

# Research-Based English Vocabulary Program for College Freshmen

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## Abstract

*This study endeavored to develop an English vocabulary program for first year college students at the University of Northern Philippines in Vigan, Ilocos Sur. It utilized the Research and Development (sometimes called "research-based development) method.*

*The research involved 2,543 first year college students from the 21 degree and eight non-degree programs of the four colleges and seven institutes of UNP. Random sampling with the use of Slovin's Formula was used to determine the number of respondents from each college and institute. The total number of respondents was 501.*

*The instruments used to gather data were the standardized Vocabulary Level Test for Learners of English as a Second Language and the English Vocabulary Achievement Test for First Year College students constructed by the researcher and content validated by English professors.*

*The proficiency level of the first year college students in receptive and productive vocabulary is Fair. This means that the respondents need help in all the five vocabulary levels.*

*The structure of the English Vocabulary program for College Freshmen is made up of: type of vocabulary, title/level, objective, content, learning strategy, timeframe, evaluation technique, and success indicator.*

*The validity of the English Vocabulary Program is highly Satisfactory.*

*The program effectiveness or the gain in the mean scores of the respondents' rating is Very Significant,*

*There should be a wide use of the English Vocabulary Program in freshman English classes to validate further the instructional material.*

*Teachers should be patient enough to supplement the vocabulary lessons with the following training activities beyond the sentence level: (1) actual listening to a conversation or speech material; (2) reading a text ; (3) actual talking in communication situations common to the professions or social events; (4) letter writing; (5) reporting; and (6) giving instructions in an examination or a recipe. These receptive and productive tasks will enrich the learners' experiences. Homework for individual study by the students will also be very useful for both the teacher and the learner.*

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

*Instructional materials such as modules, workbooks, and programmed materials may be constructed based from the English Vocabulary Program.*

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

One of the main concerns of school administrators and English language teachers is to prepare learners to deal effectively with the receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) tasks in their academic subjects because this relates most directly to improvement of classroom work resulting in better achievement.

In college, listening, reading, speaking, and writing in the professional subjects pose many problems to learners because they lack adequate vocabulary. Although a considerable amount of vocabulary building is associated with English Language teaching in the elementary and secondary schools, the English proficiency of college students remains limited.

In the Philippines, learners enter school at age six with English as their second language (L2). They start receiving formal instruction in English in the first grade. In basic education, while learning the English language as a subject, learners are required to use the English language to learn other subjects like Science and Mathematics. In college, English is used as the medium of instruction in all content and professional subjects. Hence, there is a need to teach English well. Teaching the communicative use of English helps the students to cope with the increasing difficulty in learning tasks required by their 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 Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECS Order Number 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, effective communication, sound judgment, and formation of values. At the end of the four-year arts and sciences degree/course, the student should have: the ability to think critically; the essential foundation for his development into a well-rounded citizen; the ability to investigate and analyze questions and problems carefully and to present his results and ideas clearly on the basis of solid data and study; the capacity to appreciate human values and cultural heritage; and the ability to develop ideas, attitudes, and habits essential for his improvement as a human being.

Through the use of the English language, learners gain knowledge, solve problems, express feelings, communicate with others, acquire information, and develop skills necessary for a career. The school provides the environment, and that includes the English language teacher, for the most effective learning of the English language. However, with the adoption of the Bilingual Education Policy effective May 1987, as per DECS Order Number 52, English is cast into a modified role in Philippine classrooms and the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) 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.

In 1996, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) came out with Memorandum Order Number 59 series of 1996 requiring all colleges and universities to offer English Plus (English Zero) 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 requiring adequate vocabulary needed for academic study.

The emphasis is on the use of English for communication and learning proposes.

The Department of Education (DepEd) recently required the implementation of the Bridge Program, an enrichment and developmental program in English, Science, and Mathematics for first year high school students in all public secondary schools starting school year 2004-2005. This shows that the English proficiency of Filipino students is deteriorating. English is not the mother tongue (MT) of Filipino learners. It is studied as a separate subject, at the same time, it is used to learn other subjects.

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

Among other considerations, this dictates the teaching of vocabulary intensively. Vocabulary should not be left to take care of itself. There are very strong reasons for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both the teacher and the learners (Nation, 1987). First, because of the considerable research on vocabulary, there is adequate information about what to do concerning it and about what vocabulary to focus on. This means that vocabulary work can be directed towards useful skills. One can feel confident that learners get good return for the effort that they put in. Second, there is a wide variety of ways for dealing with vocabulary in foreign or second language learning. Third, both learners and researchers see vocabulary as being a very important, if not the most important, element in language learning. Finally, giving attention to vocabulary is unavoidable. Getting learners to do language learning tasks when their vocabulary is inadequate is a frustrating experience.

The problem of this study together with the scheme to tackle it was framed along the view that vocabulary is so closely related to listening and reading comprehension as well as speaking and writing that an English vocabulary program will help first year college students master strategies for becoming independent learners of vocabulary and learn specific words that will be useful in their academic work and future careers.

Since the aim of the English Communication Arts Program is to develop language proficiency it considers the teaching of meaning or content and enriching of vocabulary and diction paramount. Vocabulary is fundamental to the development of the listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills in English, so, aspects on what and how to teach it should be given emphasis. This is the rationale of the study. Students are likely to encounter many unknown or partially-known words as they listen or read all kinds of content. Teachers generally find it impossible to teach all the unfamiliar words that students will encounter. Teachers need to focus on what kinds of vocabulary are needed for certain groups of learners, hence, this research work. 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 researchers and other English language teachers, the result of the study may be of great help in their teaching job. With enough knowledge of the vocabulary needs of 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 also in all content area learning, hence, improving academic achievement.

To the school administrators, the result of this research may serve as 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.

## Objectives of the Study

This study attempted to develop and validate an English Vocabulary Program for college freshmen. It sought to answer the following questions:

- I. What is the proficiency level of the first year college students in terms of:
  - 1.1 receptive vocabulary, and
  - 1.2 productive vocabulary?
2. What is the structure of the English vocabulary program as to:
  - 2.1 philosophy, goals, and objectives of vocabulary instruction,
  - 2.2 vocabulary levels/needs of students,
  - 2.3 vocabulary skills to be developed,
  - 2.4 strategies in teaching and learning vocabulary,
  - 2.5 evaluation techniques,
  - 2.6 time frame, and
  - 2.7 success indicators?
3. What is the validity of the vocabulary program in terms of content and instructional characteristics?
4. How effective is the vocabulary program in teaching vocabulary? Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of freshman students?

## Review of Related Literature

### *Meaning of Vocabulary*

Vocabulary is the stock of words and their meanings which are 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 speaking and in writing; it is the collection of word meanings acquired as one learns a language or communicates with others. It is also called word-wealth.

### *Receptive and Productive Vocabulary*

Vocabulary can be divided into two groups – receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary (Bamard et al, 1987). A person's receptive vocabulary contains words which are understood when he is listening or reading. Productive vocabulary refers to the words used for speaking and writing.

### *Approaches to Vocabulary Teaching*

Vocabulary teaching can fit into the language teaching course in four ways: (1) Material is prepared with vocabulary learning as a consideration. (2) Words are dealt with as they are met. (3) Vocabulary is taught in connection with other language activities. (4) Time is spent either in class or out of school on the study of vocabulary without an immediate connection with some other language activities. For example, time is spent on learning spelling rules, dictionary use, the use of word parts, word list learning, vocabulary puzzles, and other word games.

To put all the four approaches into practice, a teacher needs to consider the following three questions: (1) What vocabulary do learners need to know? (2) How will they learn this vocabulary? (3) How can a teacher see what learners need to know and what they presently know?

### *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 occurs frequently in most kinds of texts; technical vocabulary occurs, sometimes frequently, in specialized texts; while low frequency words occur very infrequently. (Nation, 1987)

### *Word Levels/Lists*

Word lists can help 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 List 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 Chadessy (1979). All these lists were made by studying the vocabulary of first year university textbooks. The 19 disciplines covered by Campion and Elley are Accountancy, Anthropology, Biology, Chemistry, Economics, Education, English, French, Geography, History, Law, Literature, Mathematics, Mechanics, Philosophy, Physics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology while the 10 by Praninskas are Biology, Chemistry,

History, Literature, Mathematics, Philosophy, Physics, Psychology, Rhetoric, and Sociology.

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, requires simple recall of the meanings of isolated words, usually divorced from context.

**Methodology**

This study utilized the Research and Development Method. The steps in this process are usually referred to as the R & D Cycle. The major steps in the R & D Cycle used in developing the English Vocabulary Program for College Freshmen are shown in Figure 2.

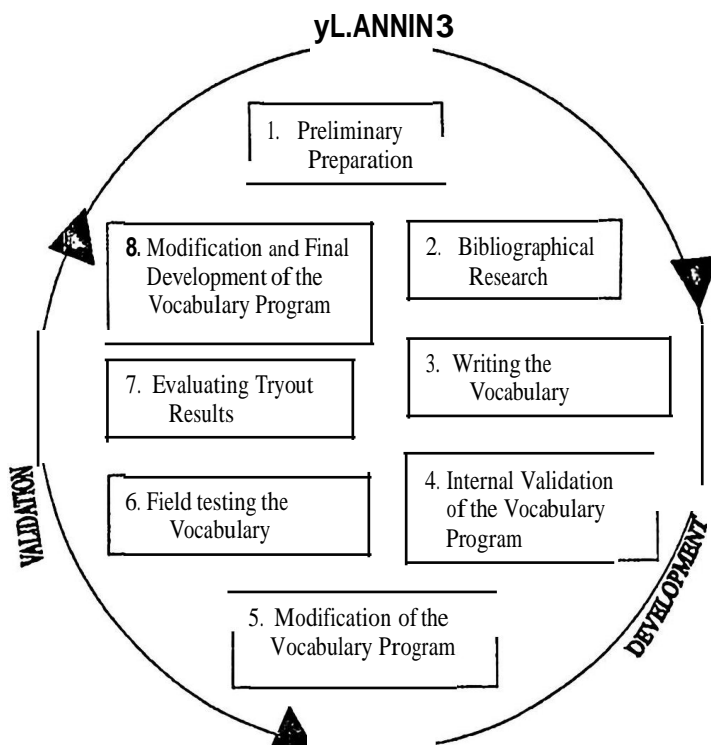


Figure 2. Steps in the Research and Development Process



## Results and Discussion

### Proficiency Levels of the UNP College Freshmen

Table 1 presents a summary of individual mean ratings in the Vocabulary Level Test.

**Table 1. Summary of individual mean ratings in the vocabulary level test**

College/Instituto	Word Level					Over All Performance
	2,000	3,000	5,000	UWL.	10,000	
College of Arts and Sciences	G	G	F	F	P	F
College of Business Administration & Accountancy	VG	G	F	F	P	F
College of Health Sciences	G	G	F	F	VP	F
College of Teacher Education	G	G	F	F	P	F
Institute of Architecture	G	G	F	F	P	F
Institute of Criminology	G	G	F	P	VP	F
Institute of Engineering	VG	G	G	F	P	F
Institute of Fine Arts	G	G	F	F	P	F
Institute of Nursing	VG	VG	G	F	P	F
Institute of Technical Education	F	F	P	P	VP	P
<b>Overall Mean Rating</b>	G	G	F	F	P	Fair

Legend:

18	Excellent	10-12	Fair
16-17	Very Good	5-9	Poor
13-15	Good	2-4	Very Poor

It is gleaned from Table 1 that the overall performance of the students in the different colleges and institutes is Fair with mean ratings ranging from 10-12. Topping them all is the College of Nursing whose students rated Very Good in the 2,000 and 3,000 Word Levels (13-15), but poor in the 10,000 Word Level (2-4). The least performance was garnered by the students of the Institute of Technical Education whose mean ratings fall under Fair (10-12), Poor (5-9), and Very Poor (2-4). Generally, all the students need to be reinforced on lessons in vocabulary development.

## Structure of the English Vocabulary Program

The structure of the English Vocabulary Program is presented on Table 2.

**Table 2. Structure of the English vocabulary program.**

Type of Vocabulary	Title of Lesson	Objective	Content of Lesson	Learning Strategy	Time Frame	Evaluation Technique	Success Indicator
Receptive vocabulary	2,000 Word Level	Provide words to enable the learner to comprehend simplified English texts	50 words from the General Service List	∞ ω + ω: ω& ω:ωωω ω:ω	120 minutes	True or false technique	Understand simplified texts when listening or reading
Receptive vocabulary	3,000 Word Level	Provide vocabulary to comprehend unsimplified English texts	50 words from the Third Thousand Word List	Context clues of substitution	240 minutes	Substitution strategy	Understand unsimplified English texts
Receptive and productive vocabulary	5,000 Word Level	Provide vocabulary to comprehend texts from a wide variety of sources like news, magazines, broadcasts and use them for speech and writing	Topical vocabulary from various sources like occupational fields and current issues	Discovering meaning through context clues of definition	20 weeks	Completing sentences	Use appropriate words; talk and write in the discipline

## Validity of the English Vocabulary Program as to Content and Instructional Characteristics

The English Vocabulary Program was rated by nine English professors from the Mariano Marcos State University and the University of Northern Philippines. The overall mean is 4.72 and this means that the vocabulary program is highly satisfactory or the vocabulary program is highly adequate as to content and instructional characteristics. **It is**, therefore, safe to say that the vocabulary program can be an effective tool for teaching and learning vocabulary.

## Effectiveness of the English Vocabulary Program

The results obtained as shown in Table 3 indicate a significant gain between the pretest and posttest.

**Table 3. Comparison of the difference between pretest and posttest means of students exposed to the English vocabulary program**

Variables	MEAN			SD	DiIT	SEdiff	(ray)	t-value
	N	Pretest	Posttest					
<b>BSBA</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>49.057</b>	<b>70.857</b>	10.59	<b>21.8</b>	1.7214	<b>(0.23185)</b>	<b>12.66</b>
<i>Secretarial</i>	35	50.514	11.58	25.2587	2.1565	2.1565	(0.7144)	11.7253

+ Significant at 1%

## Conclusions

1. The proficiency level of the college freshmen in receptive and productive vocabulary is Fair.
2. The structure/component of the English Vocabulary Program for College Freshmen is made up of: type of vocabulary, title/level, objective, content, learning strategy, time frame, evaluation technique, and success indicator.
3. The validity of the English Vocabulary Program for College Freshmen is Highly Satisfactory/Highly Adequate.
4. The program effectiveness as shown by a gain in the mean scores of the respondents' rating is Very Significant.

## Recommendations

1. There should be a wide use of the English Vocabulary Program in the freshman English classes to validate further the instructional material.
2. Teachers should be patient enough to supplement the vocabulary lessons with the following actual training activities beyond the sentence level: (1) listening to a conversation or speech material (2) reading a text; (3) talking in communication situations common to the professions or social events; (4) letter writing; (5) reporting; and (6) giving instructions in an examination or a recipe. These receptive and productive tasks will enrich the learners' experiences. Homework for individual study by the students will also be very useful for both the teacher and the learner.
3. Communication Arts professors/instructors or teachers as well as content and professional subject teachers should conduct similar studies to determine the vocabulary levels and needs that have to be attended to.
4. Instructional materials such as modules, workbooks, and programmed materials may be constructed based from this English vocabulary program.

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