Korean Primary Students Perception of English Vocabulary in their English Textbook

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to investigate the perception of Korean primary students on the vocabulary of their English textbook. It also investigates the vocabulary proficiency level of Korean elementary students. 1033 elementary students participated in this study. A vocabulary test and questionnaires were used to collect the data. For the data analysis, Crosstabs and Multiple Response were used. The results of this study were as followings; 1) 44.9% students were accorded a vocabulary proficiency level 2 (500 word level), 38% of them a vocabulary proficiency level 3 (750 word level) and 6% of them a vocabulary proficiency level 4 (1100word level). 2) Most of students recognized that the vocabulary of their English textbook was not difficult. In addition, 49% of the students mentioned that over 70% of the target words were known words. 3) Most of the students recognized that they could and should learn at least 4 new words per hour.

Keywords
Vocabulary Proficiency Level/ Perception/ Vocabulary of English Textbook/Primary Students

Introduction
Vocabulary is one of the important language components and of critical importance to foreign language learners. Words are basic units of language and carry the major message in communication. Several studies reported that vocabulary errors were the main cause of communication problems while grammatical errors weren’t (Gass, 1988; Meara, 1984). Blaas (1992) analyzed errors of L2 learners and reported that most of L2 learners’ errors were related to vocabulary. Native speakers face more serious problems in communicating with L2 learners when L2 learners make vocabulary errors than grammatical errors. McCarthy (1991) also mentioned that vocabulary learning is essential to language learning. Thus, considerate amount of vocabulary knowledge is needed for L2 learners to communicate in L2 fluently.

Although the importance of vocabulary is recognized, the actual vocabulary acquisition has not been challenged before 1980s. Along with the communicative language approach and lexical approach, the importance of acquiring vocabulary has been emphasized (Brown, 2007). Especially it is essential for L2 learners to acquire vocabulary in the earliest stage of the learning process in order to communicate effectively (Gower, Phillips & Walter, 1995; Nunan, 2000). Laufer (1998) reported that L2 learners recognized the enhancement of their L2 proficiency when their vocabulary knowledge increased. Other studies also showed the high correlation between L2 proficiency and vocabulary knowledge (Lambert, 1972; Schmit, 1988; Zareva, 2007).

Many studies reported that L2 learners need to know at least 95% of the running words in order to understand spoken or written text roughly and more than 98% of known words are needed to comprehend the text well (Bonk, 2000; Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer, 1992). Vocabulary ability affects the ability of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Especially it affects the success of L2 learning of beginning learners critically (Higgs & Clifford 1982; Kim, 2002).

The ultimate goal of English education in Korea is to enhance the ability to communicate in English. Thus, Korea has begun to teach English as a subject matter from 3rd grade. Since vocabulary constitutes the building blocks of communication to carry the central message and forms the essential base of learning listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, vocabulary learning is important for Korean primary students. Therefore, it is important to consider how much English vocabulary Korean primary learners need to learn and what kind of vocabulary they need to learn. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the vocabulary proficiency level and the perception of Korean elementary students on the vocabulary of their English textbook.
1 Literature Review

Vocabulary takes an important role in learning L2 since it is the basic unit containing knowledge related to pronunciation, spelling, morpheme, inflection, grammar, and meaning (Laufer, 1997; McCarthy, 1990; Read, 2000). Vocabulary acquisition is an ongoing process. Thus, L2 learners still have some difficulties in communicating fluently, even though they have high vocabulary knowledge.

Marcarthy (1990) mentioned that vast amount of vocabulary knowledge is more important than any other knowledge to communicate in L2. Therefore, beginning level students need to study basic vocabulary first (Kim & Jung, 1999; Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Cook, 1994; Nunnan, 2000). Lado (1964) reported that at least 2000 words are needed for speaking, 3000 words for listening and writing, and 7000 words for reading. Nation (1997) also mentioned that 2000 words are required to understand 80% of written text and 96% of spoken text. Thus, L2 learners need to learn at least 2000-3000 words to communicate in L2.

Wendy and Ytreberg (1990) reported that it is adequate to learn 4-8 words per hour for native English primary students while Cross (1995) mentioned that learning 5-7 words per hour is adequate for L2/EFL learners. Kim and Jung (1999) reported that it is adequate for Korean primary students to learn at least 3 words per hour. However, Korean primary students are recommended to learn 520 words according to the revised 2008 Korean national curriculum. In other words, Korean primary students are required to learn 520 words in 4 years (learn 1.5 words per hour). Compared to other countries and studies, Korean primary students learn very short amount of vocabulary.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

1033 Korean primary students from 7 different schools participated in this study. The participants are composed of Grade 3, 4, 5, 6 students (see Table 1). 53% of the participants are male students and 47% of them are female students. 70.5% of the participants attend a private English after-school program and most of them didn’t have any experience of studying abroad.

Table 1: Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade (N)</th>
<th>Gender (N)</th>
<th>After School(N)</th>
<th>Studying Abroad (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3(197), 4(270)</td>
<td>M(546)</td>
<td>Yes(723)</td>
<td>Yes(91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5(339), 6(227)</td>
<td>F(484)</td>
<td>No(303)</td>
<td>No(834)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Materials

Since the first 1000 words are the core vocabulary for L2 learners, ‘Vocabulary Test: 1,000 Word Level Test B’ of Nation (1993) was used to measure the English vocabulary ability of Korean primary students. There are 40 items in this test and the score of the test is the total number of correct answer. There is agreement between the score of the test and the level of Longman Structural Readers (level 1-300 word stage, level 2-500 word stage, level 3- 750 word stage, level 4-1100 word stage). Therefore, the test score was converted to the levels of word stage to analyze the data.

The survey questionnaire was used to collect data on the perception of primary students on the vocabulary of their English textbook. There were 6 questions: 3 questions related to the difficulty of English vocabulary and 3 questions related to vocabulary size.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Vocabulary Ability

The results of vocabulary test of primary students were shown in Table 2. Most of students belonged to either the vocabulary proficiency level 2 or 3. Vocabulary level 2 equals to the stage of 500 words and vocabulary level 3 equals to the stage of 750 words. To be more specific, 44.9% of students already know first 500 words and 38% of students have 750 words knowledge. Furthermore 6% of students already have 1100 words knowledge.

Table 2: Results of Vocabulary Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>49(24.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>92(46.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>54(27.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2(1.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the grade went up, the level of students’ vocabulary proficiency increased significantly. As the grade increased, the number of students in the level 1 decreased and the number of students in the level 2, 3, 4 increased. 46.7% of 3rd grade students already knew 500 words and 27.4% of them had 750-word knowledge. 47%, 43%, and 44% of 4th, 5th , 6th grade students respectively already knew 500 words. 34%, 42%, and 45% of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students respectively already knew 750 words. 10% of 6th grade students already knew 1100 words.

These results indicate that 89% of students already knew at least 500 words. More specifically 74.4% of 3rd grade students, 85.5% of 4th grade students, 92% of 5th grade students and 99.6% of 6th grade students already have more than 500 words knowledge. Therefore, there is a great possibility for Korean elementary students to know the words
(520 words) required to learn in the revised 8th national curriculum. Thus, the size of vocabulary required to learn in primary school should be increased.

3.2 Perception on English Vocabulary

3.2.1 Vocabulary Difficulty

The results of primary students’ perception on the difficulty of their English textbook were shown in Table 3. The results showed that most of students thought words in their English textbook were not difficult (89%). Most of students also mentioned that they have experienced to learn known words in an English class (84.1%). To be more specific, 49.8% of students mentioned that 70% of words introduced as new words in an English class were known words and 79.5% of students mentioned that 50% of introduced words were known words.

Table 3: Results of Survey I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty of English vocabulary</th>
<th>1 (very easy)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of introduced words known</td>
<td>10-30%</td>
<td>30-50%</td>
<td>50-70%</td>
<td>70-90%</td>
<td>90-100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known word among the new target words in an English class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>246(23.9)</td>
<td>241(23.3)</td>
<td>434(42.0)</td>
<td>73(7.5)</td>
<td>53(5.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate that the vocabulary in Korean English Textbook is easy for most of Korean primary students regardless of grade level. Therefore, students tend to attend an extra English class at a private after-school program to improve their English ability. Thus, the required size of English vocabulary for primary students should be increased so that primary school students could get comprehensive input and improve their English skills.

3.2.2 Vocabulary Size

The results of survey II were shown in Table 4. 22.9% of students mentioned that it is proper to learn 4-7 new English words per hour, 22.5% of students mentioned 8-10 new English words, and 21.8% of students mentioned 15-20 new English words. Similarly, 23.6% of students mentioned that they could learn 4-7 new English words per hour, 23.2% of students mentioned 8-10 new words, and 22.4% of students mentioned 11-14 new English words. When students were asked how many new English words should be taught per hour in order to enhance their English skills, 24% of them mentioned 8-10 words should be taught, 23.2% of them mentioned 11-14 words, and 23.9% of them mentioned 15-20 words. These results indicate that primary students perceived that they could learn at least 4 new English words per hour and they should learn at least 8 new English words to enhance their English skills.

Table 4: Results of Survey II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many words do you think you can learn in an English class?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G 1-3 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 23(23.1) 52(52.5) 35(35.4) 52(52.5) 42(42.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 28(28.0) 39(39.0) 39(39.0) 39(39.0) 40(40.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 36(36.0) 40(40.0) 40(40.0) 40(40.0) 40(40.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 49(49.0) 50(50.0) 50(50.0) 50(50.0) 50(50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 53(53.0) 54(54.0) 54(54.0) 54(54.0) 54(54.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Conclusion

The results of this study reveal the perception of Korean primary students on English vocabulary. First 44.9% students were accorded a vocabulary proficiency level 2 (500 word level), 38% of them a vocabulary proficiency level 3 (750 word level) and 6% of them a vocabulary proficiency level 4 (1100 word level). Therefore, there is a great chance for Korean primary students to know the 520 words required to learn in the primary school.

Second, most of the students recognized that the vocabulary of their English text book was not difficult. In addition, 49% of the students mentioned that over 70% of the target words were known words. Third, most of the students recognized that they could learn at least 4 new words per hour and should learn more than 4 words in order to enhance their English skills.

All of these results strongly indicate that the size of vocabulary required to learn in primary school in the frame of the revised 2008 Korean national curriculum should be increased.

References


