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## Direct Vocabulary Instruction: The Effects of Contextualised Word Families on Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition

Frankie Subon\*

*Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40200 Shah Alam, Malaysia*

### Abstract

Acquiring vocabulary is one of the biggest challenges in learning the second language in Malaysia. Classroom research has ascertained that students can experience a great improvement in their vocabulary growth if they are given exposure to meaningful input even with the absence of direct instruction (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). However, other studies have also revealed that without direct vocabulary instruction (DVI) students could not make further progress in some features of the second language. In view of these conflicting findings, this study aims to examine the effects of a systematic and structured proposed contextualized word family model of DVI on students' vocabulary acquisition. It also aims to answer its research question on whether there are any significant differences between students' vocabulary size before and after DVI using contextualised word families based on proficiency levels. This present study employs a quasi-experimental design whereby the data collection is done in a normal classroom condition using Laufer and Nation's (1999) Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (PVLТ) at 2000-word level (Test A and Test B). The data obtained from the pre-test (Test A) and post-test (Test B) scores of the PVLТ was computed using paired samples t-tests. It was found that there was a statistically significant difference between learners' vocabulary size in the pre-test and post-test after direct instruction using the contextualised word families for two and a half months. Therefore, the results rejected the null hypothesis of no difference and accepted the research hypothesis that there was a statistically significant difference between learners' vocabulary size before and after the treatment. The findings reveal some important implications for instructional practices, new knowledge in L2 vocabulary acquisition and recommendations for future research.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-019-837-2834.

*E-mail address:* [Frankjaring@yahoo.com](mailto:Frankjaring@yahoo.com)

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is pivotal in the second and foreign language acquisition. This is because vocabulary covers all the lexical items learners need to know in order to meet their numerous educational needs (Sedita, 2005). Thus, vocabulary is essentially vital in acquiring the target language of a speaker whether it is the second or foreign language. Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman (2005) argue that vocabulary has been claimed as the most important prerequisite in acquiring a language by the Natural Approach teaching practitioners and it has been regarded as the building blocks of language learning. This reveals that it is pertinent for the second and foreign language learners to acquire sufficient vocabulary knowledge to enable them to acquire their target language. Hence, there is a dire need for educators to help and train learners to use effective vocabulary learning strategy to acquire ample amount of vocabulary size. Apparently, literature shows that there is a contradiction of opinions on how learners can best acquire vocabulary. For an example, classroom research has ascertained that students can experience a great improvement in their vocabulary growth if they are given exposure to meaningful input even with the absence of direct instruction (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). On the other hand, some studies have also revealed that without direct instruction, students could not make further progress in some features of the second language. This is supported by the National Reading Panel (2002) who ascertained that explicit instruction of vocabulary is highly effective as it could improve both comprehension and vocabulary. Numerous studies have also supported the crucial roles of independent reading in enhancing learners' vocabulary acquisition. However, despite the critical role plays by independent reading in the acquisition of new vocabulary, Shostak (2002) contends that a systematic direct instruction is necessary for vocabulary growth that is needed for successful reading comprehension and should not be left to incidental learning alone. Furthermore, it is found that vocabulary knowledge has a strong correlation with other language skills (Alderson, 2005). Therefore, direct vocabulary instruction is beneficial in the L2 and FL classrooms to boost learners' vocabulary growth.

### 1.1. The problem statement

In Malaysia, many students are still unable to acquire the English language after spending many years in school. Students spend between 11-13 years learning English i.e. 6 years in primary school and between 5-7 years in secondary school. Despite many years spent in learning English as a second language, a portion of students are still unable to master the language upon completing secondary school (Wendy Hiew, 2012). Students' lack of vocabulary is quoted as the main reason for their inability to acquire English. This is mentioned by Low (2004) as cited in Zakaria (2005) who argued that ESL learners in Malaysia are facing difficulties in learning the four language skills, mainly because they are lacking in vocabulary. This is supported by Naginder, Othman & Kabilan (2012) who revealed that various studies conducted at secondary schools as well as at institutions of higher learning show that lexical paralysis is a major contributor to learners' inability to cope with the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Besides, currently there is a gap in literature in a specific area of vocabulary acquisition i.e. word families (Schmitt, 2008) and it is necessary to explicitly teach words in families (Schmitt, 2010). Furthermore, Paribakht & Wesche (1997) and Nadarajan (2009) contend that there is a need to examine the effects of direct vocabulary instruction using a different strategy such as word web, word families, contextualized and decontextualized techniques, etc.

### 1.2. Purpose of the study

The aim of this quasi-experimental research is to examine the effectiveness of direct vocabulary instruction (DVI) using contextualized word families on students' vocabulary acquisition.

### 1.3. Research question and hypothesis

This study aims to answer the research question on whether there are any significant differences between students' vocabulary size before and after direct vocabulary instruction of contextualised word families based on proficiency levels. It also aims to test its research hypothesis i.e. there is a significant difference between the

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