

The Impact of Vocabulary Size on the Receptive Skills of Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of vocabulary size on Saudi EFL learners' reading and listening skills. Thirty-eight undergraduate Saudi EFL learners participated in the study. The study tools consisted of vocabulary size test (VST) developed by Nation and Beglar (2007). The test was developed to provide a reliable, accurate, and comprehensive measure of a learner's vocabulary size from the 1st 1000 to the 14th 1000-word family of English word-level tests. A paid reading and listening comprehension tests were used. Both tests were obtained from ETS, TOEFL official application. The results revealed that the vocabulary size of the Saudi EFL learners in the tertiary stage was 2790 words. Furthermore, the study found a positive relationship between the scores of the vocabulary test levels and the score of the reading and listening test. This indicates that a higher level of performance in the vocabulary test may lead to a higher level of performance in the reading and listening test, and these relationships were statistically significant at the level of 0.01. Because of this, it was recommended that teachers and learners use different approaches and styles for teaching and learning vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary size, receptive skills, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, Saudi EFL learners

1. Introduction

Knowledge of vocabulary is regarded the building block of a language. It's role is pivotal in the comprehension and understanding of texts (Ali & Ayub, 2012; Eng & Abdullah, 2003; Dabbagh & Janebi Enayat, 2019; Matthews, 2018; Nation, 2006). According to Moghadam et al. (2012), when readers do not know enough vocabulary in a text, it affects their comprehension. Vocabulary size refers to the volume of vocabulary that language learners know (Nation & Nation, 2001). Listening and reading are receptive skills (also known as passive skills), as both involve receiving information. Vocabulary size is considered a good predictor of reading proficiency in EFL contexts (Nation & Nation, 2001; Qian, 2002; Read, 2000). Furthermore, the amount of vocabulary that readers find familiar or unfamiliar is significant in recognising the difficulties that learners face when practicing reading (Sidek & Rahim, 2015). The role of vocabulary size in reading has been widely explored in previous literature (Ibrahim et al., 2016; Sidek & Rahim, 2015; Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Stahr, 2008). Its role in listening has been thoroughly researched (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Stahr, 2008; Mecarty, 2000). This will be elaborated on in the following sections.

2. Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension

Many studies have explored the impact of vocabulary size on reading comprehension. Two main aspects have been studied: a) the role of lexical repertoire in understanding and comprehending texts, and b) the role of practicing reading in increasing knowledge of vocabulary. According to Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010), vocabulary knowledge can help with reading, and, in turn, reading can contribute to vocabulary growth. The correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension is interrelated; vocabulary is central to reading comprehension, and reading is important for vocabulary development. Learners can improve their vocabulary through exposure to various types of reading and contexts, and even different types of reading materials, especially authentic ones (Nagy & Herman, 1987). Because of its fundamental role in text comprehension, vocabulary teaching is greatly emphasised in English language teaching. Vocabulary can be taught implicitly, as mentioned earlier, by exposing learners to different kinds of reading, such as extensive reading. Explicit teaching is also a good option for vocabulary education (Taylor et al., 2009). However, some believe that explicit vocabulary teaching is insufficient and might disrupt the new word-learning process (Sternberg, 1987).

A significant number of empirical studies have discussed the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Stahr (2008) investigated the relationship between vocabulary size and listening, reading, and writing skills. There were 88 participants, all of whom were EFL learners at a secondary school in Denmark. Vocabulary size was found to be strongly correlated with reading and writing and moderately associated with listening. Furthermore, most learners did not know the 2000 most common English words. One of the most crucial studies on this topic was conducted by Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010). They studied the relationship between second language learners' vocabulary size, lexical text coverage, and reading comprehension. A total of 745 college students participated in the study in Israel. The Levels Test, Vocabulary Profile, and standardized national test were used to collect the data. The findings demonstrated that small increments of vocabulary knowledge contributed to reading comprehension. They suggested that knowing 8000 word-families

was necessary to comprehend 98% of the text, while 4000–5000 words were required to comprehend 95% of the text. Another empirical study by Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010) explored the effect of vocabulary size on the reading and listening skills of EFL learners in Iran. The sample consisted of 58 freshman university students. The results revealed that vocabulary size had a positive impact on both reading and listening comprehension. In 2012, Alavi and Akbarian investigated the extent to which vocabulary size can predict reading ability. The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) was used to recognize the vocabulary size of 213 Iranian university students. Five types of reading comprehension were tested, and the results showed that performance in three of the TOFEL test items (guessing, vocabulary, stated detail, and main idea) correlated with the vocabulary test performance. Therefore, reading performance is influenced by vocabulary knowledge and proficiency level. Terms such as lexical depth, lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and lexical richness are allocated to vocabulary. Sen and Kuleli (2015) explored the effects of vocabulary size and depth on reading. A sample of 361 university students in Turkey was studied. The findings revealed that both vocabulary size and depth were significantly correlated with reading performance, but vocabulary depth was a better indicator of reading performance. A similar study by Sidek and Rahim (2015) discussed the role of vocabulary knowledge in L1 and L2 reading. A vocabulary and a reading test were used to obtain data from 10 public high school students. The findings revealed that the scores of the vocabulary test and reading comprehension test were significantly better for the L1 text than for the L2 text. A recent study by Ibrahim et al. (2016) examined the relationship between students' reading comprehension skills and the size of their vocabulary. A total of 129 students enrolled in an intensive English programme at a Malaysian public university participated in the study. Data were collected using an institutional English proficiency test and the Vocabulary Levels Test. The findings revealed a significant relationship between the two variables.

Although reading comprehension is strongly correlated with vocabulary size, there are other factors that affect text comprehension. Bee Eng and Abdullah (2003) outline three strategies that might affect the reading and comprehension of texts. They are a) the use of contextual clues, b) conducting structural analysis, and c) making associations to acquire the meanings of new words. Another factor that helps with quickly understanding texts is learners' background knowledge of reading passages (Chou, 2011). Furthermore, the purpose of reading helps determine the extent to which a text is understood and comprehended. According to Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010), reading can be done for pleasure, academic purposes, or to improve knowledge; therefore, reading can be easy when practiced as a pleasurable activity. To sum everything up, the following controversial question needs to be answered: What comes first, vocabulary teaching or reading skill (comprehension)? Alderson and Alderson (2000) answered this question by declaring that 'in the early stages of language learning and before the threshold level, it is a matter of language which prevents students from comprehending texts and the main components of the language are words which play the key role' (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010, p. 294).

3. Vocabulary Size and Listening Comprehension

It is obvious that spoken language is different from written language in that the listener needs time and more effort to decode information and analyse utterances when speaking or conversation is taking place. In written discourse, a reader can go over a text multiple times until they understand it. A variety of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies are involved in listening comprehension. For this reason, and unlike reading comprehension, very few studies have explored the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Stahr, 2008). Of these, Mecarty (2000) found that vocabulary size is more linked with reading rather than with listening. Stahr (2008) found a similar result. He found that vocabulary knowledge is better correlated with reading and writing than with listening. This outcome was confirmed by Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010). They found that vocabulary size was better correlated with reading than with listening. Another study by Bonk (2000) investigated the relationship between lexical knowledge in listening texts and the gist comprehension of these texts. He concluded that both variables were only modestly associated. Furthermore, Stahr (2008) explored the relationship between a vocabulary size test and a listening comprehension test. The results demonstrated that there is substantial correlation between the two, and vocabulary plays a crucial role in listening comprehension.

According to Mehrpour and Rahimi (2010), Adolph and Schmitt (2003), Stahr (2008), and Nation (2006), a vocabulary size of 3000 to 7000 words is required to understand spoken texts. After reviewing related literature, Stahr (2008, p. 141) concluded that learners need between 6000 and 7000-word families to keep up with authentic spoken discourse.

4. How Much Vocabulary Is Needed to Comprehend Texts?

As mentioned earlier, vocabulary knowledge is undoubtedly fundamental to reading and listening comprehension. The question here is how much vocabulary is required to understand and comprehend particular texts. A great number of studies have been conducted to determine the range of vocabulary required to understand written or spoken texts. These study findings vary according to the types of texts and genres to which they belong. In their study, Zhang and Annual (2008) found that knowledge of 2000 to 3000 words is needed to comprehend texts for short-answer tasks. Similarly, Laufer (1992) clarified that 3000 words are enough to read well in English, and it can be a reliable indicator of good performance of learners. A higher figure (3600 words) is required to understand unassisted texts, as approved by Saragi et al. (1978). To comprehend texts without help, Hu and Nation (2000) suggested that learners should be able to know 98% of the words in texts. Reading and understanding authentic texts require a higher figure (8000–9000 words), as indicated by Nation (2006). Nation and Webb (2011) claim that 20,000 words are required to properly understand technical and academic texts. The following table summarizes these findings:

Table 1. Summary of the vocabulary needed to comprehend texts

Author/s	Number of words	Purpose
Zhang and Annual (2008)	2000-3000	Reading comprehension for short answer tasks
Laufer (1992)	3000	-Reading well -Predicting the performance of students
Saragi, Nation, and Meister (1978)	3600	Understanding unsimplified texts in English
Hu and Nation (2000)	98% of words in a text	Understanding texts without help
Nation (2006)	8000–9000	Reading authentic texts
Nation and Webb (2011)	20,000	Reading technical and academic texts

In the Saudi context, few studies have been carried out to measure the vocabulary size of EFL learners. Alnujaidi (2003) found that Saudi learners at the university stage know between 500 and 700 words, while Al-Masrai and Milton (2012) came up with a different number. Their results revealed that the vocabulary knowledge of Saudi English learners at the university stage is between 2000 and 3000 words. This result was confirmed by Altalhab (2019), who found that they know an average of 3000 words.

Based on the positive association between vocabulary size and reading and listening comprehension that was evident in the previous literature, the present research tries to answer the following questions:

1. What is the vocabulary size of Saudi EFL learners?
2. How do Saudi EFL learners perform in the reading comprehension test?
3. How do Saudi EFL learners perform in the listening comprehension test?
4. How do Saudi EFL learners perform in the vocabulary level test?
5. What is the relationship between the reading comprehension and vocabulary size of Saudi EFL learners?
6. What is the relationship between listening comprehension and the vocabulary size of Saudi EFL learners?

5. Methods

5.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 38 male EFL students. They were in their final year of study at the Department of English at King Khalid University in the academic year 2023. They were all aged between 20 and 22 years and were native Arabic speakers. They studied English for nine years during general education stages.

5.2 Instruments

Reading comprehension test: The researcher used a practice TOEFL reading test. It was obtained from ETS, TOEFL official application and it cost 17.99 SAR. The test consisted of two reading passages with 10-item questions for each passage. All the questions were multiple choice, with four options for each answer. The time allocated, as suggested by the test developer, was 40 minutes.

Listening comprehension test: The researcher used a practice TOEFL listening test. It was obtained from ETS, TOEFL official application and cost 17.99 SAR. The test consisted of two listening tasks on different topics. Participants were required to answer 10 questions after listening to the two listening clips. It required 30 minutes.

Vocabulary size test (VST): The researcher used Nation and Beglar's vocabulary size test (2007). According to the authors, the test was developed to provide a reliable, accurate, and comprehensive measure of a learner's vocabulary size from the 1st 1000 to the 14th 1000-word family of English. Of the several reasons to want to measure a non-native speaker's vocabulary size, one is to see how close the learner is to having enough vocabulary to be able to perform certain tasks. The VST consists of 140 items that represent 14 levels (ten words/items from each level). Each item includes 4 alternatives. Here is an example from the 2000-word level:

MAINTAIN: Can they maintain it?

- a. Keep it as it is.
- b. Make it larger.
- c. Get a better one than it.
- d. Get it.

According to the developers, this test is different from others in that it uses the multiple-choice format compared with other tests' yes/no format. It puts the tested word in a short, non-defining context and is based on a different set of word frequency lists from the Thorndike and Lorge lists.

Due to time constraints and participants' existing levels of language proficiency, the researcher used the tests at the levels of 2000, 3000, 5000, 8000, and 10000 words.

5.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The VST was first administered to the participants, after which they received a listening test. The last part of the test was the reading

comprehension test. The application of these research tools took place during second term of the academic year 2023. The reading test was given 20 points, while the listening test was given 10 points. The VST were allocated 50 points (five levels, ten points for each level). Clear instructions about how to complete the tests were provided, and the participants were informed that their data would be confidential and their performance on the test would not affect their current course. All data were analysed by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The statistical methods used were mean, standard deviation, percentage, and Pearson coefficient.

6. Results

6.1 Question One: What Is the Vocabulary Size of Saudi EFL Learners?

To answer this question, students’ performance on the vocabulary size test was analysed, as outlined in the following table:

Table 2. Participants’ performance on the vocabulary size test

Level	Level score	Mean score	Standard deviation	Lowest score	Highest score
2k	10	5.29	2.34	0	10
3k	10	5.03	2.20	1	9
5k	10	3.89	2.04	1	8
8k	10	3.32	2.05	0	9
10k	10	2.79	1.74	0	6

As indicated in Table 2, the mean score for the sample in the 2000-word level was 5.29. This means that the participants knew approximately 1085 words from the 2000-level list. For the 3000-word level list, the mean score of the respondents was 5.03. This indicates that the vocabulary size was 1509 words. The vocabulary size of students at the 5000-word level was 1945 words, and the mean was 3.89. For the 8000-word level, the mean was 3.32; therefore, the vocabulary size was 2656 words, while it was 2790 words for the 10000-word level, as the mean was 2.79.

As is evident from the data, the mean score becomes lower when the word level increases. Participants scored 5.29 in the 2000-word level compared to 2.79 points in the 10000-word level. This is logical, as the 2000-word list contains more frequently used, familiar words. The learners’ vocabulary knowledge at this level is 1085, which represents more than half of the 2000-word list. The participants are in their final year of their undergraduate education; therefore, they have adequate knowledge to answer the first two lists properly. However, when the word levels increased, they failed to demonstrate the proper vocabulary size that they were expected to have. They might face difficulty understanding and comprehending texts. Zhang and Annual (2008) mentioned that knowing 2000–3000 words is needed to comprehend texts for short answer tasks. Laufer (1992) suggests that 3000 words are enough to read well in English. Reading and understanding authentic texts requires a vocabulary size of 8000–9000, as suggested by Nation (2006). In order to understand technical and academic texts properly, Nation and Webb (2011) claim that knowledge of 20,000 words is required.

The results of this study revealed that the vocabulary size of Saudi EFL learners, all of whom were undergraduates in their final year of university, is 2790 words. This result is in line with those of Al-Masrai and Milton (2012), who found that the vocabulary repertoire of Saudi learners at the university stage is between 2000 and 3000 words. This result is further confirmed by those found in Altalhab’s 2019 study, where he found that Saudi EFL learners know approximately 3000 words. In contrast, Alnujaidi (2003) found that, at the tertiary level, they know between 500 and 700 words.

6.2 Question Two: How Do Saudi EFL Learners Perform in the Reading Comprehension Test?

To answer this question, the researcher calculated the means and standard deviations of the reading test scores. The following table shows the results:

Table 3. Average scores of the study sample on the reading test (N=38)

Test	Mean	Standard deviation	Lowest score	Highest score
Reading test score (out of 20)	7.24	2.76	4	17

Table 3 outlines that the mean score for the reading test was 7.24, the lowest score was 4, and the highest score was 17. The sample’s reading test scores were divided into three levels of equal range to obtain the following classifications that represented their reading test performance:

Table 4. The sample’s performance level in the reading test

Level	No.	Percentage
Low (0–6)	16	42.1%
Medium (7–13)	21	55.3%
High (14–20)	1	2.6%
Total	38	100.0%

As can be seen in Table 4, 42.1 % of the participants obtained low scores (0–6), while 55.3% of them gained medium scores (7–13). This means that almost all participants received either medium or low scores. Only one student received a high score. The participants’ vocabulary size, as mentioned in the results for the first question, was estimated to be 2790 words. This might indicate that this level of vocabulary is insufficient to perform well on reading comprehension tests. Reading and understanding texts requires a vocabulary size of 8000–9000 words, as suggested by Nation (2006), a number that increases to 20,000 in the case of academic texts. (Nation & Webb, 2011).

6.3 Question Three: How Do Saudi EFL Learners Perform in the Listening Comprehension Test?

To answer this question, the researcher calculated the means and standard deviations for the scores of the sample in the listening test. The following table presents the results.

Table 5. Average scores of the study sample on the listening test (N=38)

Test	mean	Standard deviation	Lowest score	Highest score
Listening test score (out of 10)	3.95	1.82	1	9

The mean sample score in the listening test was 3.95, which is low compared to their reading test scores. The participants' scores on the listening test were divided into three levels of equal range to obtain the following classifications that represent their performance:

Table 6. The sample's performance level in the listening test

Level	No.	Percentage
Low (0-3)	15	39.5%
Medium (4-6)	20	52.6%
High (7-10)	3	7.9%
Total	38	100.0%

Table 6 shows that 39.5% of participants obtained low scores (0-3), whereas 52.6% of them obtained medium scores (4-6). Only three learners gained high scores (7-10). Generally speaking, the participants' performance was low (mean=3.95). This can be attributed to their low vocabulary. Understanding texts requires a vocabulary size of 8000-9000, as suggested by Nation (2006), a number which increases to 20,000 in the case of academic texts. (Nation & Webb, 2011).

6.4 Question Four: How Do Saudi EFL Learners Perform in the Vocabulary Levels Test?

To answer this question, the researcher calculated the average and standard deviations for the participants' scores for each level of the vocabulary test: 2000-, 3000-, 5000-, 8000-, and 10000-word levels. The following table presents the findings.

Table 7. Mean scores of the study sample in the vocabulary test

Level	Level score	Mean score	Standard deviation	Lowest score	Highest score
2000	10	5.29	2.34	0	10
3000	10	5.03	2.20	1	9
5000	10	3.89	2.04	1	8
8000	10	3.32	2.05	0	9
10000	10	2.79	1.74	0	6

Table 7 demonstrates that the performance of the participants was better at the 2000- and 3000-word levels than the other levels. As mentioned earlier, this can be attributed to the fact that the lexis at the 2000- and 3000-word levels are more frequent.

For a better explanation, the researcher divided the sample scores in the vocabulary test into three levels of equal range to obtain the following classifications that represent the performance level for each level of the vocabulary test:

Table 8. The sample's performance level at each level of the vocabulary test (N=38)

Word level	High (7-10)		Medium (4-6)		Low (0-3)	
	N	percent	N	percent	N	Percent
2000	11	28.9%	19	50.0%	8	21.1%
3000	10	26.3%	19	50.0%	9	23.7%
5000	5	13.2%	14	36.8%	19	50.0%
8000	2	5.3%	14	36.8%	22	57.9%
10000	-	-	17	44.7%	21	55.3%

Table 8 indicates that a third of the sample obtained scores that were classified as high at the 2000- and 3000-word levels, and about 50% obtained medium scores. About 20% of the participants had low scores. The performance at the 5000-, 8000-, and 10000-word levels was low when compared to the 2000- and 3000-word levels. More than 50% of the sample obtained low scores in these three levels (0-3).

6.5 Question Five: What Is the Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Size of Saudi EFL Learners?

To answer this question, Pearson correlation coefficient was used to discover the correlation between the scores of each level of the vocabulary test, the total score of the levels in the vocabulary test, and the reading test scores. The following table shows the results:

Table 9. Pearson correlation coefficients to measure the relationship between the scores of the research sample at each level and between their scores on the reading test. (N=38)

Word level	Correlation factor	Significance	Correlation type
2000	0.2159	Insignificant	Positive
3000	0.2666	Insignificant	Positive
5000	0.4427	Significant at 0.01	Positive
8000	0.5211	Significant at 0.01	Positive
10000	0.2866	Insignificant	Positive
All levels	0.4781	Significant at 0.01	Positive

Table 9 demonstrates positive relationships between the scores of the vocabulary test levels and the score of the reading test. This indicates that a higher level of performance in the vocabulary test may lead to a higher level of performance in the reading test, and these relationships are statistically significant at the level of 0.01. However, the relationship with the vocabulary test in the 2000-, 3000-, and 10000-word levels were not seen to be statistically significant.

It is also clear in Table 9 that there are positive relationships between the total score of the vocabulary level test and the score of the reading test. This indicates that a better performance in the vocabulary level test may lead to a higher level of performance in the reading test, and this relationship was statistically significant at the level of 0.01.

This positive association between vocabulary size and reading skills was evident in many studies across different contexts (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Stahr, 2008; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Sen & Kuleli, 2015; Sidek & Rahim, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2016).

6.6 Question Six: What Is the Relationship between Listening Comprehension and Vocabulary Size of Saudi EFL Learners?

To answer this question, the researcher used the Pearson correlation coefficient to measure the relationship between the scores of the research sample at each level of the vocabulary test (2000-, 3000-, 5000-, 8000-, and 10000-word levels), the total score of all levels of the vocabulary test, and the scores on the listening test. The following table displays the results:

Table 10. Pearson correlation coefficients to measure the relationship between the scores of the research sample for each level and between their scores on the listening test. (N=38)

Word level	Correlation factor	Significance	Correlation type
2000	0.4436	Significant at 0.01	Positive
3000	0.5623	Significant at 0.01	Positive
5000	0.4881	Significant at 0.01	Positive
8000	0.4756	Significant at 0.01	Positive
10000	0.2272	Insignificant	Positive
All levels	0.6228	Significant at 0.01	Positive

Table 10 indicates that there are positive relationships between the scores of the vocabulary level test and the score of the listening test. This indicates that higher levels of performance on the vocabulary test may lead to higher levels of performance in the listening test, and these relationships were statistically significant at the level of 0.01. The exception was the relationship with the vocabulary test at the 10000-word level, which was found to be insignificant.

Furthermore, Table 10 indicates that there are positive relationships between the total score of the vocabulary levels test and the score of the listening test, which indicates that the higher the performance level in the total vocabulary level score, the higher their performance on the listening test. This relationship was statistically significant at the level of 0.01.

This result about the positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension was confirmed by some studies, such as Mehrpour & Rahimi (2010), Stahr (2008), Mecarty (2000), and Bonk (2000).

7. Conclusion

The outcomes of the current study estimated the vocabulary size of undergraduate Saudi EFL learners to be 2790 words. This low number resulted in weak performance in reading, listening, and vocabulary tests. Furthermore, the study found that vocabulary size has a positive influence on reading and listening skills. This is in line with previous literature (i.e., Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Stahr, 2008; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Sen & Kuleli, 2015; Sidek & Rahim, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2016).

Due to low performances in the vocabulary test at the 5000-, 8000-, and 10000-word levels, and the strong association between vocabulary size and receptive skills, it is evident that more attention should be paid to teaching vocabulary. Teachers should make use of different methods and approaches to teaching lexis. In this regard, Hunt and Beglar (2005) proposed a useful framework for vocabulary development. This framework incorporates two approaches: 1) promoting explicit lexical instruction and learning strategies; and 2) encouraging the use of implicit lexical instruction and learning strategies. This might be especially helpful in academic contexts, as 20,000 words need to be known to properly understand academic texts (Nation & Webb, 2011).

On the other hand, it is recommended that learners utilize different learning styles to increase their vocabulary, as it was shown to be positively correlated with reading and listening comprehension. They should be aware that building vocabulary is a lifelong learning task and should make use of various available resources accordingly. And, needless to mention, teachers should help students learn in an autonomous manner.

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