L2 Vocabulary Knowledge and Authentic Academic Text Comprehension
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I. Introduction
The importance of vocabulary in understanding academic texts has been neglected in research. However, over the last decade an increasing number of researchers have investigated its crucial role in L2 reading. They claim that a lack of vocabulary may significantly hinder L2 reading comprehension because vocabulary is a key component of reading ability (Folse, 2004; Hucken & Bloch, 1993; Haynes & Baker, 1993). Some even contend that L2 vocabulary is more important than any other variable in the understanding of L2 reading materials because L2 readers are generally not skilled enough to use strategies effectively (Laufer & Sim, 1985). Nuttall (1994) and Grabe and Stroller (2002) point out the knowledge of at least 90-95 per cent of the words in a text is necessary for independent comprehension.

Despite this, L2 reading pedagogy has not actively incorporated vocabulary into EFL classrooms. Indeed, while many L2 reading programs in Japan are shifting from the grammar-translation approach and focusing on reading for gist, or main ideas (Mouri, 2003; Takanashi & Takahashi, 1987), explicit lexical instruction appears to have been left by the wayside, thereby placing the study of vocabulary in the hands of individual learners.

Many students, however, report that they have difficulty developing adequate vocabulary and consequently cannot improve their reading ability.

The goal of this study therefore is to explore the issue of vocabulary and reading ability to see if there is a close connection between them. The results will provide insights into the future role of vocabulary instruction in L2 reading so that learners are able to more effectively read the text most appropriate for their current level of development.

II. Method
Participants:
The participants who took part in the research on a voluntary basis were 1st year university students enrolled in a compulsory university-wide academic reading course in an EFL program. Their English proficiency level varied from intermediate to advanced and placement in the course was determined by a combination of an Institutional TOEFL Test and interviews.

Procedure:
Data was collected in an academic reading course in intensive reading titled “Reading for Content Analysis” during the 10-week term. After reading two required
authentic academic articles, the students took vocabulary and reading multiple-choice tests to determine their level of comprehension. The extent of the participants’ vocabulary knowledge was measured using Nation’s (2001) receptive vocabulary test which includes the 2000, 3000, 5000, 10000 frequency levels, and the academic word list. The lexical difficulty of the academic texts was determined by counting the ratio of low frequency to high frequency vocabulary using Nation’s (2005) counting program.

The learners were split into two groups based on the percentage of vocabulary known in the texts (90%). The degree of understanding between these groups was then compared for statistical difference using an independent samples t-test.

III. Results

We predict that the limited vocabulary knowledge will inhibit these first year university students’ understanding of the text. We conclude that the inclusion of such authentic texts is not conducive to the linguistic development and use of these texts will result in the frustration of, and eventual de-motivation of these learners. We propose that in courses where it is necessary to use authentic academic texts in an effort to prepare learners for academic study in English, that learners under the 90% threshold be identified and specialized instruction in vocabulary be provided to ensure all students attain the challenging goals set for these courses.

References


毛利公也 (2003), 『英語の語彙指導あの手 この手』, 東京: 研究者出版.