

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i12/6669>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i12/6669

Received: 05 November 2019, **Revised:** 28 November 2019, **Accepted:** 1 December 2019

Published Online: 24 December 2019

In-Text Citation: (Wang & Yamat, 2019)

To Cite this Article: Wang, F., & Yamat, H. (2019). Identifying English Vocabulary Levels of Malaysia Year 5 Primary School Students. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(12), 62–76.

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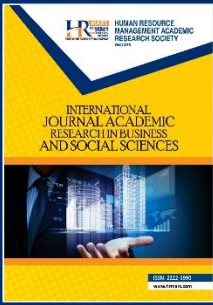
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Vol. 9, No. 12, 2019, Pg. 62 - 76

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Identifying English Vocabulary Levels of Malaysia Year 5 Primary School Students

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Abstract

Despite numerous actions taken by the government sectors in uplifting the standard of education by introducing Education for all, in primary schools, there are emerging areas of concern that require urgent attention, particularly on acquiring English language vocabulary at the early years. Vocabulary is fundamental in any language as it is a key feature in order to make oneself understood. Limited knowledge of vocabulary hinders acquisition of English language as the students particularly faced obstacles in remembering and retrieving the words learnt, lack of opportunities in practicing English and use of rote memorisation strategies in vocabulary acquisition. Thus, this paper discusses a part of a study which aimed to identify the vocabulary knowledge on adjectives, nouns and verbs among a group of 36 Year 5 primary school students who sit for an adapted version of the Vocabulary Levels Test of Nation (1983). The findings indicate that 58 % which was 21 students had low vocabulary knowledge on nouns and 72% (26 students) on verbs. However, 50% (18 students) of the participants' vocabulary on adjectives were in the intermediate level. Hence, the findings provide some insight for English teachers or educators, parents and students themselves to know in depth of the level of the students' English vocabulary. Thus, it is vital for future researchers in implementing suitable strategies for vocabulary acquisition after determining the students' vocabulary level among the Year 5 primary school students in Malaysia for successful language acquisition.

Keywords: English Vocabulary, Vocabulary Level, Primary School Students, Adjectives, Verbs, Nouns

Introduction

Acquiring English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysia is not an easy pathway and has been an alarming issue for most students in Malaysia. According to Tan & Goh (2016), Malaysian children begin learning English formally in Year 1 (age 7) till Year 6 (age 12) when schooling becomes compulsory. However, English education in the schools are not doing well especially towards the learning of English as Second Language (ESL) specifically in English vocabulary.

Vocabulary has been defined as all the words known and used by a particular person (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2019a). Vocabulary means all words in English which indicated that an individual needs to be able to read and know what they mean in order to master the language. English vocabulary are being classified into ten part of speech which are nouns, verbs, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, numeral, article and interjection (Haspelmath 2001). Three word classes which are adjectives, nouns and verbs are being emphasised and explored in this study.

In a primary level context, the students were found to have lack of opportunities in learning English (Razali et al. 2017) which limited them to learn English vocabulary and tend to use translation to learn English. Besides, the students also tend to learn English by using rote memorization where they learn the meaning of the words learnt verbally without any non-verbal input. As a result, the students were unable to have a vocabulary bank that store words from which they can select to express this meaning or concept naturally. A recent study by Rosidawati Ab Dollah & Parilah Mohd Shah (2016) also concluded that not all the students can get the meaning of the new words and retain them in their memory. This problem has seem to be an obstacle to learners who acquire English as their second language in the early years, but this problem still remains unsolved despite all actions taken at the recent year. Therefore, it is crucial for the teacher and students to know how much vocabulary knowledge the students are mastering.

In order to explore the research question, this study aims to identify Year 5 Malaysia primary school students' English vocabulary level in urban area. Most of the students have yet to master wide range of vocabulary even though being exposed to the vocabulary learnt before and struggled to express themselves while speaking with others. They tend to forget easily hence mastering the English language is found to be low. Therefore, I believe that by examining their vocabulary levels will help to close the research gap on the Vocabulary knowledge of primary school students in English language. The students would not be left behind where actions can be taken to improve their vocabulary bank with proper solutions. Having this purpose in mind, this study will provide insights for students, parents and teachers in focusing on vocabulary levels of the students with different mastering level through the use of adapted version of Vocabulary Levels test. The research question is stated as below:

Research Question

1. The research question for this study is What are the Malaysian urban students' English vocabulary level?

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will provide an integrated overview of the study as it will explain briefly the broad bodies of literature that have relevance for the research problem. Then, the history of the area of the study will be enlightened from the theories, methods and results stated by previous researchers in the field.

Past Studies on Malaysia Urban Students

Even though there are various researchers explore and conduct research in the Malaysia education context, there are limited research related to urban schools in Malaysia as many researchers focused on bridging the academic gap of rural schools.

There are few researchers explore the attribution to success and failure in English Language Learning of urban and rural undergraduates in Malaysia (Gobel et al. 2013). The respondents were selected randomly from six main public universities in Malaysia which made up of 1156 respondents in this study. The researchers employed the Attribution to Success and Failure Questionnaires (ASQ & AFQ) to collect the data. The findings showed that urban and rural students held different attribution ratings for success and failure in learning English as a second language. It is found that the urban group react willingly to attribute their success to their own ability, effort and study skills as compared to the rural group. Through this study, we can hypothesize that the urban group are much more study-wise and confident as they have a greater belief in their own ability to take control of their successes in the language classroom. This is an interesting point pointed out by the researchers where urban students are in frequent contact with English environment.

Furthermore, Rosidawati Dollah & Shah (2016) have conducted a survey research design to compare the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by urban and rural schools' students. There were 94 participants where 54 participants are from urban and 40 participants from rural secondary schools in Malacca. The researchers have classified Vocabulary Learning Strategies into three categories which are strategies to discover the meaning of new vocabulary items, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned vocabulary items and to expand the knowledge of vocabulary items. It could be intentional or incidental strategies which depending on individual and situations. The researchers used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) questionnaires as their data collection instruments. The VLS questionnaires consist of 32-Likert scales items on three categories of VLS. The findings of the study indicate that no significant difference of Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by the urban and rural students. However, a great gain was formed where there is a significance difference between the high and low achievers with respect of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed. The urban school students employed all the three categories proposed on the Vocabulary Learning Strategies more frequently compared to the rural school students.

From the two different studies and the findings, I believed that urban students are highly motivated to equip themselves with the second important language. However, there are researchers who actually reported that there are 40% of the urban Primary Six children had below average scores based on the results of a standardised national examination (Boey et al. 2003). In order to bridge the gap between the studies collected, this study is used to identify the English vocabulary level in advance for Year 5 primary school students which the participants are from a Malaysia urban school.

Importance of English Vocabulary

Past researchers have proven and recognised the importance of vocabulary in Second and Foreign Language learning and acquisition. Leaver et al. (2015) said that vocabulary has been

called the building blocks of language learning and the proponents of some teaching approaches such as Natural Approach believe that vocabulary is the most important thing in acquiring a language. They added that the more vocabulary ones know the more things ones will be able to talk about, read about, write about, and listen to well. Studies by previous researchers found that a considerable amount of vocabulary size is crucial for learners to function effectively in the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. Laufer & Sim (1985) and Qian (2002) cited in Tschirner (2004) asserted that an important predictor of efficient reading and of academic success in general, is vocabulary size.

Besides, Sabit & Hadi (2017) claimed that vocabulary knowledge being viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because of limited English vocabulary. When a person have the knowledge of vocabulary, it enables the individual to use the language and, conversely, it leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. The researchers also realised that the vocabulary is demonstrated daily. Acquisition of vocabulary is essential in the formation of complete spoken and written passage. Besides, it plays a vital role in all language skills (Hiew 2012). (Hiew 2012; Hiew 2012) Research has shown that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for second language readers to overcome.

To conclude, we found that English vocabulary is a key for a person in mastering a language. As English vocabulary is expanding continuously with time, English as a Second Language learners need to be aware of the importance of English vocabulary and started to increase vocabulary knowledge.

Part of Speech in English

As in English, there are 10 word classes in the part of speech. It is one of the grammatical groups, such as noun, verb, and adjective, into which words are divided depending on their use (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2019b). There are some brief explanations on the word classes mainly focused on nouns, verbs and adjectives.

A noun refers to a person, animal or thing (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2019c) For example, 'girl', 'bird', 'tree', 'picture' and 'computer'. There are many different types of nouns such as proper nouns, common nouns, collective nouns, possessive nouns and compound nouns.

Verbs show actions of states of being (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2019d) . The word 'go', 'sing' 'have' are verbs. The verbs give us more information about the subject of the sentence.

Adjectives are words that describe nouns or pronouns. It gives more details about a noun or pronoun of the sentence. For instance, 'Mark is driving a black car.'. The word 'black' is an adjective describing the noun 'car'. From the sentence, it tells us the colour of the car.

Past studies on Vocabulary Levels Test of Nation (1990)

The VLT was first introduced in 1983 by Paul Nation (Nation, 1983). The test was based on word frequency and designed to evaluate learners' receptive vocabulary size that can be considered as an indicator of the coverage of vocabulary in a text (Nasir et al. 2017). The standardised test was used by people internationally as academic purposes.

There are past studies done by researcher in having Vocabulary Levels Test as one of the instrument in the research. One of the past studies, Kameli & Baki (2013) administered Vocabulary Levels Test and Reading Comprehension Test in the quantitative research to examine the impact of vocabulary knowledge level on reading comprehension performance among 220 English as Foreign Language (EFL) Iranian adult students. The findings of the study proved positive relationships among different levels of vocabulary test and also test scores on vocabulary size of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The higher vocabulary breadth which is the vocabulary size level will lead to better reading comprehension performance and vice versa.

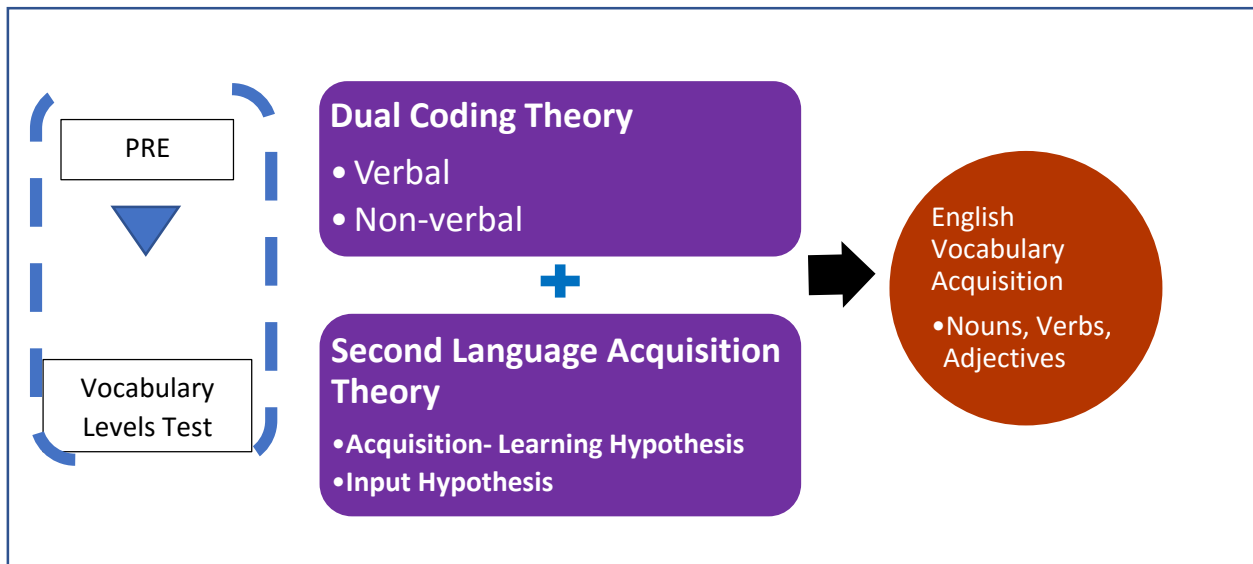
Quite recent, (Nasir et al. 2017) examine the relationship between English language proficiency and receptive or productive vocabulary knowledge of 136 first year diplomat students from a public university in Malaysia. The researchers used Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) by Nation (1983) to measure the students' receptive vocabulary knowledge while Lexical Frequency Profile was used to measure productive vocabulary knowledge. Findings of the regression analysis suggested that more proficient learners have larger vocabulary repertoire. It also proved that the students' performance on Vocabulary Levels Test can be used as predictors of their general proficiency.

A similar study which was carried out by Mokhtar in 2010, the Vocabulary Levels Test was administered among 360 Malaysian diploma students at University Technology MARA, Perlis. Although the researchers were not mainly concerned with the students' total score on the test, they were concerned in whether the students knew an adequate number of words with high-frequency or not. Hence, working within this context, the present researchers deemed it indispensable to launch a study where vocabulary is paid little heed to in most reading comprehension courses.

In a summary, the Vocabulary Levels Test that was introduced by Nation was consider as one of the suitable instruments in measuring the size of the vocabulary knowledge.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



Based on Figure 1, it shows the main study of the research which focused on the theories and target vocabulary as the main elements to be taken into consideration in identifying Year 5 primary school students' vocabulary level and exploring how Malaysian urban students' experience strategies in vocabulary acquisition. As first step, there is a need to identify English vocabulary level of Year 5 primary school students by administering the adapted version of Vocabulary Levels Test. After that, the study used a combination of two theories, Dual Coding Theory and Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory. Where there is a combination of theories used, strategies used in vocabulary acquisition on three word classes varies. It could be applying images, actions, graphic organisers which are used as the input added with verbal. The two theories acted as the underlying concepts of this study. The strategies used with a combination of verbal and non-verbal as a source of English vocabulary words that led students to acquire the English vocabulary naturally. During English vocabulary acquisition, a student is naturally exposed to unfamiliar words as potential target vocabulary. While a student encounters the unfamiliar words, the strategies used assist a student not only to grasp the meaning of the word but also to retain the target vocabulary. Therefore, the target vocabulary could be acquired by going through the strategies with the combination of verbal and non-verbal.

Summary

In summary, explore the students' vocabulary level is vital before any extended actions in improving vocabulary acquisition for Malaysia urban students being taken. The test used in the study should be valid and reliable in measuring the level of vocabulary knowledge. It is hope that through getting the score of the vocabulary level of an individual, the teacher and student will sort out the vocabulary strategies that suit them in expanding their English vocabulary.

Methodology

Introduction

As this study targeted to identify English vocabulary level of Year 5 primary school students through the use of Vocabulary Levels Test, the data was collected and analysed ethically in a quantitative research approach. Therefore, this chapter discusses the methodological concerns of the study which consists of research design, research methodological, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability.

Methodological

As the purpose of the study was to identify Year 5 primary school students' English vocabulary level, a quantitative research design was employed.

Participants

This study was conducted in an urban primary school in Malaysia, Sekolah Kebangsaan Keses (pseudonym), where English is taught as one of the core subjects. A total of 36 Malaysian primary Five students participated in the study. Basically, the sampling method for the study was based on the simple random sampling approach where the students were selected randomly in a class which fulfilled the requirement of they had learnt the English vocabulary in Malaysia school Primary Four syllabus. All of the students are in Year 5 and hence they would have had more than four years of learning English as the second language in the classroom.

Instruments

An adapted version of Vocabulary Levels Test

The instruments used in the study was an adapted version of Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (1983). The tool was used to give insight to the researcher to understand the current English vocabulary level of the participants in the school.

The adapted version of the test (Appendix 1) was designed in consideration of the Year 4 Standard-Based Curriculum English syllabus. The researcher conducted the test to examine the Malaysian urban students' English vocabulary acquisition that the participants learnt before.

For the adapted version of Vocabulary Levels test (Table 1), it consists of three sections. Section 1 focused on words of adjectives, Section 2 on Nouns and verbs in Section 3. There are 8 questions in each section where the respondents need to choose the right word to go with each meaning. In total, there are 24 targeted words being examined in the test. Then, they must write the number of that word next to its meaning. The time limit for completion of the test is 20 minutes. A pilot study was being conducted and the internal consistency was $\alpha = 0.85$ for the Cronbach alpha which means the test is reliable.

By having this test, the researcher gets to examine the students' vocabulary size known and how well these items are mastered which is the vocabulary depth which is highly important for productive use of language (Schmitt et al. 2011).

Table 1 Outline of the Vocabulary Levels Test

Section	Part of Speech	Items
A	Adjectives	8 items
B	Nouns	8 items
C	Verbs	8 items

Data Analysis

In order to identify the English vocabulary level of Malaysia urban primary school students, descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages of the test score was computed.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher conducts the Vocabulary Levels test to the population of the study which is Primary 5 students. The participants are to complete the test within the time frame given which is 20 minutes. Then, the researcher collects the test and conducts descriptive analysis.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability of the research are vital measures in the consistency of a measure and the validation of the instruments used.

Validity of a research instrument assesses the extent to which the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure.

Face Validity

According to Masuwai et al. 2016, face validity refers to researchers' subjective assessments of the presentation and relevance of the measuring instrument. It is to make sure that the items in the instrument are clear and unambiguous. The researcher seeks an English teacher who is teaching in a Malaysia National school to check for the approval of the test. An approval of the items was given to the teacher. The teacher gives comments on the appropriateness of grammar, clarity of the items, spelling of the words, and the structure of the test. The criteria of face validity assessment for this study is based on Oluwatayo (2012). The English teacher, Mdm Parva (pseudonym) focused on the spelling of the word and unambiguity of the items. There were some items found to be having alike meaning and thus the researcher made amendments on the mistakes. For the structure of the test and clarity, they were good and well-organised. For the structuring of the items into sections, Mdm Parva loved the vocabulary being divided into sections which could avoid any misunderstanding on the meaning of the vocabulary.

Content Validity

Content validity is vital to predict the efficacy of the test in order to minimize or eliminate measurement errors that may arise (Masuwai et al. 2016). It is an approach that allow the test to demonstrate a comprehensive study with regards to conciseness and completeness required to establish the test's credibility at the preliminary stages. Therefore, an English teacher from

Sekolah Kebangsaan Keses, Mdm Lim (pseudonym), an expert in English language who possesses extensive knowledge and demonstrate a good grasp of the language being chosen to validate the tool in term of the content. From the remarks or comments given by the teacher evaluating on the content validity, the test is adapted which suits the syllabus of Primary Four English Language. The vocabulary used in the test are being taught in Primary Four level. The instructions stated are clear and simple English are found. Besides, examples are given to show a brief explanation in answering the test. There are no errors found in the items except some ambiguity which has been corrected by the researcher.

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure (Mohajan 2017). It indicates the extent to which it is free from biasness in the research findings.

In this study, researcher used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the Vocabulary Levels Test items that are fit for purpose. A pilot study was conducted with 36 students of the same English as a Second Language proficiency level as participants in the current study. The students answer the Vocabulary test within 20 minutes. In the pilot study, the internal consistency was $\alpha = 0.85$ for the Cronbach alpha. From the Cronbach alpha, it shows the test is reliable. In other words, the higher the α coefficient, the more the items have shared covariance and probably measure the same underlying concept (Goforth 2015). Therefore, all items were maintained for the current study.

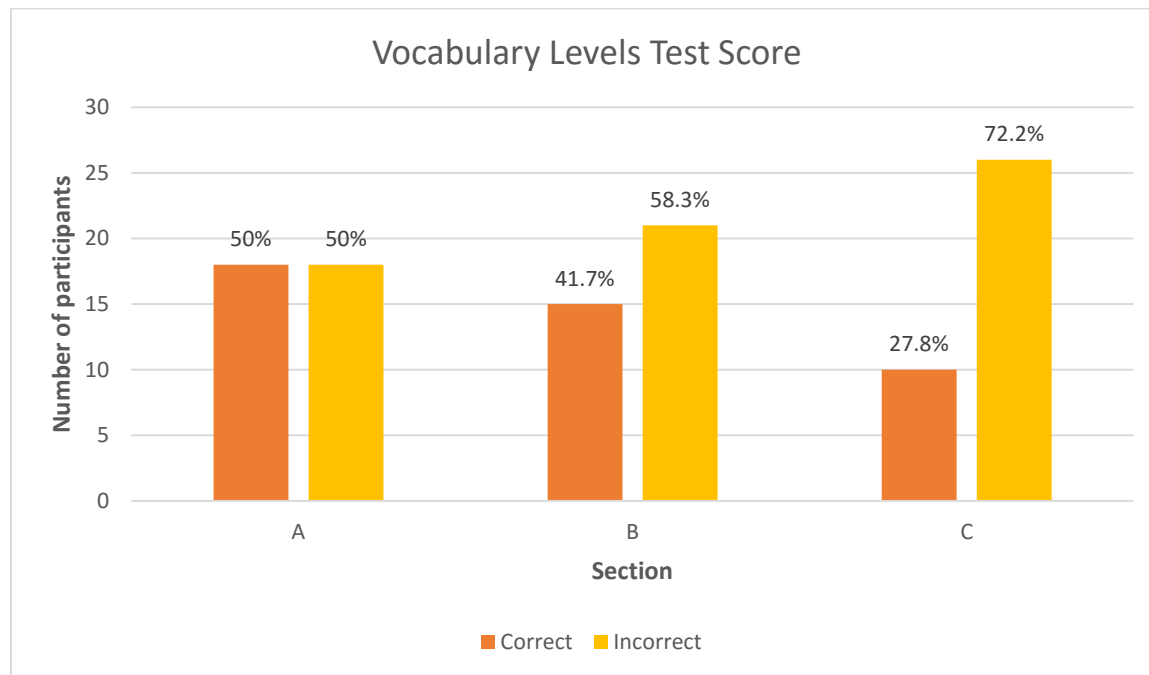
Summary

By having a clear statement on the methodological of the study, it guides the researcher in conducting the research and obtain the results that is valid and reliable. By having a proper methodology for this quantitative research, it particularly helps the data collection to reveals the current English vocabulary level of Malaysia urban students through Vocabulary Levels Test score.

Findings

Figure 1 describes the descriptive statistics of the data collected from the Vocabulary Levels Test score. The Vocabulary test is divided into three sections. The data analysis was based on the frequency and percentages to determine the Malaysian urban students' vocabulary level.

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics of frequency and percentages in Section A, B and C of the Vocabulary Test



As can be seen from the Figure 1 above, there were three sections of vocabularies being tested. The vocabularies were divided into three types of part of speech mainly adjectives, nouns and verbs. Section A focused on adjectives, Section B on nouns and Section C tested on verbs.

Although the participants had learnt these vocabularies in their Primary Four, Section A was found to be 50% of the vocabulary in adjectives mastered by the participants. There were only four items scored high percentage for the correct answers. Most of the respondents (94.4%) remembered the meaning of the word 'pleasant' but least respondents remember the meaning of the word 'honest' where 7 out of 36 respondents got it correct. There were also 3 items that the respondents did not manage to get the right meaning for the words 'spectacular', 'ancient' and 'unprotected'. Overall, Malaysian urban students' vocabulary level on adjectives were in the intermediate level.

As for Section B, there are eight vocabularies on nouns being tested. The words of nouns were being taught previously. However, 58.3% of the participants did not get to match the meaning of the vocabularies correctly. The most challenging vocabulary found was 'monument' where only 3 respondents that successfully matched the correct meaning of the word. There were three vocabularies 'grocery', 'photograph' and 'coach' among the eight nouns that obtain high percentages for correct answer. Overall, the Year 5 participants' vocabulary level on nouns were in the low level as quite a majority of the respondents could not match the correct meaning.

In Section C, eight vocabularies on verbs being tested. Based on the figure 1, the percentages of incorrect answers with 72.2% were higher than the correct answer with the

percentages of 27.8% among the eight vocabularies even though they had learnt the vocabularies in their Primary Four. The vocabulary 'reward' scored the most respondent that matched the correct meaning. However, two vocabularies 'stretch' and 'accomplish' are found to be the most challenging vocabularies with the percentages of 80.6%. Overall, 10 out of 36 Year 5 students managed to score in this section. It revealed that the participants' vocabulary level on verbs were in a critical level where more studies and teaching strategies need to be used to improve their English vocabulary.

Table 2. The Vocabulary Level according to the sections in Vocabulary Levels Test

Vocabulary Test Items	Vocabulary Level
Section A (8 items on adjectives)	Intermediate
Section B (8 items on nouns)	Low
Section C (8 items on verbs)	Low

As illustrated in Table 2 for the test results in Vocabulary Levels Test, Section B and C were found in low level as most of the respondents could not match the correct meaning to the nouns and verbs. However, respondents were found to obtain intermediate vocabulary level in Section A which focused on adjectives. The respondents remember the adjectives more compared to nouns and verbs.

In summary, the English vocabulary level of the Year 5 primary students who were involved in this study specifically in a primary school setting indicated that they were not mastering English vocabulary learnt based on the Vocabulary Levels Test. Thus, they were not well-equipped with sufficient English vocabulary knowledge based on their current standard.

Discussion

The result of the Vocabulary Levels Test indicated that the majority of the participants have not acquired the vocabulary learnt in Primary Four as there are now in Primary Five. This means that they are yet to master the English vocabulary according to the standard set by the Malaysia Standard-Based Curriculum English syllabus. This result is consistent with the study by Boey et al. (2003) that 40% of the urban Primary Six children had below average scores based on the results of standardized national examination. The use of Vocabulary Levels Test and the standardized national examination in Malaysia provide a valid indicator of an individual general proficiency in English. Thus, teachers play important roles in guiding students to master the vocabulary as mentioned by Leaver et al. (2015) where a considerable amount of vocabulary size is crucial for learners to function in the other language skills.

One of the most important findings of this study also revealed that, an identification of the students' vocabulary level needs to be done for successful academic achievement. The results found to be opposed to the findings of the research done by Gobel et al. (2013) where urban students are in frequent contact with English environment and have the ability to take control of their successes in the language classroom. It is found that a crucial action towards urban students need to be taken in order to expand their vocabulary knowledge.

Most importantly, it was in line with the study done by Sabit & Hadi (2017) where second language learners were equipped with limited English vocabulary. The researchers also noted that vocabulary knowledge was being viewed as a critical tool where attention needed. Without having attention focused on the students' vocabulary level, it may lead to low achievement in language acquisition. This support the finding made by Hiew (2012) that lack of the vocabulary knowledge was the main and the largest obstacle for second language learners which need to be overcome.

Implication, Recommendation and Conclusion

Through the study, the researchers were successfully identified Year 5 primary school students' English vocabulary level in one of the primary schools in Selangor via the Vocabulary Levels Test which answered the research question. It showed that at the overall level, the primary school students were at the low level of mastering English vocabulary.

As the data collected, it gave an insight to educators, teachers, parents and students on the current English vocabulary mastering level in Malaysia Year 5 primary school context. The test score collected through the adapted version of Vocabulary Levels Test has become an indicator for respective learning strategies to be taken in improving the Malaysian students' English vocabulary. Hence, it was seen that Vocabulary Levels Test was able to conduct testing in English vocabulary level.

Hence, the researchers recommended that there is a need for educators, English teachers to examine the students' English vocabulary level in advanced which is advisable to administer a test early of the year. The used of Vocabulary Levels Test is considered as one of the valid and reliable tests to identify English vocabulary level in the school. By having the test score of the students, the teachers are vigilant on the individual vocabulary level. English teachers are to work on giving equal emphasis on vocabulary building as teaching the other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Apart from that, the test score would guide teacher trainees who are going to be a teacher to be well-equipped with more knowledge on students' vocabulary level. The teachers would also be more aware that there is different mastering level of the English vocabulary among the students in the same standard. Parents play an active role in developing attitudes towards learning English by providing reading materials and creating a learning and reading friendly environment at home (Bano et al. 2018). Thus, each party, teachers, trainee teachers and parents play a significant role in examining and improving the students' English vocabulary knowledge.

It is vital that the students who scored low vocabulary level being addressed sooner to increase English vocabulary knowledge of the English as a Second Language learners. Malaysia educators could address the issue of limited vocabulary knowledge by exploring how Year 5 Malaysia primary school students' experience strategies such as using graphic organizer, games and songs in vocabulary acquisition.

With reference to the findings collected in the study, hence, it can be concluded that the selected Malaysian Year 5 primary school participants were having low English vocabulary level in the three word classes. It is hoped to ring up the curtain to school teachers in Malaysia as to embrace more creative and innovative ways in the teaching and learning of English vocabulary.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the research participants for taking part in this research. This research is supported by the Faculty of Education Grant GG-2019-016.

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