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THE EFFECT OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE ON THE PERFORMANCE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS.

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary knowledge and its role in reading comprehension has been one of the main areas of focus in second language research for years. The present study tends to investigate the effect of vocabulary knowledge on ESL learners' reading comprehension performance. The participants consisted of 40 form two students of St. Peter's SHS learners' reading comprehension in an English class. The results of Pearson Correlation analyses showed a significant positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The findings suggest that giving awareness of vocabulary knowledge to the students along with making them conscious of their ability gives them a broader sense of the depth of reading comprehension texts and improves their reading ability. This paper examines how vocabulary knowledge influences in written production. The instruments used in this study are the Vocabulary levels test. Data were collected from a quota sampling of 40 learners who study English as second language. The findings suggest that the vocabulary knowledge of foreign language is necessary; it provides learners a broader ability to produce well-structured written texts and contributes to the comprehension of utterances as well.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a language-based skill and involves cognitive process. (Stahl 2003). It is the most important skill to master in order to ensure success in learning. Reading is a process that requires effort on the readers' part if they want to understand what they are reading. A considerable amount of research has been devoted to understanding the process that contribute

to reading comprehension and the effect of vocabulary knowledge in comprehension of text. When it comes to learning a foreign language such as English, many students spend hours working through textbooks, doing grammar exercises and perhaps even watching videos on television in their target language.

Working on vocabulary is just as important as learning the grammar of the language. Vocabulary is important because it is the basis of all language. It is the raw building blocks that we can use to express our thoughts and ideas, share information, understand others and grow personal relationships. (Nation, 2001) Vocabulary is clearly important for language learning as it underpins all other language skills. It can be a stepping stone to high level language use and can help the student to achieve fluency faster. A large vocabulary helps develop other language skills. When you have a wider vocabulary in your target language it also helps support all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. As Paul Nation (2013) noted in his paper on vocabulary learning: "Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform.

Some researchers advocate that vocabulary is the most crucial factor in reading comprehension. Cooper (1984) described vocabulary as being the key ingredient to successful reading while other researchers argue that "no text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary" (Laufer 1997). Vocabulary simply refers to the number of words known by a speaker of an L2. Vocabulary knowledge is perhaps the most important factor when it comes to reading comprehension and communication for both native and non-native speakers. Laufer (1989), claim that a reader whose vocabulary is insufficient to cover at least 95% of the words in a passage will not be guaranteed comprehension. Readers themselves consider vocabulary knowledge to be the main obstacle to second language reading comprehension.

Many researchers emphasize on the crucial effects of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension. Over the years, vocabulary has been considered as a component of language proficiency, both in L1 and L2 language acquisition. Knowledge of words is now considered the most important factor in language proficiency and school success, partly because of its close relation with text comprehension (Bernhardt, 2005; Wang, 2009). Without knowledge of words, understanding sentences or texts is not possible. There is agreement among second language researchers that vocabulary knowledge is an important component in reading comprehension. As noted, many studies of English as a Second language have suggested that L2 readers must understand 95% of the words in any text to ensure reasonable reading comprehension of the text (Laufer, 1989; Maher Salah, 2008).

Other researchers have suggested that L2 learners need 98% of word coverage to read un-simplified texts for pleasure. Nation (2001). There is clearly a strong link between a person's understanding of vocabulary and an individual's skill with language as a whole, whether as a native or a language learner. Since reading is a skill that involves making sense and getting meaning from the printed word (Nunan, 2006), it is obvious that reading cannot be conducted without vocabulary. To comprehend texts easily, the possession of a large number of words is required. Fauziati (2002) stated that vocabulary is crucial to language and essentially significant to language learners in general. Without adequate vocabulary, one cannot communicate effectively in both oral and written language.

According to research, second language learners' lack of vocabulary is one of the main reasons why they do not like reading for pleasure in English language. Besides, Stahl (2003) contended that the difficulty of the words is the most important determining factor of text difficulty. Therefore, vocabulary size is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. In other words, someone with a large number of vocabularies will find reading comprehension easier than those with a limited number of vocabularies. The threshold of complete comprehension is not

absolute, but it is logic to say that a limited knowledge of vocabulary leads to poor understanding of English (Karakoce & Kose, 2017).

Despite the fact that vocabulary plays an important and significant role in the production of spoken or written texts, it has been receiving little attention. Thus, language instructors pay more emphasis on learners' linguistic competence rather than on vocabulary knowledge. In this view, it is necessary to point out that, no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully he or she masters the sounds of the target language, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication cannot happen in a meaningful way. Words need interaction and combination with others otherwise their learning is non-productive.

Vocabulary learning is dominant in language acquisition, whether the language is a second or a foreign language, and crucial to the learners'' overall language acquisition. One of the fundamental reasons for this notion is that a lot of unknown words, which learners encounter while reading could cause difficulties in processing the text. Students and teachers alike know that many of the reading comprehension breakdowns experienced by students involve word recognition and lexical access.

As you can see from the above discussions, there is clearly a strong link between a person's understanding of vocabulary and an individual's skill with language as a whole, whether as a native or a language learner. This means that if we want to improve the overall standard of English language teaching and create better learning materials for our students we need to focus closely on vocabulary. Using a vocabulary analysis tool will be the most effective ways to do this as it will provides greater insight into how common or frequently used or complex different vocabulary is.

Therefore, in an attempt to broaden our knowledge of vocabulary and its relationship with reading comprehension performance. The present study attempts to explains the effect of

vocabulary knowledge on the performance of English as a second language in reading comprehension of Ghanaian ESL learners in the classroom, the case study of form two learners of St. Peter's Boys SHS.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview on the relationship between Vocabulary knowledge and Reading Comprehension

Many studies have inquired into the effect of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension and on listening comprehension and its performance in an ESL Classroom. Contemporary accounts of word knowledge point to three components of lexical knowledge: form, meaning, and use. For instance, in Nation's (2013) framework of the dimensions of word knowledge, the three main components are identified as form, meaning, and use. 'Form' involves knowledge of the spoken and written forms of a word in addition to the ability to recognize its parts. 'Meaning' is interpreted as understanding the form-meaning relationship, concept and referents that a word signifies, and its association with other words. Finally, 'use' refers to knowing the grammatical functions of the word, the collocations of the word, and the constraints on the use of the word. Another framework to conceptualize word knowledge was the components approach explicated by Read (2000), which defined different aspects of word knowledge such as forms, meanings, collocations, word parts, and register. This framework is closely in line with Nation's.

Joshi and Aaron (2000) find that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading ability when factoring reading speed with decoding and comprehension. Martin-Chang and Gould (2008) find a strong correlation both between vocabulary and reading comprehension and between reading rate and primary print knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge is essential in reading comprehension because it has a similar function to background knowledge in reading

comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge helps students in decoding, which is an important part of reading (Qian, 2002).

Cremer, Dingshoff, de Beer and Schoonen (2010) claim that vocabulary knowledge does not only involve knowing a multitude of words, but also necessitates acquiring various types of knowledge regarding each word and creating semantic networks among multiple lexical items. Therefore, it can be asserted that vocabulary knowledge is not a unitary competency; rather, it can be broken down into separate competencies or masses of cognition. One of the earliest attempts to create such a division was proposed by Anderson and Freebody (1981), who contrasted the 'breadth' and 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge. In their account, breadth, or size, of vocabulary simply refers to the number of words known by a speaker of an L2. On the other hand, depth is defined as the extent of knowledge that one has about each word. In other words, 'breadth' and 'depth' imply the quantity and quality of lexical knowledge, respectively. Gonzalez, Fernandez and Schmitt (2017) claim that 'breadth' and 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge do not grow in a parallel fashion, yet the two aspects are related and contribute to one another. For instance, as the number of words one knows grows, so does the number of word forms (i.e. prefixes and suffixes), which in turn increases the depth of vocabulary knowledge of the speaker. Schmitt (2010) refers to this developmental process as the 'incremental nature' of language acquisition. According to his assertions, the learning of each aspect of a vocabulary item proceeds from zero knowledge to partial mastery and then to precise knowledge. Moreover, different aspects of word knowledge are learned at different rates. In other words, some aspects of vocabulary are learned before others.

 Many researchers consider vocabulary knowledge to be an important variable that affects reading comprehension in both first and second language learning (Qian (2002). A limited vocabulary size, as well as a lack of sufficient knowledge of word meanings, often hinders learners from understanding the meaning of the text. Garcia (1991) finds that a lack of familiarity with vocabulary in the test passages and questions is a powerful factor affecting

learners on a test of reading comprehension. Qian (1999, 2002) studies the roles of 'breadth' and 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension in academic settings. ''Breadth'' of vocabulary. The two factors play an important role for second language learners because learners are more likely to come across words in which they are not familiar.

Another distinction concerning vocabulary knowledge has been made between receptive and productive forms of knowledge (Laufer, 1998). Receptive knowledge means the ability to comprehend words when reading in or listening to an L2, while productive knowledge denotes the mastery of using words in speech or writing. Furthermore, productive knowledge has also been divided into two separate competencies: namely controlled and free productive vocabulary (Laufer, 1998). Controlled productive vocabulary refers to the ability to provide the whole word when given part of the word as a cue, whereas free productive vocabulary is being able to use words spontaneously and without cues within the flow of natural speech. Receptive knowledge is believed to be mastered before productive knowledge (Laufer, 1998; Ozturk, 2015). The reason for this is the relative complexity of the production process as opposed to the reception process. Schmitt (2014) claims that knowing the form-meaning link of a word is enough for the reception of it, whereas its production requires many more aspects of word knowledge such as word class, functions, or collocations. In other words, as Read (2000) states, "productive knowledge is a more advanced skill than receptive knowledge". Studies comparing the levels of productive and receptive mastery of vocabulary in language learners (e.g. Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Nemati, 2010) have indicated a significant difference between receptive and productive mastery in favour of the former being the less advanced skill.

Research on the relation between Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension

Guo (2008) investigated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge, syntactic awareness and reading comprehension of 155 English speaking undergraduate and graduate students. As results, he showed a strong positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading

comprehension. He emphasized that vocabulary knowledge directly affects reading comprehension.

Anjomshoa and Zamanian (2014) investigated the effect of vocabulary knowledge on EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. Data were collected by questionnaire from 81 Iranian EFL undergraduate students of English. The results of Pearson Correlation analyses showed a significant positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The findings suggest that giving awareness of vocabulary knowledge to the students along with making them conscious of their ability gives them a broader sense of the depth of reading comprehension texts and improves their reading ability.

Kiliç (2019) employed empirical research that endeavours to investigate the role of vocabulary knowledge in the writing and speaking performance of 54 B2 level Turkish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The measured aspects of vocabulary knowledge (productive vocabulary size, receptive vocabulary size, and depth of vocabulary knowledge) were all found to correlate significantly with performance in writing and speaking (measured through the writing and speaking components of a proficiency test). Multiple regression analyses showed that vocabulary knowledge accounts for 26% of variance in writing performance and 17% of variance in speaking performance. The study offers evidence that vocabulary knowledge is a significant predictor of performance in productive language skills.

Chou (2011) study looks at the effects of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge in an EFL reading comprehension test. The participants consisted of 159 students from a college in Southern Taiwan. The result of the study showed that the participants who received a list of vocabulary to study performed significantly better on the reading comprehension test than the participants who relied on background knowledge. This led to a discussion about the need for vocabulary building for college EFL students in Taiwan.

As Chapella (1994) points out if we follow the logic of a communicative approach to vocabulary ability, we should not just seek to measure vocabulary size in an absolute sense,

but rather in relation to particular contexts of use. Therefore, specific vocabulary knowledge contains the knowledge of some words that the learner guesses correctly from the context in the given passage. It really reflects what happens in reading in the real life.

Maher (2008) investigated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of authentic Arabic texts. Data was collected from twenty-three learners at Brigham Young University, who ranged from Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid in both productive and receptive skills. Two reading comprehension tests, circling the unknown words in texts and a lexical coverage test for each passage texts were given to the subjects. A linear regression analysis of the data shows that there is a correlation coefficient of 0.7 and 0.6 between the percentage of known words and students' comprehension of the two reading texts. The results indicate that the subjects needed to know approximately 90% of running words to adequately comprehend the first passage and around 86% to comprehend the second passage.

As a result of an extensive review of the literature undertaken for the current research, it can be reiterated that receptive skills have attracted considerably more attention than productive skills within the scope of vocabulary research. Studies above have also shown the effects of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension performance in the classroom. This current study will focus on the effects of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge on a test of reading comprehension in a second language. It is assumed that students need to understand the meaning of the words in order to fully understand the reading passage in a second language, English language. Students with high levels of vocabulary knowledge will be able to decode and understand the reading passage better than students with low levels of vocabulary (Nation, Clarke, Marshall, & Durand, 2004).

Additionally, analogies could be used to help readers tie new, unfamiliar materials to familiar information in their memory. However, teachers should be careful when introducing analogies because some analogies do not provide any assistance to the learner. According to Hammadou

(2000), "for an analogy to aid comprehension optimally, the underlying structures of each part of the analogy must be similar, but the surface features should be very different."

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This paper reports on an empirical investigation to assess the effect of vocabulary knowledge and its performance in relationship to vocabulary size and reading comprehension specifically.

The research study addresses the following key questions:

1. How does the knowledge of vocabulary influence on learners' lexical richness?

2. How do scores on vocabulary size, specific vocabulary knowledge in the given text, and reading comprehension correlate with one another?

3. To what extent do vocabulary knowledge size contribute to predicting the reading performance?
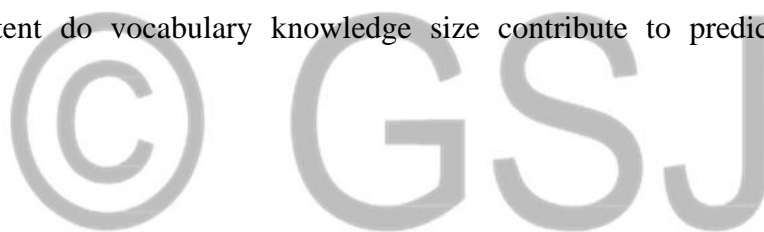
METHODOLOGY:

Creswell (2014) states that researchers use correlational research design to describe and measure the degree of association between two variables or set of scores. This implies that researchers do not intend to manipulate the variables, but they use the correlation statistics of two or more scores. The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension among ESL learners. The independent variable of the study is vocabulary size whereas the dependent variable is reading comprehension. Therefore, the design of this study is correlational as it aims to investigate the relationship between two variables in terms of performance in the English language in class.

The participants of this study were 46 ESL form two students. All participants are male learners of English as a second language at St. Peter's SHS. The participants include male students only as the researcher conducted the study at male school.

The reading comprehension test was the instrument used in the present study. The test encompassed two reading passages and the first one was taken from past question of the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) English language paper for the year 2010. This passage is about management of stress and had about 450 words; and the second passage was taken from the 'Daily Graphic' Newspaper, the 21st September 2021 edition. This passage is about covid 19 education and was about 350 words in length. The two reading passages are associated with comprehension questions and vocabulary meaning of selected words, and each correct answer was assigned one point; So, the maximum possible score of the reading comprehension test was 20 points. These two reading passages were chosen due to their suitability to the students' level. In addition, the content vocabulary items in the reading passages were found in the vocabulary lists in the participants' secondary school textbooks, which represents content validity in the reading passages. These passages were given to assessed learner's ability to comprehend and understand.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Nation's (2013) framework of the dimensions of word knowledge, the three main components are identified as form, meaning and use was employed in this study which was originally developed by Nation (1983) and later it was amended and revised by Schmitt et al. (2001). The modified version of this vocabulary test was chosen because it reduces the guessing to one response among students. The vocabulary test attached to the reading comprehension was intended to test the specific vocabulary knowledge in a given text. The design employed is the correlational design to investigate the correlation between vocabulary mastery as the predictor and reading comprehension as the criterion. The population of the research was the students of

an English of a form class. The sample was taken using the random sampling technique involving 25 students. Data was taken by asking the participants to take vocabulary and reading tests. The first instrument and the second instrument are comprehension passages on stress and covid-19 The test, taken from Davy and Davy (1984) measures the participants' knowledge of word meaning, synonym, and antonym., the reading comprehension test, consists of 10 questions and 10 vocabulary test. The items in the reading comprehension test are questions for finding the main idea, finding supporting detail, skimming, making inference, and comprehending word meaning in context. Here "comprehending the text" means "being relevant to answering the questions".

The study was conducted in two days. All the two instruments were administered to participants as part of their normal class work. On the first day, the first reading comprehension test and translation test were conducted. In the second week, the second tests were conducted. Furthermore, they had been informed about the way to complete both tests as they do in class and during examination before the commencement of the official tests. Descriptive statistics were utilized to show the vocabulary knowledge of learners. Pearson Correlation analyses were also employed to find any potential relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results obtained from this research. The SPSS program version 16 was used to conduct the analysis of the data. Two statistical procedures of descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The inferential statistics utilized in this study was Pearson Correlation analyses. Two-tailed product-moment correlations were computed for scores from the reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge to find any possible relationship between the two variables. Descriptive Statistics results of Participants' performance on the Instruments Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics results of the participants' performance on the instruments. In order to determine the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and

its effect on reading comprehension, the Pearson Correlations analyses, were performed. The results obtained from these computations are presented in the following matrix of correlations.

Passage 1 : Results of Pearson Correlation Test between Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension

Vocabulary words	Correct answers		Wrong answers		Reading comprehension. Correct answer		Reading comprehension wrong answers	
	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%
Important	17	68%	8	32%	18	72%	7	28%
Collapse	20	80%	5	20%	20	80%	5	20%
Reprimand	12	48%	13	52%	11	44%	14	66%
Achieved	18	72%	7	28%	18	72%	7	28%
Lethargy	6	24%	19	76%	10	40%	15	60%
Elegantly	15	60%	10	40%	14	56%	11	44%
Peculiar	11	44%	14	56%	13	52%	12	48%

Passage 2: Results of Pearson Correlation Test between Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension.

Vocabulary words	Correct answers		Wrong answers		Reading comprehension. Correct answers		Reading comprehension. Wrong answers	
	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%	Freq.	Perc.%
Immersed	14	56%	11	44%	13	52%	12	48%
Unreliable	16	64%	9	36%	14	56%	11	44%

Consequences	18	72%	7	28%	16	64%	9	36%
Fatigue	19	76%	6	24%	16	64%	9	36%
Empathic	10	40%	15	60%	12	48%	13	52%
Taboos	22	88%	3	12%	19	76%	6	24%
Mincing	20	80%	5	20%	17	68%	8	32%

As depicted in the two Tables, there was a significant positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. implying that a larger vocabulary enabled students to recall more information from the text they read and also deeper knowledge of words help learners comprehend the text better. These findings support the results of studies carried out by Gou (2008).

Vocabulary knowledge and its effects in reading comprehension has been one of the main areas of focus in second language research. (Mehrpoor, 2011). Both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are closely related, and this relationship is not one directional, since vocabulary knowledge can help the learner to comprehend written texts and reading can contribute to vocabulary growth (Maher Salah, 2008; Nation, 2001; Stahl, 1990). The results of the present study may provide ESL teachers with some invaluable information. Understanding students' average vocabulary knowledge and reading ability enables test developers to develop more appropriate English tests that can actually assess students' reading comprehension (Mehrpour, et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension among students studying English in the classroom. As the result of this study, there was a significant moderate positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. This study recognized that vocabulary knowledge as predicting factors to reading comprehension in students studying English. The present finding supports earlier

studies done by Gou (2008), Golkar (2007), Maher Salah (2008), Mehrpoor (2011) and Abbutt (2006) that found significant relationships between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Moreover, in connection to the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, the results of the present study indicated that there is a positive and moderate interrelation between these two variables.

The significance of this study provides several implications for ESL teachers. Firstly, language teachers should be more aware of what they choose for their students to read in the reading classes, especially if the teachers are using English learning course books. In a foreign language learning classroom, reading in the reading class should not simply be just practice. Instead, it should be treated like reading in a native language, which is to gain knowledge. With proper textbooks and reading materials, students will be able to develop their vocabulary knowledge as well as background knowledge more effectively.

 Secondly, although vocabulary instruction is very common in second language classrooms in Ghana, most textbooks in General English only provide explicit instruction of relatively basic English vocabulary. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to find ways to increase the student's vocabulary knowledge. For example, the teacher can provide or encourage students to do extensive reading beyond the classroom requirements. When students do extensive readings, they will be able to build new vocabulary as well as background knowledge in multiple subjects. The development of vocabulary knowledge will in turn help students with their reading comprehension (Joshi & Aaron, 2002; Martin-Chang & Gould, 2008; Qian, 2002).

Finally, although this study showed how vocabulary knowledge can help students understand and improve their reading test scores, it is not suggested that language teachers pre-teach the vocabulary in all reading comprehension tests. Instead, the teacher should also spend time in class doing activities that develop the students' vocabulary knowledge from explicit vocabulary instruction or have students do more extensive reading. In addition, reading skills such as

reading around the unknown words and making educated guesses about what a word means are still valuable and necessary skills in reading.

Due to the constraints of this study, the analysis was based on the participants' performance in two reading comprehension tests only. In order to have more reliable findings, perhaps a longitudinal study could be used to determine the effects of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension.

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APPENDIX

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