

# An Assessment of the Importance of Vocabulary in English Language Study to Vietnamese Learners

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to assess the importance of vocabulary in English language study for Vietnamese learners. This paper summarises 35 scientific papers on the importance of vocabulary in English study in Vietnam. The paper first reviewed current status of vocabulary of Vietnamese learners. Next, the assessment of the importance of vocabulary in English language teaching and testing was fully discussed in Vietnam. Finally, we finished this review by providing suggestions for vocabulary learning in Vietnam. It was found that vocabulary play a very important role in English language study in Vietnam. In addition, this review also finds it important for Vietnamese students to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and for teachers to understand the conditions necessary for vocabulary learning in order to improve vocabulary learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Importance, Vocabulary, English language study, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the national strategy period 2011-2025 goal for Vietnamese EFL education, English is taught as a compulsory subject across primary to tertiary education (1). Vocabulary is key to communication and developing vocabulary knowledge is important for the improvement of language skills (2). English is today without a doubt the most often used foreign language due to Vietnam's rapid economic integration with the rest of the world. It is a compulsory subject in the curriculum of secondary education, i.e., from Grade 6 (12 years old),

across Vietnam and is also introduced as a subject from Grade 3 (9 years old) in many provinces (3). The importance of English in Vietnam is also evidenced by the increase of English language schools and private English centres across the nation and the significant financial commitment made by Vietnamese parents to pricey English-language programs. However, English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam is frequently of poor quality (4). The poor quality of teaching speaking skill at a university in Vietnam results in a large number of graduates who have difficulty with communicating English (5). This is partially reflected in the fact that a significant portion of Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) students are unable to communicate in English for survival needs despite receiving years of official English training (6). Communicative language teaching has gained popularity in Vietnam since the early 1990s. However, in reality, reading and grammar skills continue to be the main foci of ELT in Vietnam (7). A study of (8) indicated that in most schools and colleges in Vietnam, except for some English language classes in schools for gifted students, teachers continue to emphasize grammar, reading, and writing skills to prepare their students for midterm or final term tests, as the tests, both institutional and national, are still designed with a major focus on testing (8). The English curriculum in Vietnamese schools may pay some attention to vocabulary, but mostly to make reading and grammar exercises easier. When studying and

teaching a second or foreign language (L2), vocabulary is extremely important (9,10). Perhaps vocabulary should have its own section in the Vietnamese English curriculum. Furthermore, only recently has ELT research in Vietnam started to focus on vocabulary (3). Many subjects pertaining to vocabulary in ELT in Vietnam have been researched up to this point. Particular focus has been paid to Vietnamese EFL students' vocabulary knowledge (2,11,12). Additionally, a number of studies have looked at how Vietnamese EFL students pick up vocabulary through prolonged reading (13,14) explicit instruction (15), computer-assisted language learning (16), input-based and output-based tasks (17), and audiovisual input (18).

This paper aims to assess the importance of vocabulary in English language study for Vietnamese learners. The paper begins with current status of vocabulary of Vietnamese learners. Next, we will discuss of assessment of the importance of vocabulary in English language teaching and testing in Vietnam. We finish this review by providing suggestions for vocabulary learning in Vietnam.

## **MATERIALS & METHODS**

### **2.1. Materials**

Scientific papers were first primarily collected from three main digital databases including Web of Science, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar. A total of 35 papers was used to discuss three main sub-topics in the study.

### **2.2. Methods**

First, queries were made on three different topics about the importance of vocabulary in English language teaching and testing in Vietnam. Various keyword combinations were searched in digital databases including Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SCOPUS. In general, different combinations of keywords were used as follows: "vocabulary", "English language", "English teaching", "English learning", "English

testing", "lexical coverage", "Vietnam", and "Vietnamese".

## **RESULT & DISCUSSION**

### **Current status of vocabulary of Vietnamese learners**

In Vietnam, according to the Ministry of Education and Training, by the end of high school (12th grade), Vietnamese students should be fluent in about 2,500 English terms (2). Recent studies (11,12) have shown that Vietnamese EFL learners typically have inadequate vocabulary knowledge, which includes understanding the meaning of English words and formulaic sequences (for example, collocations, idioms), as well as recognizing their form. For example, a thorough investigation on the understanding of meaning recognition among 500 Vietnamese EFL students in Grade 12 from various high schools was carried out in several Vietnamese provinces, where the results of a vocabulary test showed that even though Vietnamese students had studied English for anywhere between six and twelve years, only a very tiny percentage of them (14%) were able to master the 2000-word level and even fewer were able to master the following word levels (2). Similar to those obtained from (2), after ten years of formal English learning, more than 90% of Vietnamese university students, who do not major in English, did not grasp the most common 2000 words (19). It was also revealed that students in urban areas had significantly more vocabulary knowledge than students in rural areas at all word levels except 10,000 word level (2). A recent study has indicated that about 70% of Vietnamese pupils performed below average on the national high school English exam in 2019 (20). All of these problems may have been caused, at least in part, by the students' inadequate vocabulary skills. It was indicated that numerous variables, including word-related variables, contextual variables, and learner-related variables, could contribute to Vietnamese EFL students' inadequate vocabulary knowledge (21).

### **Assessment of the importance of vocabulary in English language teaching**

It is crucial to comprehend the current vocabulary teaching methods in Vietnam before any inferences or suggestions are made. Unfortunately, no research has specifically and thoroughly examined English vocabulary teaching methods in Vietnam. Various Vietnamese EFL teachers have reported vocabulary teaching methods using translation (22), code-switching (23), songs (24), or storytelling (25), and recently digital apps (26). In many EFL courses in Vietnam, vocabulary teaching follows a standard format. A Vietnamese EFL teacher may put on the board before the start of an English lesson a list of new English words that will be discussed, together with Vietnamese translations of those words. Some students may be asked by the teacher to test their memorization of words that were covered in the prior lesson. Despite being urged to learn new words by heart, they rarely get the chance to use them in class because the focus is typically on reading and grammar. It should be noted that Vietnamese EFL instructors rarely evaluate their students' vocabulary proficiency before and after an English course to determine their vocabulary increases. Instead, they often tend to prioritize grammar knowledge (3). The relationship between word form and meaning is a topic on which many Vietnamese EFL teachers like to place a lot of emphasis. Different facets of vocabulary knowledge may not be appropriately addressed in textbooks, one of the primary input sources for L2 learners (27,28). A recent study has indicated that Vietnamese EFL teachers should evaluate the frequency of the lexical elements they want to offer to their students rather than just relying on their hunches or glossaries in textbooks and reference books when choosing vocabulary (3). They can get to know tools like Lextutor and AntwordProfiler to examine target words to determine whether or not they merit classroom instruction. Discourse frequently uses formulaic sequences, which

are essential for L2 proficiency (29,30). Therefore, more teaching time should be devoted to formulaic sequences, and Vietnamese EFL students would benefit from a higher emphasis on them. In addition, formulaic sequences are used frequently in discourse (31) and are essential for L2 proficiency (29,30) [34,35]. As a result, formulaic sequences should be given more teaching time, and Vietnamese EFL students would benefit from a stronger emphasis on them. A recent study by (32) has explored both positive factors and negative factors affecting English teaching quality where it was found that an updated syllabus, modern teaching methods, and adequate facilities and equipment are positive factors identified by the teachers. Nevertheless, there are still many negative factors hindering the efficacy of English teaching and learning, including: insufficient time for English subjects; lack of speaking component in tests and examinations; unequal students' English abilities; large class sizes; limited support from university leaders; and students' limited efforts and motivation (32).

### **Assessment of the importance of vocabulary in English language testing**

The link between vocabulary and comprehension has been shown in the research [46]. A key element that might influence understanding is lexical coverage, or the percentage of terms in a document that are known to the reader. For minimal and ideal comprehension, it was recommended by a study of (33), 95% and 98% coverage, respectively. The link between vocabulary and comprehension has been shown in a study of (33). A key element that might influence comprehension is lexical coverage, or the percentage of terms in a document that are known to the reader. To put it another way, for students to have a basic grasp of a text, they must be familiar with at least 95% of the words in it. But very few research have examined the lexical coverage of language tests up to this point. One of the few analyses of English

language examinations in Vietnam, and the first to examine their lexical content. Twenty English exam papers from Vietnam's high school and university entrance exams were subjected to a corpus-based lexical analysis during a period of 17 years (2002-2018) (34). It was found that to achieve a 95% vocabulary coverage on the exam papers, one needed to be familiar with 5000-word families. There were significant differences between the exams in terms of the quantity of vocabulary knowledge necessary for each exam paper, ranging from 3000-word families to 12,000-word families for 95% coverage. The results of (34) do not, however, support the idea that vocabulary alone should be the exclusive focus of high-stakes English exams in Vietnam. Instead, while creating high-stakes English tests in Vietnam, test creators should pay more attention to the lexical profiles and lexical coverage of the examinations in order to make them more uniform, in line with the MOET's rules (35), and appropriate for Vietnamese EFL students (2). Many students may find it too difficult and, in some cases, demotivating to take a language test with a vocabulary that is too extensive.

## **CONCLUSION**

There haven't been many studies on vocabulary in Vietnam, therefore the picture of vocabulary in English language learning, teaching, and testing in Vietnam is now far from comprehensive. This paper aims to assess the importance of vocabulary in English language study to Vietnamese learners through reviewing 35 scientific papers. The paper first reviewed current status of vocabulary of Vietnamese learners. The assessment of the importance of vocabulary in English language teaching and testing was then discussed in Vietnam. Finally, we finished this review by providing suggestions for vocabulary learning in Vietnam. It was found that vocabulary play an very important role in English language study in Vietnam. In addition, Vietnamese EFL students and

teachers should understand the conditions necessary for vocabulary learning in order to improve vocabulary learning and teaching. In light of the significance of vocabulary for reading, listening, speaking, and writing as well as the growing interest in research on vocabulary learning and teaching, it is hoped that more studies on vocabulary learning and teaching in Vietnam will be conducted in order to inform interested stakeholders and the pertinent ELT policies of the nation.

## **Declaration by Authors**

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