

# ***ESTIMATING STUDENTS' VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE BY USING VOCABULARY SIZE TEST***

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## **Abstract**

Assessing vocabulary is a crucial issue among the linguists, how many words are needed to understand a spoken or written English text. This paper describes the use of Vocabulary Size Test (VST) – a test to measure written receptive vocabulary size to estimate students' vocabulary knowledge. The use of VST has not been reported that it has been used in the context of Indonesia ELL. The monolingual version of VST was administered to the first and the fourth-year university students who were English major N=60. The findings add indicated that the fourth-year students perform better than the first-year students. It means VST distinguishes learners of difference level of proficiency. VST provides teachers and researchers as a new alternative instrument to measure of written receptive vocabulary size.

*Keywords: assessing vocabulary, vocabulary knowledge, VST, ELL*

## **Introduction**

Measurement of vocabulary mastery levels has been an important issue among researchers since the 1970s (Read, 2000). For example, how many words should be mastered to understand English text both oral and written? How to measure it? How to determine the word to be tested? The situation encourages the speakers to develop instruments that can be used to measure the level of vocabulary satisfaction.

Vocabulary as one of the language units is very important in language learning. This can be seen from all speaking skills of vocabulary. To understand text like novels and newspapers it takes between 8,000-9,000 words. As for oral texts such as movies and conversations it takes between 6,000-7,000 words (I. S. P. Nation, 2006).

One of the difficulty of acquiring vocabulary is the English learner itself. Sedita (2005) issue there are four types of language learners who are in the process of obtaining words, such as students with limited knowledge of English, students who do not read while outside the classroom, students who have limitations in reading and learning, and students who learn with limited knowledge of vocabulary Lack of entry in the realm of the academic world in college.

Language skills of college students are still poorly monitored, within the mastery of academic vocabulary. Their vocabulary, especially in high-frequency and academic vocabulary, is still low. This is evident when reading textbooks or scientific journals, mostly.

Vocabulary is an important part of language acquisition, whether in the context of a mother tongue, a second language, or a foreign language. Because of the importance of vocabulary functions in language development, vocabulary becomes a crucial part that needs to be a consideration in language learning. Vocabulary is generally known for knowing the meaning of a word.

Vocabulary itself can be divided into four parts, namely high-frequency vocabulary, academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary, and low-frequency vocabulary

(Nation, 2001). High-frequency vocabulary is the 2000 most commonly used English vocabulary. Based on Chung and Nation (2003), 80% of the vocabulary used in academic texts and 90% of the vocabulary used in conversations and novels are high-frequency vocabulary. Academic vocabulary is a commonly used vocabulary in the academic realm, but does not enter high-vocabulary vocabulary and is not included in the technical vocabulary usually associated with a domain. Furthermore, the technical vocabulary is the vocabulary determined from the degree of its relationship to a domain. Usually this vocabulary is used by people who work in certain realms. Low-frequency vocabulary are the least used words and are the remainder of the three types of vocabularies mentioned earlier. Of the several types of vocabulary, Nation (2006) suggests about 8,000-9,000 derivative words are needed to understand the written text and about 6000-7000 derivative words are needed to understand oral texts.

The acquisition of English vocabulary is indeed a significant factor in determining the success of communicating in the foreign language. The role of context and individual factors are two things to consider in vocabulary testing. Of course, the content of the vocabulary test itself should be able to align the function of a valid and reliable vocabulary test.

Vocabulary testing of prospective students needs to be done, especially in language preparation classes. Testing of the vocabulary itself is usually done by several institutions in a separate test section, although some other institutions combine it with a reading test (Paker, 2013). Based on Paker's research, the vocabulary test format used is more contextual in the cloze test format, such as drawing conclusions about the meaning of words from the context provided. However, some other tests still use the classic format by isolating the context of the tested vocabulary. Of course, the vocabulary test to be used should provide an unknown / vague / meaningless vocabulary (Fulcher, 2010).

Hughes (2003) suggests that assessment of vocabulary needs to be done on a number of needs, especially to find out how far the language learner's vocabulary is. Particularly in the context of higher education, high-frequency and academic vocabulary tests need to be done to prepare students for writing or speaking activities in the academic realm.

Testing vocabulary in written contexts has its own difficulties for language learners. As the Nation (2006) suggests, the number of derivative words in the 8000-9000 range for written text is certainly much more challenging than the number of derivative words required by spoken text which is only in the range of 6000-7000 vocabulary. Furthermore, in research conducted by Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (1996), the vocabulary in written language is much more numerous and varied than the vocabulary in spoken language.

Vocabulary testing needs to be given to language learners to get information about the number of vocabularies possessed by language learners. Indeed, the function of the vocabulary test itself is less appreciated in Indonesia which is seen from the content of the test that has not yet integrated the role of vocabulary test in the academic realm. Awareness of the importance of high-frequency and academic vocabulary tests will help students complete their academic tasks better.

Vocabulary Size Test (VST) is designed to measure the vocabulary knowledge of English learners either as first language (L1) or second language (L2) (I. S. P. Nation & Beglar, 2007). This test measures the knowledge of receptive vocabulary writing, ie the vocabulary needed for reading.

VST is a loose vocabulary test in multiple-choice form with 4 answer choices. There are two versions of VST, the 14,000 version which consists of 140 questions and 20,000 versions consisting of 100 questions. The 14,000 version uses the vocabulary of

14<sup>th</sup> word frequency levels of 14,000 words from the General Service List (GSL) and British National Corpus (BNC).

Level 1 1000 first word and second level 2 1000 word is taken from GSL level 3 and beyond taken from BNC. Each word frequency level is represented by 10 questions. Problems are arranged from frequency level 1 (high) to frequency level 14 (low). Each question represents 100 derived words (word family).

The casting for VST version 14,000 is done by multiplying the number of correct answers by 100. This means that if a test participant answers 100 questions correctly the estimated vocabulary mastery is 10,000 words. As for the 20,000 version of the scoring is done by multiplying the number of correct answers by 200. If a test participant answers 30 questions correctly then the estimated vocabulary mastery is 6,000 words.

Validated VSTs are a monolingual version, a question and answer option in English. If necessary VST can be adopted with bilingual (I. S. P. Nation & Beglar, 2007). The bilingual version ever studied is the Vietnamese version which shows that the use of bilingual VSTs can work well in measuring vocabulary knowledge (Nguyen & Nation, 2011). While also being validated VST version of Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean (P. Nation, 2016). As for the Indonesian version has not done any research.

The study was conducted to investigate the vocabulary knowledge of the 4<sup>th</sup> year students by using monolingual vocabulary size test.

## Method

The 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate students of English Department (N=26) took part in the study: 5=male and 21=female. They are all the 4<sup>th</sup> year students.

The VST of 20,000 version that consists of 100 items was used as the instrument. Scoring is by multiplying the correct answer by 200. If a test participant answers 30 questions correctly then the estimated vocabulary knowledge is 6,000 words.

## Result and Discussion

The result shows that the vocabulary knowledge of the 4<sup>th</sup> year students of English Department is fairly high. Even no one get the maximum score at 20,000 words but mostly the students' score between 9,000 to 11,000 that approximately 39%.

Table 1. VST Score Frequency

No.	Score	Frequency	Percent
1.	14.000 – 15.000	2	7.69%
2.	13.000 – 14.000	1	3.85%
3.	11.000 – 12.000	3	11.54%
4.	10.000 – 11.000	5	19.23%
5.	9.000 – 10.000	5	19.23%
6.	8.000 – 9.000	2	7.69%
7.	7.000 – 8.000	2	7.69%
8.	6.000 – 7.000	1	3.85%

While the vocabulary knowledge was significantly related to reading (Moghadam, Zainal, & Ghaderpour, 2012). Vocabulary size around 8,000 to 9,000 words are needed

to read novel or newspaper (Nation, 2006). It means the ELLs as non-native speaker at least needs to know 8,000 the English words.

Referring to Table 2 it can be argued that the highest value is 71 or equivalent to 14,200 words and the average is 53 or equivalent to 10,600 words. It means in average the 26 students of English Department have qualified the words needed for reading novel or newspaper.

	Correct Answer	VST Score
Minimum	33	6,600
Maximum	71	14,200
Average	53	10,600
Median	52	10,400

Table 2. Statistical Summary of VST Score

The result implies that it is a useful information for English teachers to know their student's vocabulary knowledge as a consideration before giving instruction and material. Although vocabulary size is not the only one but it should help teacher to assess the students' achievement and vocabulary awareness. Since vocabulary is a very important component in language learning.

### Conclusion

This study shows that Vocabulary Size Test worked well to estimate the students' vocabulary knowledge. In average, the students' vocabulary knowledge is 10,600. It can be concluded that the 4<sup>th</sup> year students of English Department have acquired the minimum words needed to read novel and newspaper.

However, a study with a larger sample is needed. The correlation study of vocabulary knowledge and reading is also needed in Indonesian EFL the context.

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