

# English Vocabulary Limits Me: What Lecturers Have To Say

Ntombekhaya Princess Caga

*Faculty of Education*

*University of Fort Hare, Alice, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa*

**Abstract-** In universities both globally and locally the researchers chronicle the plight of a lack of English vocabulary mostly in students who learn English as their First Additional Language (FAL). Most of these learners in South Africa come from townships and rural areas. Since vocabulary is central to all language skills and meaningful communication, implementing effective strategies in teaching vocabulary will have a positive contribution to students not only in their language proficiency but also in their academic performance. There appear to be adequate provisions and guidance for balancing classroom teaching methods and autonomous learning modes aiming to improve low English language proficiency in English FAL lecturers. However, less attention is paid to the influence of vocabulary in their English FAL learning. This paper presents a qualitative case study conducted in a selected University in the Eastern Cape primarily to examine students' views about the challenges of having a limited vocabulary and seeks to highlight strategies that can assist the students in their vocabulary learning in order to improve their English language proficiency that may translate to adequate performance. Richard's (1976) vocabulary knowledge framework was used as the lens of the study. Interviews were used to solicit data from 10 lecturers. The finding revealed that insufficient vocabulary knowledge makes learners to be challenged to participate in lecture conversations, have poor writing and reading comprehension skills, and obstruct their overall achievement. The students end up labeled as "at risk. The findings also revealed that these students' socio-economic background contributes immensely to their limited English vocabulary. The study recommends extensive use of the university library and encourages the use of online reading material. The study suggests that the students be encouraged to apply for funding in order to be able to find learning resources. The teaching of vocabulary by English lecturers might eliminate inequalities and the uneven relations that persist between students in class, students at the university, and their counterparts elsewhere in the world regarding the use of the English language.

**Keywords – achievement; contextualized; knowledge; proficiency, vocabulary**

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is the language that is used for education, employability, international mobility, unlocking development opportunities, and accessing information (Coleman, 2010). In a multilingual country like South Africa, the English language is used as means of communication for the diverse. In South African schools, it is a developed and contextualized language. According to Alexander (2005), a language with a corpus that allows it to be used at different levels of education, and across disciplines is referred to as a developed and intellectualized language. In South Africa, English is used from pre-primary schools up to institutions of higher learning. In addition, the English language permeates the whole curriculum except for the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3). In institutions of higher learning, it is taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction. Hence, the study seeks to understand the experiences of students on vocabulary learning strategies in their English FAL classrooms.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of the student's insufficient vocabulary that result in poor English language proficiency has been explained in the background. It is also important to note that research indicates that the phenomenon of low English proficiency levels is prevalent mostly in higher institutions that have an access to students coming from mostly rural and semi-urban schools. Similarly, Louw, Bayat, Eigelaar-Meets (2011) support the view by highlighting that most schools hit by low literacy levels are those termed historically disadvantaged schools. Naidoo, Reddy and Dorasamy, (2014), share the same sentiments that students with poor literacy skills are those students who have not acquired the language skills as expected at high school level and the most affected learners are those who are from African families. Such students need to be developed in listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting and language usage skills and possess language competencies to overcome academic challenges. For these reasons, it is imperative to research lecturers' views on their students' vocabulary learning in their classrooms.

## 111. LITERATURE REVIEW

*A. Reasons for teaching English FAL vocabulary*

Although some lecturers may think that vocabulary learning is easy, learning new vocabulary items has always been challenging for students (Khany & Khosravian, 2014). Maharajh, Nkosi, and Mkhize (2016) argue that in some schools teachers who are trained in implementing the curriculum and also plagued by the lack of appropriate resources. Students with limited vocabulary or word-learning strategies continue to struggle throughout their educational careers, which leads to a cycle of frustration and continued failure (Khany & Khosravian, 2014). Various scholars including Sultan (2016) share the same sentiments that communication in any form is made possible when the communicator has a good command of vocabulary. This implies that in order to be effective in spoken or written communication, people need to have enough vocabulary. Sultan further asserts that to decode the message from language utterances, one needs to be equipped with enough vocabulary. Vocabulary helps to achieve literacy in a foreign language and the knowledge of vocabulary is deemed important in communication in an effective way (Asyiah, 2017). Study skills that are specific to higher education include conventions of academic writing, styles for references and bibliographies, searching for and selecting information in libraries and using the internet, note-taking from lectures, making presentations, and revision and exam techniques (Gosling(2009) ) and students with minimal vocabulary might not be able to perform such tasks

*B. The challenges of having a limited vocabulary*

According to Tseng & Schmitt (2008), in English FAL learning, the opportunities are restricted in terms of input, output, and interaction. In addition, what seems necessary for vocabulary learning is the employment of motivational and effective learning strategies. The lack of vocabulary knowledge can be an important reason for making students reluctant to be exposed to the skills of reading and listening (Grabe & Stoller, 2018). Besides, a wide range of notable features are usually subsumed under the category of the challenge of vocabulary learning (and teaching) such as word frequency, saliency, learning burden, and students' particular vocabulary needs and wants (Grabe & Stoller, 2018). According to Nelson, Dole, Hosp, and Hosp (2015) students from lower-income backgrounds acquire far fewer than 3000 words on average learned per year. In order for the students to understand the passage, they must first understand unfamiliar words(Beck, Mc-Keown, & Kucanm, 2013). This seriously impacts students' level of reading. Students fail to read with comprehension. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge makes students to be challenged in classroom conversation participation. One of the first problems of second language learning is how to commit a massive amount of foreign words to memory. Establishing independent vocabulary skills needs a high level of motivation on the student's part and is a dynamic process that involves multiple variables and the practice of different skills (Van de Wege, 2018). Finally, students' lack of vocabulary obstructs their overall academic achievement.

*C. Strategies that can assist learners' vocabulary learning**Diagnostic screening:*

It is believed that lecturers could do diagnostic screening in order identify students who may be suspected to have, significant weaknesses in their use of English among other things. According to Gosling(2009) diagnostic screening has an ability to identify students with specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) or problems with numeracy or early warning signs about their ability to meet deadlines and organise their work..

*Teaching Strategies:*

The sort of strategies used by the students often depends on the specific student; however, inside the lecturer's room, lecturers can explicitly model their strategies, remind students about them, and practice them to motivate their independent vocabulary-building skills (Van de Wege, 2018). In his view, this classroom practice gives students the chance to take learning into their own hands. Cook, (2013) is of the view that when students are provided an opportunity to be first exposed to the new words and their meanings, and be secondly placed in conditions under which they try to retrieve, recall, and use the target vocabulary items across different settings and contexts, the process of vocabulary development will occur. According to Morrow & Gambrell, (2011), teaching literacy skills through an evidence-based approach provides opportunities for students to engage in a dialogue. The lecturers

model listening and speaking skills in an additional language and provide feedback for students' participation. Lecturers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practices. Servant-Miklos (2018) encourages Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and views it as an approach that takes the focus away from the task-based process of information retrieval and focuses on developing an understanding of the learning of vocabulary. Fler (2015) has found that learning through play enhances learners' oral communication, their social, innovative, and creative use of play material together with divergent thinking and problem-solving skills. Reciprocal teaching is also identified as one of the strategies relevant to literacy development.

#### 111 METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative case study within the interpretivist paradigm (Yin, 2018) to explore strategies that could help students with learning of vocabulary and in developing their literacy skills. Purposive sampling was applied to this study because the authors focused particularly on lecturers teaching EFAL. Interviews were used to solicit data from 10 lecturers from two Schools in the Faculty of Education. For this article, lecturers were coded as L1– L10 to ensure the anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of the data. The coding confirmed that no individual could be identified.

#### IV DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was inductive. Three questions were asked to lecturers regarding their students' lack of English FAL vocabulary and the strategies they use in their teaching of vocabulary in their English classrooms.

During the interviews, lecturers were asked about the importance of vocabulary in learning English learning. It is worth noting that L3, L5, L8 and L10 did not even try to respond to the questions.

L1: "Vocabulary learning is important but most lecturers use teacher-centered teaching approaches that require rote memorization"

L2: "We all know that the challenge experienced by these students woes from high schools where learners depend on the teachers as they do not have exposure to English reading material at home and do not speak English either.

L4: "As most schools are in rural areas they have no contact with native – speakers of the English language.

L6: "Students with the limited vocabulary found themselves being laughed at by others which limits them from choosing friends.

L7: " This is a serious challenge because such students fail other subjects due to a lack of English vocabulary.

L9: " This is worrying because lack of vocabulary limits students from understanding what is discussed in class whether for academic purposes or pleasure.

L4. " Lack of vocabulary changes one's character, some of them do not attend lectures and some have negative attitude towards the subject and the lecturers teaching the subject.

The second question was on the challenges students are faced with due to limited English vocabulary. The responses from lecturers were as follows:

Lecturers' responses revealed that without vocabulary students cannot participate in English activities with other students e.g debates (L6). The responses shows that a lack of vocabulary makes students to be treated differently by other lecturers (L4) and become a laughing stock in class (L5). These students struggle with reading comprehension and are dependent on the dictionary (L8). This results in failing other subjects as English is used as the medium of instruction (L9). Some of the learners decide not to participate, especially in group discussions in class (L3).

The third question on the methods used by lecturers when teaching English was also asked. The lecturers' responses revealed the need for diagnostic screening during the first lecture as a starting point. The aim is to identify students with English language challenges. The learners' responses above revealed that teachers encourage rote memorization (L1) and use a teacher-centered approach as he/she is the one providing the meaning of words to learners (L2). The teacher refers students to the dictionary and does not use strategies that would assist learners to improve their vocabulary as advised by (Van de Wege, 2018).

## V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings showed that lecturers should use diagnostic tests as a yardstick to test students' ability to use English language. Such diagnostic tests can either be an oral or a written task, as Gosling(2009) indicated above that diagnostic screening can be used as a tool in English FAL learning. The findings revealed that students coming from educationally disadvantaged schools are the most impacted students with limited vocabulary as they are not exposed to native language speakers and English reading material during their high school learning. According to Nelson, Dole, Hosp, and Hosp (2015) students from lower-income backgrounds acquire far fewer than the expected words on average learned per year. The finding reveals that insufficient vocabulary knowledge make students to be challenged in participating in conversations. Grabe & Stoller, (2018) and Altyari (2017) support the view when highlighting that the lack of vocabulary knowledge can be an important reason for making students reluctant to be exposed to the skills of reading and communication. Flear (2015) asserts that at high school level, learning through play and social, innovative and creative use of play material together with divergent thinking and problem-solving skills might be the bests strategies that increases learners' vocabulary and enhances learners' oral communication skills. In the institutions of higher learning, learning through inquiry could encourage students to find information from libraries and e - learning other than waiting to be spoon-feed by their lecturers. As indicated above, students with insufficient vocabulary have poor writing and reading comprehension skills. The lecturers put the blame to students 'high school background whereby teachers encourage rote memorization not to learn the language for understanding and be able to use it. Servant-Miklos (2018) encourages the use of Problem – Based Learning (PBL) and view it as an approach that takes the focus away from the task-based process of information retrieval as in rote memorization but focuses on developing an understanding of the learning of vocabulary. It is also evident that lack of vocabulary obstructs the students' overall achievement. The findings also reveals English teachers that are not subject specialists at high school level. In institutions of higher learning, some lecturers teaching English language assume that students have gained enough knowledge of language as prescribed in schools' curriculum, and or do not teach vocabulary and that contributing immensely to students' limited English vocabulary.

The study suggests that the institutions of higher learning provide students with resources and ensure that they are exposed to the English language material. Due to insufficient vocabulary, students become shy and become passive in lectures. The lack of vocabulary knowledge can be an important reason for making students reluctant to be exposed to the skills of reading and listening (Grabe & Stoller,2018). According to Morrow & Gambrell, (2011) teaching literacy skills through an evidence-based approach provides opportunities for students to engage in dialogues. Simply put, a lack of vocabulary limits these students to engage in most activities that require discussion in English .The study revealed that lecturers only focus on students who are able to express themselves, and those with vocabulary challenges end up becoming introverted. Such students ended up being labeled as “at-risk students”. Khany & Khosravian (2014) assert that a lack of vocabulary leads to a cycle of frustration and continued failure.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the lecturers' views on how the lack of vocabulary limits students, the researcher agreed upon the following recommendations:

**Strengthening lecturer's knowledge:** not only base the appointment of lecturers on the lecturers' academic achievement, meaning having passed English language as a major in his Degree qualification. This implies that English is the specialization in terms of subject content. It is believed that the lecturer should have the language as a specialization in his professional qualification as well. The lecturer would have knowledge of various English FAL teaching methods. The knowledge about English teaching methods would enable them to apply some of the strategies discussed above to develop students' vocabulary and enhance literacy skills development. Furthermore, there should be continuous ongoing professional development and capacity-building programmes on these strategies. In addition, lecturers should familiarize themselves with the strategies such as the balanced approach to literacy development, PBL, evidence-based approach, problem-based approach, play-based approach, and reciprocal teaching. Lastly, lecturers teaching English should be given in-depth training on vocabulary development strategies.

**In-service training:** It is recommended that student teachers should be trained on how to implement the content of CAPS in their classrooms. In other words, they are responsible for the development of the learner's vocabulary. There should be ongoing workshops to capacitate students on new teaching strategies including the integration of technology in the teaching and learning of English FAL.

Study skills and academic integrity: The use of libraries should be encouraged and various Language Applications should be made available to students. Students with minimal vocabulary tend to plagiarize. It is therefore recommended that in order to reduce plagiarism, these students be introduced to the notion of ‘academic integrity’ and that might help them use appropriate referencing when using material from sources other than their own work requires.

## V11 CONCLUSION

A lack of vocabulary skills is a significant cause of students’ poor academic performance. Lecturers feel that this limit students in achieving various things inside and outside the classroom. Insufficient vocabulary deprive them opportunities to converse in English language with confidence, read text with understanding and write meaningful text. Students need to be motivated using different strategies to excel in their literacy development and be encouraged to engage in meaningful language and print activities. This study was significant because it provided a platform for lecturers’ voices to be heard. Furthermore, it highlighted the different strategies and approaches lecturers could use to develop student’s vocabulary skills, and provide EFAL students with opportunities to weave their own experiences, feelings and interests into vocabulary and literacy development.

## REFERENCES

- [1] H. Coleman, “*English in Development. London: British Council*”. Available online at [www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/english-language-development](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/english-language-development) (accessed 2020 May 7) 2010.
- [2] N. Alexander, “*The Intellectualisation of African languages: the African Academy of Languages and the Implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa* “. Cape Town: PRAESA. 2005.
- [3] W. Louw, A. Bayat, & I. Eigelaar-Meets, “Exploring Grade Repetition at Underperforming- Schools in the Western Cape. A research Paper. By Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development, a partnership between Presidency, the Republic of South Africa and European Union. 2011.
- [4] U. Naidoo, K. Reddy, N. Dorasamy, “Reading literacy in primary schools in South Africa: Educator perspectives on factors affecting reading literacy and strategies for improvement.” *International Journal of Education Science*, Vol 7 , no. 1, pp 155-167.2014.
- [5] Department of Basic Education (DBE). “*National curriculum statement (NCS): Curriculum and assessment policy statement (CAPS). Foundation Phase Grades 1–3: English Second Additional Language*”. Pretoria: Government Printer. 2011.
- [6] R. Khany, & F. Khosravian, ““Iranian EFL learners” vocabulary development through Wikipedia. *English Language Teaching*, Vol 7 no. 7, .2014.
- [7] L.R. Maharajh, T. Nkosi, & M.C. Mkhize,.” Teachers’ experiences in the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in three primary schools in KwaZulu Natal”. *Africa’s Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* ,Vol 4, no. 2. pp 371–388. 2017.
- [8] A.A. Altyari, “English Vocabulary Uptake by Saudi Arabic Speaking Students at Public Schools”. *British journal of English Linguistics*, Vol 5, no. 1, pp 10-16. 2017.
- [9] W.T. Tseng, & N. Schmitt, “Toward a model of motivated vocabulary learning: A structural equation modeling approach. *Language Learning*, Vol 58, no. 2, pp 357–400. 2008.
- [10] W. Grabe, & F. Stoller, “ Teaching vocabulary for reading success “. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition*. 2018.
- [11] K.L. Nelson, J.A. Dole, J.L Hosp, & M.K. Hosp. “Vocabulary instruction in K-3 low- income classroom a during reading reform project”. *Reading Psychology*, Vol 36. pp 145-172. 2015.
- [12] T. Beck, M. Mc Keown, L. & Kucan “*Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*” .2nd ed. New York: Guild ford Press. 2013.
- [13] M. Van de Wege “Teaching strategies for independent vocabulary development teaching vocabulary”. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, pp. 1–7.2018.
- [14] D. Gosling. *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York. Routledge.2009
- [15] V. Cook, “*Second language learning and language teaching*” 4th ed.. Routledge. 2013.
- [16] L.Morrow, & L. Gambrell, (Eds.). “*Best practices in literacy instruction*”, 4th ed. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- [17] V.F.C. Servant-Miklos, “Problem-solving skills versus knowledge acquisition. The historical dispute that split problem-based learning into two camps “. *Health Sciences Education*, Vol 24, pp 619–653. 2018.
- [18] M. Fleeer,.” Pedagogical positioning in play – teachers being inside and outside of children’s imaginary play”. *Early Child Development and Care*, Vol 185, no.12, pp, 1801–1814. 2015.
- [19] R.K. Yin, “*Case study research and applications: Design and methods* “. 6th ed. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.2018.