

The orthographic and aural vocabulary knowledge of Arabic native speakers learning English in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Without words there can be no content in a language lesson and vocabulary knowledge is undoubtedly central to language performance. Yet, studies in Saudi Arabia have pointed out that learners leave high school with around 1000 words.

The orthographic form of these tests, however, may lead to under-estimation and no study has tried to investigate the aural vocabulary knowledge of these learners. This paper reports a study where the orthographic and aural vocabulary size of 237 students has been tested. Results suggest the vocabulary size of learners is probably not under-estimated. More worrying they suggest that vocabulary knowledge, however measured, fails to grow systematically from school level to university level.

Key words: orthographic, aural, vocabulary, measure, false-alarms

Introduction

Very few studies attempted to examine the vocabulary size of the learners in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, no study has gone beyond school level. Studies show that vocabulary knowledge of Saudi learners is very poor, perhaps fewer than 1000 words on leaving high school which is below the vocabulary threshold for communication (Nation, 2001). The current study will investigate the orthographic and aural vocabulary knowledge of those learners from year 6 to year 17. It will also investigate how much vocabulary the public schools students learn from the Ministry of Education target word list. The third objective for this study is to examine the hypothesis which claims that the written vocabulary size tests underestimate the knowledge of Arabic native speakers because they have vocabulary knowledge accessible only through the aural route.

Subjects:

237 male students, 139 studying 823 classroom hours at public schools and 98 studying at university with a total of 2070 classroom hours. Their ages are between 11 and 22.

Tests:

Three vocabulary size tests are used in this experiment. The first test is X-Lex (Meara and Milton, 2003), which is an orthographic test of the most frequent 5000 English words. This computer-based test presents the test takers with 120 words; 20 words are randomly selected from every 1000 word frequency band and 20 words are pseudowords which are designed to look like real English words while they are not. Scores are calculated by counting the number of "Yes" responses to real words and multiplying them by 50 to give a raw score of 5000. The number of "Yes" responses to pseudowords are counted and multiplied by 250. This will allow the scores on the real words to be adjusted for guessing and overestimation of knowledge. The second test is A-Lex (Milton and Hopkins, 2005), which is the phonological counterpart of X-Lex where the testees listen to the words without watching them. The third test is the MOED word-list test which is a paper-and-pencil test which adopts the principle of X-Lex.

Results and discussions:

Results on x-lex show that students at year 6 know around 387 words and by the time they leave school, they only know around 890 words; 83 words annually. The results on a-lex are slightly better but the difference is not significant. They start with 442 words at year 6 and end

with approximately 1052 words at year 12. Both tests, however, show that the number of words learned per classroom hour is less than one word which is extremely low. Milton and Meara (1998) suggests learners fairly consistently acquire 3 to 4 words per contact hour from classroom instruction. The standard deviation is quite high which may indicate a lot guessing is taking place.

Results from the third test are surprisingly low. Although the words tested are taken from the textbooks, the results show that students know only 340 words out of the 1950 words.

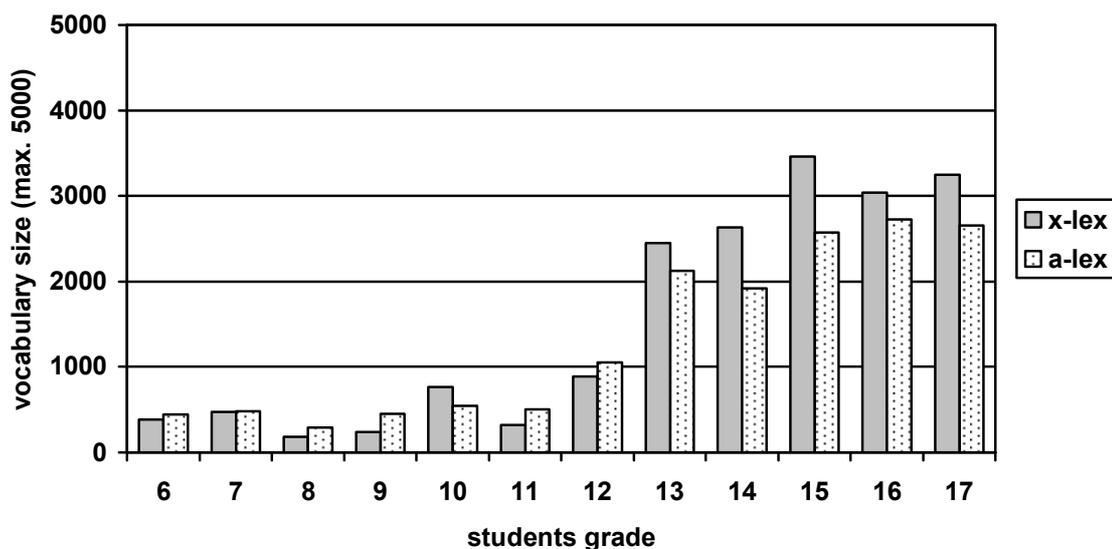
These results confirm the previous findings of Al-Hazemi (1993) and Al-Bogami (1995) about the poor vocabulary knowledge of students in Saudi Arabia. The three tests show a small inconsistent vocabulary growth over the years. It is not clear, if students really do enter the system consistently with several hundred words of English why they are unable to make more progress in a structured learning environment.

Milton (2005) explains that Arabic native speakers can be cogent in speech even when vocabulary size tests suggest their knowledge of English is very limited. This implies that if the tests present the words aurally, results will be better which may lead to the conclusion that the written tests underestimate the vocabulary knowledge of those learners. This is also supported by the nature of Arabic script where most Arabic words are based on three consonant roots which appear as three letters. When learners transfer this consonant-based decoding strategy into English, a lot of errors will probably take place.

However, the insignificant difference between the results of x-lex and a-lex and the correlation of individuals' score do not support the assumption that Arabic speakers have vocabulary knowledge accessible only in phonological form. This finding is supported by two previous studies; Milton and Riordan (2006) and Milton and Hopkins (2007).

Results of x-lex and a-lex at university level are presented in graph 1 which shows a big jump in students' vocabulary size in year 13, orthographically and phonologically. This jump is due to the fact that the university subjects are all students at the English department which means they are most likely motivated and their English background is good.

Graph1: annual growth on x-lex and a-lex in schools (6-12) and university (13-17)



The graph also shows that the students' aural knowledge of vocabulary is slightly better than their orthographic knowledge but the situation reverses at advanced levels. This suggests that there was not enough focus on written at school. Ignoring the written representations of words at early stage may hinder vocabulary growth. When students have enough vocabularies to enable them to read full English texts, their vocabulary expands because they can add up the infrequent words which are most likely to be learned orthographically.

Possible reasons for the low vocabulary size:

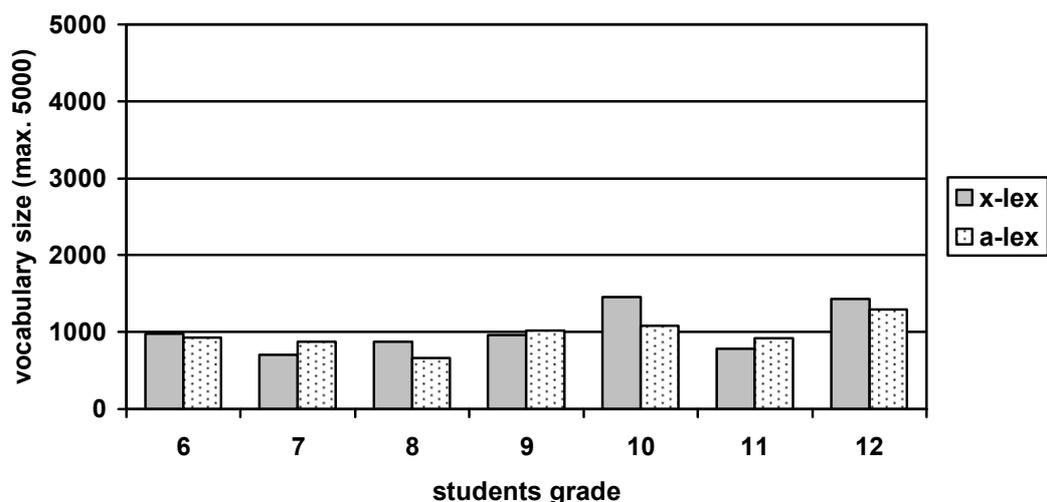
One possible reason for this poor knowledge is that attention towards writing is not enough or rather does not start early enough to enable learners to learn infrequent words. Another possible reason is that target words may not be presented explicitly to students. Al-Akloby (2001) noticed that the way vocabularies are presented in students' textbooks gives students the impression that they are not very important and that they can be good speakers of English with a small number of words. New vocabularies need to be presented and recycled properly. Some teachers think that their role ends in presenting the new vocabulary while, in fact, it starts from there.

A third reason is that learners are not probably demonstrating whatever knowledge they may have of English vocabulary with any accuracy, Nation (2007) notes that the validity of any test is dependent on the willingness of learners to demonstrate their knowledge accurately. Here, with high rates of false alarms on all versions of the test, it must be questioned whether learners are guessing or are just going through the motions of answering these tests rather than trying accurately to demonstrate their knowledge. The high false alarms could be the result of the tests scoring system which penalizes the test takers for making yes responses to unreal words which eventually leads to having zero or even minus scores.

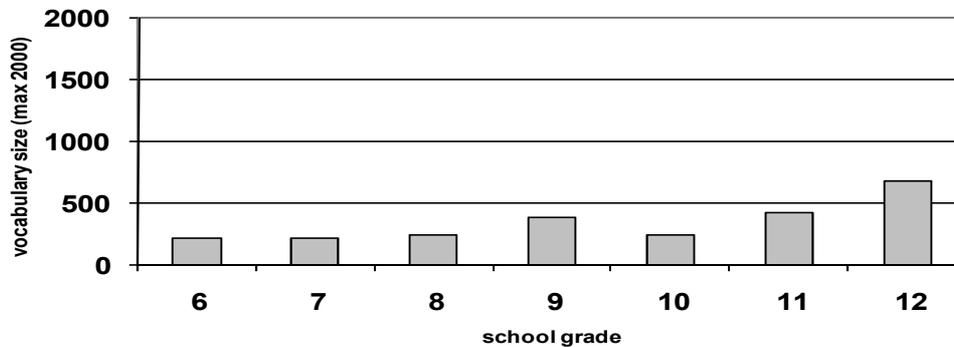
Tests scoring system and false alarms

In order to eliminate the effect of false alarms on the data, all the negative and zero scores will be excluded. If no significant change occurs, scores with high false alarms will be excluded. There is no clear answer to what rate of false alarms is accepted, so the exclusion will be done in two steps. First, scores with 75% false alarms will be excluded. Then, scores with 50% of false alarms will be excluded. Graphs 2 and 3 show the new results.

Graph 2: students' orthographic and aural vocabulary size after excluding negative, zero and suspected guessers' scores



Graph 3: Scores on MOED word-list test after excluding negative, zero and suspected guessers' scores



Conclusion and suggestions for follow-ups

Regardless of the nature of the test the scale of learning remains consistent, learners leave school with only about 1000 words known out of the most frequent 5000 and knowing, on average, only about a quarter of the MOED wordlist which seems a very minimal list. Learners also appear to start school knowing something like 500 to 800 words and it is apparent that progress through the school system is small.

The high false alarms in this data may require running another type of test, like L2 to L1 translation. This will probably eliminate guessing possibilities from students' answers. It is also recommended to make some classroom observations to examine how teachers teach and recycle new vocabularies in class.

Students' textbooks are important in vocabulary learning. They need to be examined to check the presentation, distribution and recycling of the target words. Finally, it is recommended to run some case studies on students who have very big orthographic vocabulary but very small aural vocabulary and students with the opposite situation to see the effect of these conditions at this early stage on their progress at advanced levels. Those with good orthographic vocabulary size at early stages are expected to be more successful in the future than the other group. This will help education authorities to realize the importance of introducing English writing at early stages.

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