

# Vocabulary Levels of the First Year Students of the UNP College of Social Work

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## Abstract

*This study endeavored to determine the vocabulary levels of the first year students of the College of Social Work of the University of Northern Philippines.*

*Data was gathered using a Vocabulary Level Test for Learners of English as a Second Language. The test was divided into five levels - the 2,000 Word Level, 3,000 Word Level, 5,000 Word Level, University Word Level, and 10,000 Word Level. Each test gave one mark for each correct matching of a word and its definition. Although only 18 words are matched at each level, in fact 36 words at that level are tested. This is because the distractors in the test are not meanings but words. The learners' scores on a level represent the proportion of the words known at that level.*

*Results of the Vocabulary Level Test showed that the students got a Good rating in the 2,000 Word Level, Good in the 3,000 Word Level, Fair in the 5,000 Word Level, Fair in the University Word Level and Poor in the 10,000 Word Level. This means that the freshman BSS students of UNP need help in the University Word Level and 10,000 Word Level. An English Vocabulary Program for BSS students should be developed and validated for use.*

*English Professors or Communication Arts teachers as well as content/professional subject teachers should conduct similar studies to determine the vocabulary levels and needs of their students.*

## Introduction

### Background of the Study

Language teaching is the most essential part of a school program. Through the use of language, learners gain knowledge, solve problems, express feelings,

communicate with others, and acquire skills necessary for a vocation. Language makes schoolwork possible and meaningful; the school in turn, through its many activities and learning experiences, provide the impetus and the environment for the most effective learning of language.

Language is the medium for understanding concepts in all the tool and content subjects in the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. It is also the instrument for careful thinking, problem-solving, and communicating with others. As students mature and move through the school system, they must learn to define their problems, gather necessary facts, examine these facts, organize their ideas, and then communicate with others.

The English Language Program is a pattern of interrelated skills. The learning of these four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – are closely related to the students' academic growth and their experiences. Since language is a tool of communication, the receptive (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) are the focus of the Communication Arts Program.

In the Philippines, learners enter school at the age of six with English as their second language. They start receiving formal instruction in English in the first grade. In the elementary and secondary levels, English is taught sixty minutes a day from Monday to Friday. In college, English is used as the medium of instruction in all general education and professional or major subjects. Teaching the communicative use of English helps the learners to cope with the increasing difficulty in learning tasks required by the academic subjects as they progress from one level to the next level.

The Arts and Sciences General Education Program in college as prescribed by the Policies and Standards of the then Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports (MECS Order No. 35, S. 1984) is intended to be a continuum of general education started at the elementary level and carried through the secondary level; a program of studies that provides the foundation for advancement into a major field of specialization, and a program that seeks to develop critical thinking, sound judgment, formation of virtues, and effective communication.

Learning the English language is quite complicated. The basics of English that can be burdensome to learners are the sound system, the grammatical signals, and its enormous vocabulary.

Since the aim of the English Language Program is to develop language proficiency, it considers the teaching of meaning or content and the development of vocabulary and diction paramount.

However, with the adoption of the Bilingual Education Policy which took effect in May 1987, as per MECS Order No. 52, English is cast into a modified role in Philippine setting, and the teaching of this language is rendered more difficult. The use of Filipino as medium of instruction side by side with English affects the capacity of Filipino students to learn English well.

It is accepted that with the adoption of the 1987 policy on Bilingual Education, English plays a modified role in the English language program.

In 1996, the Commission on Higher Education came out with Memorandum Order No. 59 series of 1996 requiring all colleges and universities to offer English Plus to improve the English proficiency of college freshmen by learning the critical grammatical structures necessary for communicative functions like narrating, describing, and giving directions and by acquiring adequate vocabulary needed for academic study. The emphasis is on the use of English for communication and learning purposes.

Among other considerations, this has dictated the teaching of vocabulary intensively. Vocabulary should not be left to take care of itself.

The problem of this study was framed along the view that vocabulary is so closely related to listening and reading comprehension as well as speaking and writing that a good vocabulary level test can serve as a basis for developing a vocabulary enrichment program for a specific group of learners.

Studies conducted by English teachers in-the division of Ilocos Sur found out that learners in the elementary, high school, and college levels are weak in comprehension, noting details, reorganizing/sequencing, getting the main idea, making inferences, perceiving cause-effect relationships, making judgments, structural analysis, identifying synonyms and antonyms, recognizing homonyms, drawing logical conclusions, application skills, and getting meaning through context. The researchers attributed these findings to the following factors: lack of exposure to the cognitive learning skills, low intelligence quotient, lack of mastery of the basic skills in composition writing, emphasis on rote memory and fact learning instead of fact application and comprehension, and inadequate vocabulary.

In the University of Northern Philippines, English teachers as well as professional or content subject teachers complain of the students' inability to do language tasks required in their courses.

Since vocabulary is fundamental to the development of the listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills in English, assessing the vocabulary levels of students is essential in order to determine what vocabulary lessons should be given to them. The significance of the study, therefore, becomes apparent.

To the researcher and other English teachers, the study may be of great help in their teaching job. With enough knowledge of the vocabulary needs of the students, they will be able to prepare an English vocabulary program which may help learners tackle language tasks not only in their English subjects but in all content area learning, hence, improving academic achievement.

To the school administrators, the result of this study may serve as a basis for curriculum improvement particularly in the teaching of vocabulary. In addition, it may arouse a deeper concern and support from the school administration to enrich the existing English research program for the improvement of English teaching.

## Objective

This study was conducted to determine the vocabulary levels of the first year students of the UNP College of Social Work.

## Review of Related Literature

### Meaning of Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the stock or range of words available to the learner for use in oral or written communication, words which he can understand from listening to others, or from reading and which he can use in writing. (Robles, 1988).

An expanded definition made by Yazon (1964) refers to vocabulary as the stock of words one acquires in the process of learning a language. It is acquired as one learns to observe, to interpret experience, to discover nuances of feeling and mood, and to find words that express correctly what one thinks and feels. It is closely related with experience, for words are symbols of crystallized experiences. Experience is followed by interpretation which in turn is symbolized by words. These make up the vocabulary of the learner. Other experiences follow the original experience and the learner soon acquires an expanded vocabulary out of several related experiences. Thus, vocabulary is sometimes called a person's "word-wealth" or "word-ward."

## Points to Consider in Vocabulary Teaching

According to Nation (1986), the minimum vocabulary aims of a school course should be: (1) to teach a 1,000 word productive vocabulary which will enable the learners to use language as a system of communication and (2) to teach a receptive vocabulary of an extra 2,000 words which will enable learners to read thus enabling them to become independent of their language teachers. Learners at this stage should also be able to guess from context and should know how to use a dictionary.

The types of words that students learn can be classified according to the frequency of their occurrence in textbooks. They are high frequency words, academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary, and low frequency words. High frequency words occur in all kinds of texts; academic vocabulary occur frequently in most kinds of texts; technical vocabulary occur, sometimes frequently, in specialized texts; while low frequency words occur very infrequently. (Nation, 1987).

## Word Lists/Levels

Word lists can help English teachers and course designers in several ways. They can help a teacher develop a feeling about which words are useful and should be given attention. They provide a principled basis for preparing vocabulary tests or developing vocabulary programs for teaching.

The 1,000 Word Level, The 1,000 Word Level is a productive vocabulary. It contains 1,000 words but it must satisfy all the important language needs of a learner. Therefore, there must be attention to the principle of one word for one idea. However, the 1,000 Word List must also be a receptive vocabulary. It is used for stories, reading passages, and exercises which the learners can read.

The 2,000 Word Level or the General Service List. The most famous and most useful list of high frequency words is Michael West's General Service List of English Words (1953). This list is now old but it has still not been replaced as a source of useful information about particular words and as a collection of the most important vocabulary for a learner of English. The list contains 200 headwords. It gives the frequency of the main headwords plus the relative frequency of its meanings. The General Service List includes forms under the same headword. So the entry for own includes own, owns, owned, owning, and includes OWNER and ownership. In the entry, the parts of speech are distinguished (own as adjective, and own as verb) and the various meanings are also distinguished. In developing a second language learner's spoken vocabulary, the 2,000 words of the General Service List is a reasonable goal.

A learner needs to be able to recognize about 3,000 of the most frequent words in English to be able to read everyday English material. Therefore, an extra 2,000 words are needed for receptive use. A learner who knows the first 3,000 words will still have to look up a few words in the dictionary but not a large number.

**The 3,000 Word Level.** If learners need to cover the whole range of language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), then a productive vocabulary of around 3,000 base words and a larger receptive vocabulary is needed. The words in the 3,000 Word List are taught in the series of books developed for the English language Institute pre-university course by Helen Barnard (Advanced English Vocabulary Workbooks 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, 1971, 1972, 1975). The English Language Institute of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand trains teachers assigned to classes who learn English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

**The 5,000 Word Level.** This represents the word list that contains a wide vocabulary. It is the boundary of high and low frequency words. It is both a receptive and productive vocabulary.

**The University Word List Level.** The University Word Level of 737 base words and over 1,400 derivatives was prepared as part of the B.A. Honours Degree at Victoria University of Wellington in 1983 by Xue Guoyi of the Foreign Languages Department of Sichuan University in Chengtu, China. It was made by combining the word lists of Campion and Elley (1971) and Praninskas (1972), and the problem counts of Lynn (1973) and Ghadessay (1979). All these lists were made by studying the vocabulary for first year university textbooks. The 19 disciplines covered by Campion and Elley are Accountancy, Anthropology, Biology, Economics, Chemistry, Education, English, French, Geography, History, Law, Mathematics, Philosophy, Mechanics, Physics, Psychology, Political Science, and Sociology while the 10 by Praninskas are Mathematics, Physics, Psychology, Biology, Sociology, Philosophy, History, Literature, Chemistry, and Rhetoric.

**The 10,000 Word Level.** This level contains vocabulary of minor importance from a wide range of areas. It has low frequency words.

### Testing as Part of Vocabulary Building

An integral part of vocabulary building is testing. It is, therefore, equally significant that due emphasis be given to this aspect. A teacher is concerned not only with the apparent size of the learner's vocabulary but with his skill in determining the extensiveness and depth of meaning associated with words. The usual practice of testing vocabulary skills in most classrooms, however, require simple recall of the meanings of isolated words, usually the dictionary meaning divorced from context. Another problem associated with inadequate vocabulary

tests is the selection of vocabulary words for both teaching and testing purposes. The choice is based on the difficulty of a word if not its rarity. It would be helpful if the choice of vocabulary words be made discriminately (Esplana, 1972).

### **The Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Problem of Students**

Sambrano (1988) investigated the communication needs in English of first year college students enrolled in the degree programs of the Mariano Marcos State University, first, semester, school year 1987-1988. She found that the components of grammatical competence (lexicon, morphology, syntax, sentence semantics, and phonology), sociolinguistic competence (topic, role relationship, purpose, and setting) and strategic competence (ability to cope with failure to communicate and inadequacies in grammatical and sociolinguistic competencies) correlated highly among themselves as well as with the grade in English 1. All the three competences were highly correlated to effective communication.

The results show that the students failed to manifest command of vocabulary, word formation, and meaning on the sentence level all of which are necessary in the attainment of grammatical competence. She recommended the inclusion of lessons on lexicon, morphology and sentence semantics in addition to phonology and syntax. As regards language skills, the students were less proficient in listening, reading, and writing skills than in speaking skill. While speaking skill is needed most to attain grammatical competence and be able to communicate effectively and efficiently, speaking and writing skills are most influential in achieving sociolinguistic competence, and listening skills is the greatest influence to the attainment of strategic competence. It is, however, important to develop all the skills to be functionally competent in English.

In a study conducted by Chotirat (1990) on the competencies in reading of the first year college students in three institutions in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, he found out that the students are weak in noting details (recall and identification), reorganizing/sequencing, getting the main idea, and making inferences. This could be indicative of their lack of exposure to these cognitive learning skills in the secondary level.

In another study by Peredo (1988) on the comprehensive ability of the grade six pupils in Bantay, Ilocos Sur, the pupils were rated "Satisfactory" in the following skills: noting details, getting the main idea, perceiving cause-effect relationships, and making judgments. Getting meaning through context was the most difficult skill for them and was rated "Moderately Satisfactory". Not one skill was attained at a "Very Satisfactory" or "Outstanding" level. These findings could be due to the poor foundation of pupils in the lower grades where they are supposed to have gained adequate vocabulary which is basic to the learning of other reading comprehension skills. It could also be attributed to the techniques utilized by

teachers in teaching vocabulary. They have the tendency to make use of dictionary meaning which is a technique in the line of least resistance.

The study of Sanidad (1988) on the silent and oral reading competencies of the Narvacan School of Fisheries high school freshmen also revealed that students were deficient in structural analysis, identifying synonyms and antonyms; very deficient in context analysis and slightly competent in recognizing homonyms. In general, they are deficient in word recognition. The respondents were found out also to be generally deficient in comprehension as they were deficient in logical conclusion, getting the main idea, deficient in understanding sequence and slightly competent in recognizing details. In oral reading comprehension, they were slightly competent in recognizing details, deficient in drawing logical conclusions and getting main ideas, very deficient in understanding sequence and obtaining meaning of words through context, and generally deficient in oral reading comprehension.

Ruelos (1988) made an analysis of the cognitive reading skills of the first year students of the six high schools in Vigan, Ilocos Sur. The overall weakness of the respondents was the application skill level, an indication of possible weakness in our educational system where rote memory and fact learning are more emphasized than fact application and comprehension.

Navarro (1992) found out in her study on the vocabulary levels of the freshman Medical Secretarial students of UNP CBAA that the vocabulary level of students is not influenced by age and type of school attended. This means that age and type of school attended do not affect the acquisition and development of vocabulary.

If the weaknesses stated above are not abated, these will continue to accumulate and students will remain deficient in the four language skills which are vital tools for academic study.

## Methodology

This descriptive study made use of the Vocabulary Level Test for Learners of English as a Second Language by I.S.P Nation of the English Language Institute of Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. The test was administered to 17 first year students of the UNP College of Social Work.

The test was divided into five levels –the 2,000 Word Level, 3,000 Word Level, 5,000 Word Level, University Word List Level, and 10,000 Word Level. Each section of the test consisted of six words and three definitions. A maximum of 60 minutes was allowed for sitting the test.



Each test gave one mark for each correct matching of a word and its definition. The scores for each of the five sections of the test were recorded. A learner's scores on a level represent the proportion of the words known at that level.

This standardized test was chosen because it is easy to mark, provides low chances of guessing, tests a large number of words in a short time and allows learners to make use of whatever knowledge they have of the meaning of a word. The words in each section of the test are representative of all the words at that level. Although 18 words are matched at each level, in fact 36 words at that level are tested. This is because the distractors in the test are not meanings but words. The Rating Scale below was used:

18	Excellent	12		4	
17		11	Fair	3	Very Poor
16		10		2	
15		9			
14	Good	8			
13		7	Poor		
		6			
		5			

If a learner scores 12 or less out of 18 in a section of the test, then it is worth helping him study the vocabulary at that level.

The results of this test serve as basis for determining which of the five vocabulary levels should be given help with vocabulary learning. Teachers can then direct the learners to the appropriate vocabulary and use suitable teaching and learning strategies.

## Results and Discussion

### Vocabulary Levels of Students

To determine the overall performance of the respondents in the Vocabulary Level Test, the researcher computed the mean ratings in each vocabulary level (Table I).

**Table 1. Vocabulary levels.**

<b>Vocabulary Level</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Description</b>
2,000 Word Level	15	Good
3,000 Word Level	14	Good
5,000 Word Level	12	Fair
University Word List Level	10	Fair
10,000 Word Level	5	Poor

Table 1 shows that the students got a Good rating in the 2,000 Word Level, Good in the 3,000 Word Level, Fair in the 5,000 Word Level, Fair in the University Word List Level, and Poor in the 10,000 Word Level.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this study, the following conclusions and recommendations are forwarded:

The BSSWI students got a Fair performance in the 5,000 Word Level and University Word Level and Poor in the 10,000 Word Level so these Word Lists should be taught to them.

School administrators should encourage teachers not to leave vocabulary to take care of itself. They should make language teachers realize that a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning results in better achievement. They should consider the inclusion of Teaching and Learning Vocabulary as subject requirement for college freshmen.

The results of this study should inspire English teachers to determine the vocabulary levels of their students and prepare a comprehensive vocabulary program for the levels that need to be attended to or direct the learners to the appropriate vocabulary and use suitable teaching and learning strategies. This may prepare the learners to deal effectively with language tasks.

A group of curriculum writers must be organized to spearhead the preparation of an English Vocabulary Program for tertiary instruction because this relates most directly to improvement of classroom work resulting in better achievement. The result of this study should serve as basis for curriculum enrichment particularly in the English Language Program.

Finally, similar or further studies should be conducted to compare results of the Vocabulary Level Test for Learners of English as a Second Language.

## References

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