

Investigating the Role of Vocabulary Breadth and Depth in Enhancing Sudanese EFL Students' Reading Comprehension

A case Study of EFL Students at Faculty of Education-University of Dongola (Academic year 2022)

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the impact of vocabulary breadth and depth in enhancing Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension. The study adopted the experimental method. Pre-posttests were used as primary tools for data collection. The sample of the study comprises (65) EFL students at English language department, Faculty of Education, University of Dongola. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze and verify the collected data. The study revealed that: Vocabulary breadth and depth play a very significant role in enhancing reading comprehension, both aspects of vocabulary knowledge "breadth and depth" are required for better understanding, Also, vocabulary knowledge "breadth and depth" are very critical in assessing reading comprehension. Based on the findings the study recommended that Sudanese EFL students should increase their vocabulary knowledge as much as possible in order to have effective understanding.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, breadth and depth, vocabulary knowledge.

تقصي دور سعة وعمق ذخيرة المفردات في تعزيز فهم القراءة لدى الطلاب
السودانيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية دراسة حالة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة
أجنبية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية جامعة دنقلا (العام الدراسي 2022)
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المستخلص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة تأثير سعة وعمق ذخيرة المفردات في تعزيز فهم القراءة لدى الطلاب
السودانيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج التجريبي. تم استخدام الاختبار
القبلي والبعدي كأداة أولية لجمع البيانات. تكونت عينة الدراسة من (٦٥) طالباً وطالبة في قسم اللغة
الإنجليزية بكلية التربية جامعة دنقلا. تم استخدام الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية (SPSS) لتحليل
البيانات. أوضحت الدراسة أن سعة ذخيرة المفردات وعمقها لهما دوراً مهماً للغاية في تعزيز أداء القراءة لدى
الطلاب وأن سعة ذخيرة وعمق المفردات أساسيان لفهم أفضل وأن سعة وعمق ذخيرة المفردات مهمان
للتغاية في تقييم فهم القراءة. بناءً على النتائج، أوصت الدراسة طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بزيادة معرفتهم
بالمفردات «عمقا وسعة» قدر الإمكان من أجل الحصول على فهم فعال.
الكلمات المفتاحية: فهم القراءة، سعة وعمق، معرفة المفردات.

Introduction

Vocabulary breadth, or size, is usually understood to denote the number of words a language learner knows. (Qian,1998). Depth of vocabulary knowledge, on the other hand, commonly refers to how well these words are known. However, the terms are far from straight forward. There is no general consensus of what is meant by knowing a word or how depth of vocabulary knowledge can be defined. Following Nation's (2001) tripartite division of word knowledge into form, meaning, and use, Li and Kirby (2015, p. 612) suggest that breadth of vocabulary could be seen as "knowing the oral and written forms of the words, the surface meanings, and basic uses of the words." Other researchers emphasize the importance of knowing the meaning of the word. Qian (1999, 2002), for example, regards vocabulary size as the number of words for which the learner has at least some superficial knowledge of meaning. Defining depth of vocabulary knowledge seems to be an even more complex task. Indeed, there are at least two rather different

approaches to conceptualizing depth of vocabulary knowledge: the developmental approach and the dimensions (or components) approach (Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2010). According to the developmental approach, depth of vocabulary knowledge grows incrementally, from not knowing a word at all, through recognition and having a vague idea of its meaning, to mastering the word, whereas according to the dimensions approach, knowledge of a word is seen as consisting of different subcomponents, or different types of word knowledge, such as orthographic, phonological, morphological, semantic, syntactic, collocational, and pragmatic features (Read, 2004; Schmitt, 2010). Understandably, it is impossible to design tests which would measure all of these features. Some attempts have been made, nevertheless, to include several aspects of vocabulary knowledge in test formats, as reported by Read (2000).

Statement of the Problem

Reading is the most important skill for EFL tertiary level students to master in order to obtain knowledge in their own discipline. EFL students need to rely heavily on context in order to understand the meaning of words, but their lack of such skills results in poor reading comprehension. Although they may successfully decode and read fluently, but **without the knowledge of words, understanding sentences or texts is not possible.** Vocabulary knowledge is considered a significant feature of foreign language proficiency, it is vital in reading comprehension, and actually understood to be the most obviously perceivable component of reading skill.

Therefore, the current study investigates the role of vocabulary breadth and depth in enhancing Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension.

Objectives of the Study

The research has the following objectives:

1. To identify the impact of vocabulary breadth in enhancing Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension.

2. To identify the impact of vocabulary depth in enhancing Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension.

Questions of the Study

This study attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the effect of vocabulary breadth in enhancing EFL Sudanese students' reading comprehension?
2. What is the effect of vocabulary depth in enhancing EFL Sudanese students' reading comprehension?

Hypotheses of the Study

This study has the following hypotheses:

1. The vocabulary breadth enhances Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension.
2. The vocabulary depth enhances Sudanese EFL students' reading comprehension.

Significance of the Study

This study focuses on the role of breadth and depth of vocabulary in enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension, therefore the results of this study may have the following significances: it is expected to provide teachers with various strategies that could help them in teaching reading comprehension and make the indispensable development in teaching new vocabulary. This study is considered significant for EFL students, because it allows them to enhance their reading comprehension through the vocabulary breadth and depth. It also emphasizes the importance of providing EFL students with opportunities to raise their awareness in building vocabulary.

Literature Review

The significant role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension has been well recognized in first language (L1) studies and this has appeared to be the case in second language (L2) settings as well. Researchers have suggested several models to de-

scribe the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

The Breadth of Vocabulary Knowledge

The breadth of vocabulary knowledge is regarded as vocabulary size. Put simply, it is concerned with the number of words that a learner at a certain level knows (Nation, 2001). It has long been acknowledged that vocabulary size plays an important role in EFL learners' academic competency in English (Nation, 1993; Stæhr, 2008). Shimamoto (2000) compared the results of four different tests with the results of Nation's (1990) vocabulary level test, and concluded that the various aspects of vocabulary knowledge were interconnected. The mentioned research aroused the awareness of probing further into vocabulary knowledge, for which the breadth of vocabulary knowledge was found to be easier to measure than the depth of vocabulary knowledge because of its faster accessibility (Nation and Waring 1997). The threshold level, however, still remains to be a controversial issue in EFL vocabulary research. In other words, how large a vocabulary size should an EFL learner need in order to understand academic material is a much-discussed issue. Regarding threshold level, Liu and Nation (1985) conducted an experiment of using passages with 95% lexical coverage of known words compared to passages with 90% lexical coverage of known words, and discovered that a larger vocabulary level was essential. They used the results from their research on the vocabulary size that native speakers have and found that native speakers could add about 1,000 word families a year to their current vocabulary level of around 20,000 word families. Goulden, Nation and Read (1990) concluded that well-educated university graduates who are native speakers had a vocabulary size of about 17,000 base words. Although native speakers have a large vocabulary level, they use only 3,000-10,000 words in their daily use. Therefore, the vocabulary that native speakers frequently use should be the

threshold level for an EFL learner to master. Some scholars (Cobb, 2007; Laufer, 1996; Qian, 1998) found that the vocabulary level that can be assumed to be sufficient for comprehension set at 3,000 word families. In addition to this, when taking various forms of words including affixes, suffixes, tenses, and singular and plural forms into consideration, the vocabulary level an EFL learner needs to master is very large. Although there is a great deal of research on vocabulary size, most of it is focused on the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension. That urges more light to be shed on the role of vocabulary depth on reading comprehension as well.

The Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

Depth of vocabulary knowledge is the understanding level of various aspects of a given word. In other words, depth of vocabulary knowledge is the measure of how well a learner knows a word (Qian, 1998, 1999). The earliest definition could be traced back to Richards (1976), as he proposed that knowing a word means knowing its relative frequency and collocation, limitations on use, syntactic behaviour, basic forms and derivations, association with other words, semantic value, and many different meanings associated with a given word.

A decade later, Nation (1990) added receptive and productive knowledge, as well as defined form, position, function, and meaning as the four components of lexical knowledge. Qian (1998) refined the theoretical framework of Nation (1990) by including pronunciation, spelling, morphological properties, syntactic properties, meaning, register, and frequency to the depth of vocabulary knowledge. In addition, Qian (1999) added collocation properties. The research mentioned above showed that the depth of vocabulary knowledge was a difficult and complex process, and even an advanced EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge might be incomplete. "Some learners are good at the grammatical functions of particular

words, for example, and others have a strong knowledge of English word parts” (Lessard-Clouston, 2013:5). Although the depth of vocabulary knowledge was given more attention in first language (L1) studies (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Mezynski, 1983) and second language (L2) studies (Qian, 1998, 1999; Read, 1990), more research is still necessary, due to the complex nature of the depth of vocabulary knowledge. For example, if more lexical knowledge is needed in comprehension, how much knowledge is sufficient for a basic understanding level? Read (1995) developed a word associates test for the depth of vocabulary knowledge, which has had a profound influence on the assessment of the role of the depth of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension. Wesche and Paribakht (1996) also developed a five-level elicitation test of vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) for assessing ESL learners’ vocabulary development and progress. According to the VKS, the levels for the depth of vocabulary knowledge range from complete unfamiliarity to recognition of a word to partial understanding of a word, to the confident ability to use a word accurately.

Reading Comprehension

The main purpose of reading is comprehending the text she/he reads. All comprehension revolves around the reader’s ability in finding and determining main idea and topic sentence from the text (Ariyantipuspita, 2017). Schumm (2006) stated that comprehension process involves an understanding of words and how these words are used to create meaning. Comprehension entails three elements, which are:

- a. The reader who is doing the comprehension; to comprehend the text, a reader must have a wide range of capacities and abilities. These include cognitive capacities, motivation and various types of knowledge.
- b. The text that is to be comprehended; the features of the text

have large effect on comprehension. Comprehension does not occur by simply extracting meaning from the text. Texts can be easy or difficult, depending on the factors inherent in the text. When there are too many of these factors not matched to the reader's knowledge and experience, the text may be too difficult for optimal comprehension to occur.

- c. The activity in which comprehension is a part; a reading activity involves one or more purposes, some operations to process the text at hand, and consequences of performing the activity. The consequences of reading are part of the activity. Some reading activities lead to an increase in the knowledge that the readers have, another consequence of reading activities is finding out how to do something.

Block (1986:133) stated that reading comprehension is *"incredibly complex and multifaceted. Because of this, readers do not develop the ability to comprehend texts quickly, easily or independently"*. Therefore, reading comprehension strategies must be introduced at an earlier stage over an extended period of time by parents and teachers who have knowledge and experience using them. The development of reading comprehension is a lifelong process that changes based on the depth and breadth of texts the person reads. Eskey (1986) stated that words must be refined, practiced and reinforced continually throughout life. Even in the middle grades and high school, teachers need to continue to help their students develop reading comprehension strategies. As their reading materials become more diverse and challenging, they need to learn new tools for comprehending these texts.

Rubbin (1993) states that reading comprehension is a complex intellectual process that involves word meanings and verbal reasoning. Without word meaning and verbal reasoning, there could be no reading comprehension. Reading and comprehension are regarded as one activity that cannot be separated. Grellet (1999) stat-

ed that understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible. There are two strategies that the researcher focused on in this study which are contextual clues and structural analysis to help students comprehend the reading texts.

Context clues:

refer to words in a sentence or a paragraph that provide hints to readers to help them figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words (Elder, 2008). Context clues can be categorized as internal (morphological word formation) and external (surrounding context), semantic features (e.g., definitions, synonyms, antonyms, examples, contrast, or logic), structural features (including grammatical or syntactic markers within a word or sentence) or morphological analysis (e.g., prefixes, roots of words, and suffixes) (Rasinski, 2008).

Structural Analysis :

is the process of grouping English words according to their categories: root, prefix or suffix (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). The majority of English words have been created through the combination of morphemic elements, that is, prefixes and suffixes with base words and word roots. So, knowing the meanings of roots, prefixes and suffixes can help students to learn English vocabulary.

Reading Comprehension in Terms of Vocabulary Breadth and Depth

Studies concerning the relationship between vocabulary size, or breadth, and reading comprehension are numerous, and the connection between the two is well established. The number of studies concerning both vocabulary breadth and depth as well as reading comprehension is more limited. However, high positive correlations between vocabulary breadth, depth, and reading comprehension were found by Rashidi and Khosravi (2010), whose

study comprised Iranian EFL learners. A moderate correlation was found between breadth and depth of vocabulary by Li and Kirby (2015), but the relationship of these two constructs to reading comprehension showed intriguing results, as vocabulary breadth correlated more strongly with a multiple-choice task, whereas depth of vocabulary correlated more strongly with a more demanding summary task. Qian (1999) has been one of the pioneers in acknowledging the significance of depth of vocabulary knowledge as a vital element of reading comprehension skills along with vocabulary size. Qian (1999, 2002) investigated the interrelationships among vocabulary breadth, depth of vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension across Chinese and Korean readers. Qian (1999) found that scores on vocabulary breadth, depth of vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension were highly correlated, and that depth of vocabulary knowledge made a unique contribution to the prediction of learners' reading comprehension performance.

A good vocabulary system is indeed an asset to EFL students; those who know more words are able to process various reading texts and are competent to engage in active conversation with people from different backgrounds and proficiency levels (Anderson & Freebody, 1981). In a review by Moghadam, Zainal and Ghaderpour (2012) on the important role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension performance, they posited that vocabulary learning is central in language acquisition, whether second or foreign language. Researchers have also suggested that knowing a word completely should take into consideration a variety of linguistic knowledge ranging from pronunciation, spelling and morphology to knowledge of antonym, synonym, hyponym and collocational meanings (Chapelle, 1998; Henriksen, 1999). They also stated that vocabulary knowledge is an indicator of language ability and in order to be a competent second/foreign language learner,

a great amount of words is a dominant factor. Hence, such vocabulary knowledge is also required for successful reading comprehension.

Bee Eng and Abdullah (2003) reported that secondary school students adopted three strategies – knowledge and use of contextual clues, doing structural analysis and making associations to acquire word meaning of selected vocabulary items from reading. These processes would assist their vocabulary development and hence improve their vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension.

In the regional context, Kameli and Baki (2013) studied the impact of vocabulary knowledge level on EFL reading among Iranian students. They found that there is a positive relationship between knowledge of vocabulary and successful reading comprehension achievement when the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) and Reading Comprehension Test (IELTS) were conducted on the students. Chou (2011) studied the effects of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge in an EFL reading comprehension test and established that participants who received a list of vocabulary to study performed better in the reading comprehension test in comparison to the participants who relied on background knowledge.

Research Methodology

The purposive sample of this study is 65 EFL students at English department in Faculty of Education-University of Dongola. The quantitative approach was chosen for its appropriateness to the research topic. The study adopts the experimental method, as it provides this study with the tools to investigate the relationship between the independent variable (vocabulary depth and breadth knowledge) and the dependent variable (reading comprehension). The researcher used pre/post-tests to collect the data. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to analyse the data of the study.

Validity and reliability of the tools

The tools were submitted to experts in English language (from University of Dongola, Sudan University of Science and Technology and Nile Valley University) to evaluate and assess their validity in terms of content appropriateness and achievement. All the modifications and suggestions regarding the tools of the study were done.

To achieve the reliability of the results of this study, a pilot study was conducted. The results of the piloting show that the tools items were suitable to be used in the study.

Pilot study

A pilot study of the experiment was conducted to measure the reliability of the pre/post-tests. It aimed at timing the test and determining its difficulty and suitability. Therefore, (15) EFL students were selected randomly from English department at Faculty of Education -University of Dongola as participants in the pilot study.

The results of the piloting show that the tools items were suitable to be used in the study as shown below:

Analysis of the pre-posttests of the pilot study

The T-test was used to examine the degree of significance in the difference between pre and posttest in the pilot study

Table (1) The statistical analysis of mean difference of vocabulary depth, breadth and reading comprehension

| Test | Test Value = 0 | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|----|-----------------|-----------------|---|---------|
| | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Pre-test | 9.090 | 14 | .000 | 29.26667 | 22.3611 | 36.1722 |
| Post-test | 27.067 | 14 | .000 | 74.73333 | 68.8114 | 80.6552 |

Table (1) above shows the results of the pilot study's pre- and post-

tests of (vocabulary breadth and depth and reading comprehension), the calculated value of mean difference of the pre-test is (29.26667) t. value is (9.090), the degree of freedom is (14). On the other hand, the calculated value of mean difference for the post test is (74.73333) t. value is (27.067), the degree of freedom is (14), and the value of significance is (.000) which is less than (0.5) meaning that there is statistical significant difference between the pre and post-tests as a result of applying the experiment, so the tools are acceptable to achieve the objectives of the study.

Procedure of data collection

To investigate the role of vocabulary breadth and depth in enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension, three pre/post-tests were used.

The first pre-test was administered to the EFL students to measure their reading comprehension. The papers of the first pre-test were marked to assess their attainment in reading comprehension before the experiment.

The second pre-test was given to the EFL students for testing their knowledge of vocabulary breadth: it consists of (20) multiple choice questions. The papers of the second pre-test were marked to assess the participants' achievement of vocabulary breadth before the experiment.

The third pre-test was given to the subjects for testing their knowledge of vocabulary depth: it consists of (20) multiple choice questions, gap filling and matching. Then, the papers of the third pre-test were marked to assess their achievements of vocabulary depth before the experiment.

In the experiment stage, the researcher used contextual clues and structural analysis strategies in teaching new vocabulary before the students do the reading activity. the researcher selected various reading texts such as: The career ladder, City life, Global problems, Health and fitness, Places and media, among others.

Strategies of reading comprehension, namely contextual clues and structural analysis were emphasized in “pre”, “during” and “post” reading activities.

The students were given seven lessons which were followed by the post-tests. They were given the first post-test that consists of a reading comprehension text entitled “Mobile phone”. The papers of the first post-test were marked to assess the students' attainment in reading comprehension after the experiment.

The EFL students were given the second post-test for testing their knowledge of vocabulary breadth: it consists of (20) multiple choice questions, parallel to the questions in the pre-test. Then the papers of the second post-test were marked to assess their achievement of vocabulary breadth after the experiment.

The third post-test was given to the participants for testing their knowledge of vocabulary depth: it consists of (20) multiple choice questions, gap filling and matching, parallel to the third pre-test. Then the papers of the third post-test were marked to assess the students' achievement of vocabulary depth after the experiment. The analysis and discussion of the results of both pre and post-tests are below.

Analysis of the pre-posttests

The T-test was used to check the degree of significance in the difference between pre and posttest.

Table (2) The mean difference of vocabulary breadth, depth and reading comprehension

| Test | Test Value = 0 | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|----|-----------------|-----------------|---|---------|
| | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Pre-test | 22.561 | 64 | .000 | 30.10769 | 27.4418 | 32.7736 |
| Post-test | 64.177 | 64 | | 80.55385 | 78.0463 | 83.0614 |

Table (2) above illustrates that the mean difference in the EFL students' vocabulary breadth, depth and reading comprehension between the pre-test (the counted value of mean difference =30.10769, lower value =27.4418, and upper value =32.7736) and the post-test (the tabulated value of mean difference =80.55385, lower value =78.0463 and upper value =83.0614) is statistically significant. The T-test value shows statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test: the computed value of t-test =22.561, the degree of freedom = 64 while in the post-test: the counted value of t-test =64.177 and the degree of freedom = 64. The value of significance of difference between the pre and the post-tests is “.000”. From these outcomes, it is clear that the significance value (0.000) is less than the probability value (0.05). These results confirm the statistical significance of difference observed in the scores of the post-test which were extremely high compared to the scores of the pre-test.

In brief, EFL students' understanding of reading comprehension before and after the experiment changed, and increased dramatically after the experiment. These outcomes prove the power of vocabulary breadth and depth activities on reading comprehension proficiency of EFL students. Consequently, vocabulary breadth and depth knowledge plays a great role in enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension.

Discussion of the Results

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the role of vocabulary breadth and depth in enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension. The results of the study are discussed as follows:

The results reveal that vocabulary breadth and depth play a great role in enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension. These results are in agreement with Ahmad & Roghaieh (2012). They investigated depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge, and whether they affect reading comprehension of Iranian EFL

Learners. The study results indicated that Iranian EFL University students' depth and size of vocabulary knowledge are strongly associated with their reading comprehension success. In another study by Noora Harkio & Päivi Pietilä (2016), they investigated the role of vocabulary breadth and depth in reading comprehension for finish EFL learners. The results implied that vocabulary breadth and depth seem to be stronger predictors of reading comprehension skills in lower levels of proficiency than on the advanced level. The study of Elsiddig (2016) investigated the effect of vocabulary use on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension. The results indicated that vocabulary learning has a great influence on students' achievements in reading comprehension. Students with high proficiency level of vocabulary breadth were more successful in reading comprehension than those with less proficiency level of vocabulary breadth. These findings emphasize the results of the current study and proves the positive impact of vocabulary breadth on reading comprehension.

On the other hand, other studies indicated that while both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge play an important role in EFL learners' reading comprehension performance, depth of vocabulary knowledge makes a more important contribution. The study by Mlao. LI & John R. Kirby (2015) investigated the effects of vocabulary breadth and depth on English reading. The results showed that breadth and depth of vocabulary were moderately correlated. They both contributed to word reading comprehension. Also, Tayseer (2020) investigated the relationship between students' depth of vocabulary and their proficiency in reading comprehension. The study main finding was that there is a direct correlation between the depth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The current study main findings are as follow.

Findings

In the light of the results of the pre-posttests and discussion, the following findings are revealed:

- Vocabulary breadth and depth play a very significant role in enhancing reading comprehension.
- Using the strategies of contextual clues and structural analysis through pre, during and post reading activities has a vital role in increasing vocabulary depth and breadth.
- Both aspects of vocabulary knowledge- breadth and depth are required for better understanding of reading texts.
- Vocabulary knowledge- breadth and depth are very critical in the assessing of reading comprehension.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study the researcher recommended that EFL students should increase their vocabulary knowledge as much as possible in order to have effective understanding of EFL reading texts. EFL teachers should give more room for teaching vocabulary depth and breadth and allow for more awareness and practice of the vital strategies of contextual clues and structural analysis as means for increasing the students' depth and breadth of vocabulary. A suggestion for further study is to investigate other strategies of teaching new vocabulary and how they can improve the students' reading comprehension at tertiary level.

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