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AN ASSESSMENT OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE OF VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

- By the end of high-school Vietnamese students should master 2,500 words (MOET, 2018).
- 6,000 word families and beyond 14,000 word families required to comprehend 95% and 98% respectively of high-school graduation exam papers between 2015 and 2018 (Vu, 2019).

—> Do Vietnamese high-school students meet these lexical demands?

THIS STUDY

- Focus: the vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese high school students.
- Purposes:
  - To find out if the students meet the lexical demands set by the MOET (MOET, 2018) and high-school graduation exams (Vu, 2019).
  - To find out whether vocabulary knowledge of students in rural areas differs from that of students in urban areas.
  - To find out whether male and female students differ in their vocabulary knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

- Vocabulary is vital in L2 learning (Nation, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017).
- Vocabulary is positively correlated to L2 skills (Milton, 2013).
- More vocabulary —> better language achievement (Read, 2000); more vocabulary —> better marks (Laufer et al., 2004); more vocabulary —> fewer errors (Meara, 1984).

ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

- Students' socio-economic status can affect their language learning outcomes:
  - Their parents' education (Nikolov, 2009; PISA, 2003).
  - Their attendance at different kinds of schools and levels of extracurricular exposure to L2 (Muñoz, 2008).
  - Their goal setting behaviour (Gayton, 2010; Lamb, 2012).
  - Their motivation, self-regulation, motivated behaviour (= effort & persistence), learning autonomy, and self-related beliefs (Benson, 2007; Fan, 2011; Gayton, 2010; Kormos & Kiddle, 2013; Lamb, 2012).
  - Their available resources (Hu, 2003).
- Socio-economic status can affect early vocabulary development (Hoff, 2006; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009) —> Unknown if this is also the case for L2 learners?

ROLE OF GENDER

- In evolutionary terms, women are better at language than men (Kolb & Whishaw, 2001; Mindner, 2008).
- Gender was found to be an important factor in early vocabulary growth (Huttenlocher et al., 1991).

GENDER AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

- Mixed findings on gender differences in vocabulary knowledge and learning:
  - In terms of vocabulary knowledge: female > male (Catalan, 2010; Fontecha, 2010; Gu, 2002), male > female (Boyle, 1987; Scarcella & Zimmerman, 1998), male = female (Prados, 2010).
  - In terms of vocabulary learning: female > male (Nyikos, 1990), male = female (Grace, 2000; Maghsodi, 2010).

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GENDER AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

- Gender differences have been found to exist in:
  - Motivation: females > males (Fontecha, 2010; Kissau, 2006; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Mori & Gobel, 2006)
  - Attitudes: females > males (Batters, 1986; Henry and Apelgren, 2008)
  - Gender stereotyping (Fontecha, 2010; Schmenk, 2004)
  - Vocabulary learning strategies: females > males (Gu, 2002; Catalan, 2003)
  - Declarative memory: females > males (Halpern, 2000; Maitland *et al*., 2004; Hartshorne and Ullman, 2006; Ullman *et al*., 2008)
  - Reading: females > males (Chavez, 2001).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How much vocabulary knowledge do Vietnamese high-school students have?
- Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese students in rural and urban areas?
- Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese male and female students?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

- 500 Vietnamese 12th graders (aged 18)

	Number (N=500)	Years of learning English	Difference in years of learning English
Origin	Urban = 230	*M* = 10.82 *SD* = 1.71	Significant (Mann-Whitney U test: *U* = 17733, *p* < .001)
	Rural = 270	*M* = 9.45 *SD* = 0.84	
Sex	Female = 322	*M* = 10.17 *SD* = 1.59	Non-significant (Mann-Whitney U test: *U* = 27779.5, *p* = .56
	Male = 178	*M* = 9.92 *SD* = 1.23	

Table 1: Background information of the participants

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MATERIAL

- Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, Schmitt, Clapham, 2001)
  - 2000 word level
  - 3000 word level
  - Academic vocabulary
  - 5000 word level
  - 10000 word level

DATA ANALYSIS

- Correct answer = 1, Incorrect answer = 0.
- SPSS:
  - RQ1: Reports (Case Summaries)
  - RQ2 & RQ3: Non-parametric statistical tests (data not normally distributed).

RESULTS

RQ1: How much vocabulary knowledge do Vietnamese high-school students have?

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	Lowest	Highest	Mean	SD	% above 26/30*
Part 1	1	30	14	9	14%
Part 2	0	29	10	8	4.4%
Part 3	0	30	9	8	4.6%
Part 4	0	30	6	6	0.8%
Part 5	0	30	4	4	0.4%
Total	1	142	43	30	

Table 2: Vietnamese high school students' scores on the VLT.

* Threshold for mastery proposed by Schmitt et al. (2001)

- Only a very small number of students mastered 2000 word level (14%), 3000 word level (4.4.%), academic vocabulary (4.6%), 5000 word level (0.8%), and 10000 word level (0.4%).
- 2.2% of students (= 11) scored 0 for all vocabulary sections.
- Students' vocabulary knowledge tended to decrease when the word level increased.

RQ2: Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese students in rural and urban areas?

	Rural (N=270) M(SD)	Urban (N=230) M(SD)	Difference (Mann-Whitney)
Part 1	9(7)	19(8)	$U = 12022.5$ $p < .001$
Part 2	7(6)	14(8)	$U = 13454.5$ $p < .001$
Part 3	6(5)	14(9)	$U = 13464.5$ $p < .001$
Part 4	5(4)	8(6)	$U = 22089$ $p < .001$
Part 5	4(3)	3(4)	$U = 29041.5$ $p = .21$
Total	30(22)	59(30)	$U = 13106.5$ $p < .001$

Table 3: Differences in VLT scores between students in urban and rural areas.

RQ2: Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese male and female students?

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	Male (N=178) M(SD)	Female (N=322) M(SD)	Difference (Mann-Whitney)
Part 1	12(9)	15(9)	$U = 22672.5$ $p < .001$
Part 2	9(7)	11(8)	$U = 24588.5$ $p = .008$
Part 3	8(7)	10(9)	$U = 24366.5$ $p = .005$
Part 4	6(5)	6(6)	$U = 28099$ $p = .72$
Part 5	4(3)	3(4)	$U = 24545$ $p = .007$
Total	38(27)	46(31)	$U = 23992$ $p = .003$

Table 4: Differences between male and female students' scores on the VLT.

DISCUSSION

Vocabulary knowledge of Vietnamese high school students

- The majority of students did not meet the lexical demands set by the MOET (MOET, 2018) or in high-school graduation exams (Vu, 2019).
- The results were very worrying, considering their number of years of learning English of students.

Total no. Students	Mean	Mode	Scores <1	Scores <5
814779	3.91	3.00	2189	637335 (78.22%)

Table 6: Record low English scores of Vietnamese high-school students on the national high-school graduation exam in 2018 (VnExpress, 2018)

Urban vs. rural students

- Urban students had significantly better knowledge than rural students (except at 10,000 word level).
- Possible reasons:
  - Exposures to English: urban students had significantly more years of learning English than rural students (Table 1).
  - Parental guidance: urban parents often have tighter control over their children's study and attach more importance to English.
  - Goal setting (Lamb, 2012): urban students may set bigger goals (e.g. studying abroad, landing jobs in foreign-owned companies etc.) than rural students.
  - Motivation (Kormos & Kiddle, 2013; Lamb, 2012): urban students may see more need to use English at school, in their daily life, or in future jobs whereas rural students might not see much chance to use English.
  - Available resources (Hu, 2010; Lamb, 2012): urban students may have better access to the Internet, technology, books, and well-qualified teachers than rural students.

Male vs. female students

- Female students had significantly better vocabulary knowledge than male students, except at 5,000 word levels (Catalan, 2010; Fontecha, 2010; Gu, 2002).
- Possible reasons:
  - gender stereotyping (Schmenk, 2004): in most language classes or schools in Vietnam, the number of female students outweighs that of male students.
  - motivation (Fontecha, 2010; Kissau, 2006; Mori & Gobel, 2006) : female students might be more motivated to learn English than male students.
  - attitudes (Batters, 1986; Henry and Apelgren, 2008): female students might have better attitude toward language learning and hence invest more time and efforts.
  - vocabulary learning strategies (Gu, 2002; Catalan, 2003): Female students might employ more vocabulary learning strategies than male students.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

- Vietnamese high-school students should pay more attention to vocabulary learning.
- Vocabulary should be more adequately addressed in English curricula in Vietnam.
- Vietnamese EFL teachers should dedicate more time and efforts to vocabulary teaching.
- Extensive reading can be one of the solutions (Vu & Peters, 2019).
- More support is required for male students and students from rural areas to boost their vocabulary learning.

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