Column A. Please write the correct definition for each word in Column B.

Column A	Column B
1. enter (v.)	
2. empty (adj.)	
3. mountain (n.)	
4. noise (n.)	
5. sick (n.)	
6. anxious (adj.)	
7. imagine (v.)	
8. instant (adj.)	
9. couple (n.)	
10. address (n.)	
11. aboard (prep.)	
12. agreement (n.)	
13. airspace (n.)	
14. satisfaction (n.)	
15. attempt (n.)	
16. extraordinary (adj.)	
17. enthusiastic (adj.)	
18. ambassador (n.)	
19. ambulance (n.)	
20. triangle (n.)	
20. triangle (n.)	

APPENDIX II: TEST FOR DEPTH OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

Directions: Each item consists of one stimulus word, which is an adjective, and two groups, each containing four words. The left group has at least one and at most three words that have part or the same meaning of the target word. The right group has at least one and at most three words that can collocate with the target word. Each item has only four correct answers. For example:

Item	The same meaning word(s)		Collocated word(s)		Answer
difficult	1) hard 3) surprising	2) quick 4) thirsty	5) question 7) task	6) mountain 8) time	1578

Items	The same meaning word(s)		Collocated word(s)		Answer
1. average	1) lucky 3) low	2) ordinary 4) necessary	5) age 7)intelligence	6) advantage 8) speed	
2. accurate	1) exact 3) responsible	2) helpful 4) correct	5) error 7) memory	6) event 8) estimate	
3. broad	1) full 3) large	2) moving 4) wide	5) night 7) shoulders	6) river 8) smile	
4. bright	1) clever 3) shining	2) brave 4) modern	5) degree 7) meal	6) future 8) idea	
5. private	1) free 3) secret	2) handsome 4) informal	5) life 7) heaven	6) school 8) letter	
6. bare	1) empty 3) uncovered	2) heavy 4) useful	5) cupboard 7) church	6) feet 8) tool	
7. convenient	1) easy 3) near	2) distinct 4) suitable	5) experience 7) time	6) way 8) food	
8. dense	1) transparent 3) compact	2) acceptable 4) thick	5) hair 7) wood	6) view 8) material	
9. distant	1) gloomy 3) ultimate	2) far 4) rare	5) past 7) mark	6)relationship 8) journey	
10. familiar	1) traditional 3) friendly	2) formal 4) acquaint	5) advice 7) friend	6) style 8) behavior	
11. fresh	1) inexperience 3) wonderful	2) novel 4) new	5) distance 7) vegetable	6) deed 8) space	
12. innocent	1) shameful 3) afraid	2) guiltless 4) simple	5) party 7) interest	6) crime 8) child	

To be continued

Continued

Items	The same meaning word(s)		Collocated word(s)		Answer
13. natural	1) honest	2) inborn	5) gifts	6) footstep	
	3) normal	4) unaffected	7) brain	8) death	
14. powerful	1) influent	2) potent	5) position	6) engine	
	3) definite	4) supportive	7) repetition	8) price	
15. popular	1) warm	2) capable	5) name	6) road	
	3) welcomed	4) general	7) fate	8) politician	
16. blank	1) expressionless	2) thirsty	5) opinion	6) space	
	3) single	4) empty	7) problem	8) look	
17. calm	1) open	2) quiet	5) cloth	6) day	
	3) smooth	4) tired	7) light	8) person	
18. general	1) closed	2) different	5) country	6) idea	
	3) usual	4) whole	7) reader	8) public	
19. favorable	1) beneficial	2) legal	5) habit	6) response	
	3) possible	4) positive	7) teacher	8) weather	
20. tight	1) close	2) rough	5) bend	6) pants	
	3) uncomfortable	4) wet	7) surface	8) wood	
21. violent	1) expected	2) smelly	5) anger	6) death	
	3) strong	4) unlucky	7) rubbish	8) storm	
22.extraordinary	1) special	2)outstanding	5) person	6) country	
	3) important	4) separate	7) ideas	8) prices	
23. original	1) careful	2) closed	5) condition	6) mind	
	3) first	4) novel	7) plan	8) sister	
24. smart	1) nimble	2) intelligent	5) remark	6) place	
	3) beautiful	4) deft	7) influence	8) moment	
25. formal	1) official	2) loud	5) bomb	6) education	
	3) organized	4) serious	7) growth	8) statement	

APPENDIX III: READING COMPREHENSION

Direction: This section has two passages followed by questions, each with four suggested answers marked A, B, C and D. Choose the one that you think is the best answer. Mark your answers on your answer sheet.

Passage One

A million motorists leave their cars filled up with petrol and with the keys in the ignition (点火, 点燃) every day. The cars are sitting in petrol stations while drivers pay for their fuel. The Automobile Association (A.A) has discovered that cars are left unattached for an average three minutes and sometimes longer as drivers buy drinks, sweets, cigarettes and other consumer items. With payment of credit cards becoming more and more common, it is not unusual for a driver to be out of his car as long as six minutes, providing the car theft with a golden opportunity.

For more than ten years there has been a big rise in car crime than in most other types of crime. An average of more than two cars a minute are broken into or stolen in the UK. Car crime accounts for almost a third of all reported offenses with no sign that the trend is slowing down.

Although there are highly professional criminals involved in car theft, almost 90 percent of car theft is committed by the opportunists. Amateur thieves are aided by our own carelessness. The A.A recommends locking up whenever you leave the car and for however short a period. A partially open sunroof or window is a further come-on to thieves.

There are many other traps to avoid. The A.A. has found little awareness among drivers about safe parking. Most motorists questioned made no efforts to avoid parking in quiet spots—just the places thieves love. The A.A. advises drivers to park in places with people around ― thieves don't like audiences.

1. According to the A.A. survey, the result of increasingly common payment of credit cards is that _____.

A. drivers have to leave their cars to pay

B. drivers have to stay away from their cars for longer

C. drivers' money is more easily stolen D. cars are safer from thieves

2. We can learn from the passage that_____.

A. there is an increasingly large number of car crime in the UK

B. about 20% of all reported crimes involve cars

C. Car crime is decreasing gradually

D. The A.A. didn't pay much attention to car crimes

3. The word 'opportunists' (Para. 3) in this passage most probably refers to _____.
A. people who take chances to steal or break into cars
B. people who always steal or break into cars
C. highly skillful criminals
D. careless criminals who tend to fail in their crimes
4. The A.A. suggests that the car owners should _____.
A. always lock up their cars when they leave
B. keep the sunroof and windows open
C. avoid parking in crowded places
D. keep some people around to watch their cars
5. Paragraph 3 mainly talks about _____.
A. the professional car criminals
B. the opportunities for non-professional car thieves
C. the anti-theft tips
D. when to lock the car

Passage Two

A historical change is taking place in higher education. Professors are being held responsible as never before for how well they serve students. It has become as common in college and universities for students to grade professors as professors to grade students. In fact, student ratings have become the most widely used and, in many cases, the only source of information on teaching effectiveness. A comparison of three studies of the same 600 four-year colleges showed that the number of colleges using student ratings to evaluate teachers had climbed from 29% to 68% to 86%. No other method of evaluation approached that degree of usage.

One reason that student evaluations of teachers have become so popular is that they are easy to administer and to score. But they also are easy to abuse. If they are to throw meaningful light on teachers' performance, the ratings must be used in a way that reflects at least some of what we've learned about them from research and from experience. Research and experience have shown us that there is much more to teaching than what is evaluated on student rating forms. When ratings are used, we know that students should not be expected to judge whether the materials used in a course are up to date or how well the teacher knows the subject matter of the course. These judgments require professional background and are best left to the professor's colleagues. On the other hand, students should be asked to estimate what they've learned in a course, and to report on such things as a professor's ability to communicate at the students' level, professional behavior in the classroom, relationship with students, and ability to stimulate interest in the subject.

1. From the passage we learn that _____.
A. students are now responsible for grading professors
B. student rating is the only valid means of evaluating teaching effectiveness at the moment
C. professors are now responsible for grading students
D. professors are now becoming more responsible for their teaching
2. Which of the following statements is true according to the passage?
A. Student evaluations of teachers are popular because they are accurate.
B. In student ratings, students should not be asked questions that require professional background.
C. Student ratings can be used under any circumstances.
D. All colleges are inclined to use student ratings to evaluate teachers.
3. By saying 'But they also are easy to abuse' (Para. 3) the author means that _____.
A. teachers are easy to be misunderstood
B. teachers are easy to be wronged
C. student ratings can easily be put to wrong use
D. student ratings can easily be made use of to attack teachers
4. In student ratings all the following questions can be asked except _____ .
A. Is what is taught new?
B. Are students interested in what is taught?
C. Can the teacher make himself easily understood?
D. How does the teacher deal with students?
5. The main idea of the passage is that _____.
A. student ratings are very popular and should be properly used
B. student ratings are the only source of information on teaching effectiveness
C. student ratings have become the most widely used source of information on teaching effectiveness
D. besides student ratings, there are other methods to evaluate teachers