

## **Newly Placed Versus Continuing Students: Comparing Vocabulary Size**

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Students who enroll in intensive language programs are usually required to take a placement exam to determine at which institutional placement level they will begin their ESL studies. These exams typically assess reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar proficiency. At some institutions, students sometimes move on to the next levels without having to sit another placement test. Even though all the students are exposed to the same grammar lessons and read the same books, the language skills of these students develop at markedly different rates. New students enter the program and are placed at the appropriate level, but their language skills sometimes seem superior to their classmates who have moved up from the previous semester. Why is there this perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students?

One possible factor contributing to this disparity is the tendency for continuing students to be “socially promoted.” That is, they have completed the assignments and have had good attendance, so the natural thing is to move them to the next level so they can learn something new. However, learning a language takes time, and often more information is covered within a course than students are able to fully acquire.

Another factor that may contribute to the varying rates of English acquisition is the students’ L1. It is not atypical in some intensive programs to see, for example, speakers of Spanish in the same classroom as speakers of Mandarin. A large lexical overlap between students’ native language and English is good news for students whose native languages are Spanish, Portuguese, or French, for instance. Students whose mother tongue is Korean or Mandarin, on the other hand, may require a great deal more time to acquire the words that some of their classmates may learn with less effort. After a course or two, despite high motivation to learn and diligent studying, these students, who were placed into the same proficiency level at the beginning, are still studying in the same level together, but their language abilities may vary widely. Understandably, administrators are often reluctant to make “slower” learners repeat a level once they have already covered the material, especially since they pay the same tuition as their classmates who have made greater gains in the language.

The perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students could be widespread among ESL and EFL programs that only use a placement test at the beginning to place new students into the appropriate institutional placement levels, yet research on this topic has been sparse. A search for other studies on the topic yielded only one investigation by Brown, 1980. Brown evaluated the test scores of 319 ESL learners at UCLA and found that the placed students scored 6.71 (out of 50) points higher on a cloze test and 9.82 (out of 100) points higher on the final examination than continuing students. He argued that many students who continue studying for more than one semester would likely have to repeat their classes if they had to take the placement tests again.

A principle underlying this study is that vocabulary provides the “enabling knowledge” required to be successful in other areas of language proficiency (Laufer & Nation, 1999). The acquisition and retention of new vocabulary contributes significantly to overall success in learning a language. The size of a student’s vocabulary has been found to closely correlate with reading comprehension (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Laufer, 1992; Qian, 1999) as well as with writing ability (Astika, 1993; Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Linnarud, 1986). Indeed, words are the primary carriers of meaning (Vermeer, 2001), and there is growing evidence that the more extensive one’s vocabulary, the higher one’s general language proficiency will be.

It is beyond the scope of the current study to investigate workable methodologies in teaching vocabulary. There has recently been an explosion of textbooks from most ESL publishers dealing with vocabulary instruction. Rather, this study seeks to explain the extent of the apparent gap between the newly placed and the continuing student in terms of vocabulary size by answering the following question: Is there any difference between the English vocabulary size scores of newly placed students and continuing students within the same institutional placement level?

## **Method**

The study was conducted at Brigham Young University’s English Language Center (ELC) in Provo, Utah. The ELC is an intensive English language program that draws international students from all over the world, but mostly from South America, Korea, Japan, and China. Incoming students at the ELC take tests that were developed by the ELC and which assess their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar skills. Based on their scores, they are placed into one of five proficiency levels.

The primary method for exposing ELC students to new vocabulary is through extensive reading. Much research indicates that extensive reading is a primary source

of acquiring new vocabulary (breadth) and deepening understanding of existing vocabulary (depth). This is the general opinion of administrators at the ELC as well. ELC students are required to read approximately twenty to thirty pages per day, and most of the reading is narrative in nature.

### *Participants*

Participants included 159 adult non-native speakers of English. Among the participants, 58 were new arrivals to the program, another 58 had been studying at the program for 4 months, and 43 had been studying at the program for 8 months. Only students in levels three through five were considered in this study, since there were very few continuing students in levels one and two. The ELC uses its own placement tests. However, according to the ACTFL scale, the level-three students are considered to be at the low intermediate level, the level-four students are at a mid intermediate level, and the level-five student are at a high intermediate level of English proficiency.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used in this study was the Productive Vocabulary Level Test (PVLТ). The PVLТ is a diagnostic test developed by Laufer and Nation (1995). The PVLТ was chosen because it is a test of vocabulary size that is easy to administer and score.

The PVLТ uses the following format:

I'm glad we had this opp\_\_\_\_\_ to talk.

Words are tested from each of four different frequency groups: 1 to 2,000, 2,000 to 3,000, 3,000 to 5,000, and 5,000 to 10,000. Each of the four frequency groups of the PVLТ is represented by 18 items on the test, making 72 total items. Another section of PVLТ assesses words from the University World List (UWL), but was not used in the present study since the frequency of the words from the UWL overlap with the other frequency groups. Because the words on the test are a sample of a large group of words, scores on the test provide a rough estimate of the students' vocabulary size. For instance, if a student testing at the 1-2,000-word level gets 9 out of the 18 items correct, it can be assumed that he or she knows roughly 500 out of the 1,000 word families from that level. (A word family includes a headword, its inflected forms, and closely derived forms of the word). Furthermore, since higher frequency words are generally acquired first, the rest of the words in each sentence are always more frequent than the word being tested.

There are several pieces of construct-related evidence for the validity of the PVLТ scores. First, the PVLТ appears to have a high level of authenticity. The three most

widely-used vocabulary breadth tests, the Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test (EVST; Meara & Jones, 1990), the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT; Nation, 1990), and the PVLTL, were considered when selecting the instrument for the current study. Of the three, only the PVLTL measures productive vocabulary size, requiring the student to produce the word as they would if they were speaking or writing, and thus seems to more realistically mirror natural language use, whereas the EVST contains nonsense words and the VLT is multiple-choice. More authentic ways of measuring productive vocabulary, such as analyzing student-produced papers and recording their speech, would dramatically lower the practicality of the test. Another point of evidence for the validity of the PVLTL scores is related to the content. The words elicited in the test were found using a corpus, and therefore represent an accurate profile of the words and their frequencies in natural use.

Items are considered correct if students write the correct word and part of speech, even if there are mistakes in spelling or grammar. For example, in the item, “In order to be accepted into the university, he had to impr\_\_\_\_\_ his grades,” the ideal answer is *improve*. The words *improves*, *improved*, or *improving*, even with spelling mistakes, would be considered correct, since vocabulary is what is being tested. The words *improvement*, *improvise*, etc. would be marked as incorrect, since they belong to different parts of speech or to a separate headword. Whether a student has satisfactorily mastered a level or not is determined by the administrator of the test, but Laufer and Nation (1995) recommend that a score of 85% to 90% at the 2,000-word level would indicate that the student can use the most frequent words of English.

### *Procedures*

Before administering the vocabulary test, the researcher met with the writing teachers of the program to distribute copies of the test and to explain the purpose of the study. Each teacher also received instructions for giving the test. The test was administered to all institutional placement levels of the program at the beginning of the winter semester, January 2003, during the students’ writing classes. Since the test is rather long, containing 90 fill-in-the-blank type questions, the test was divided into two parts and administered over two days to minimize fatigue. Students received instructions before taking Section 2 of the test on the second day.

A one-way ANOVA was performed for each of the three ELC proficiency levels. The independent variable was the number of months studied at the ELC and the dependent variable was the raw scores of the vocabulary test. A Tukey-adjusted pairwise *t* test was also performed to compare the vocabulary size of the newly placed and the continuing students.

## Results

The current study investigated the English vocabulary size of 159 non-native English speakers. Of the 159 participants, 58 were new to the program, 58 had been studying at the program for four months, and 43 had been studying at the program for 8 months. Vocabulary size scores of each of the three groups were used to measure a perceived difference between newly placed and continuing students.

It was first necessary to obtain reliability scores for the instrument used in this study in order to know that the data obtained for the research questions could be trusted. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal reliability of the scores obtained on the PVL. The reliability of the PVL, containing 72 questions, was .94. This indicates that the scores obtained from the PVL were highly reliable, justifying investigation into the research hypotheses.

The null hypothesis was used, stating that there would be no difference between the English vocabulary size scores of newly placed and continuing students within the same institutional placement level, as measured by the PVL. As shown in Table 1, however, there is a substantial difference in productive vocabulary size between newly placed students and continuing students. In this cross-sectional analysis, newly placed students generally have larger vocabularies than continuing students. In terms of actual numbers of words, the average newly placed student knows approximately 377 word families more than the student placed 4 months earlier, and 950 word families more than the students placed 8 months earlier.

**Table 1**

**Mean Productive Vocabulary Size Scores of  
Newly Placed and Continuing Students by Level**

Source	Level 3			Level 4			Level 5		
	0	4	8	0	4	8	0	4	8
ELC mo.	0	4	8	0	4	8	0	4	8
Means	15.26	11.75	11.00	23.65	22.29	12.50	36.80	30.35	23.71
<i>n</i>	31	20	7	26	24	8	10	26	7

*Note.* ELC mo. indicates how many months participants had been studying at the ELC at the time of the vocabulary tests. Scores may be interpreted as numbers of words by moving the decimal two places to the right.

*N* = 159

One may use these numbers to roughly estimate the average vocabulary growth per semester. Although this is a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal analysis, one may subtract the vocabulary size from, for example, the level 4 students at 0 months (the newly placed students), from the level 5 students at 4 months (students returning after one semester), and so on across the table, and find that the students are learning an average of approximately 398 word families per semester (though increases vary widely).

**Table 2**  
**Cross-Sectional Analysis of**  
**Average Vocabulary Growth Per Semester**

Subtraction of total vocabulary size*		Addition and average of the sums	
Level	ELC mo.		
5	8	2,371	
4	4	<u>-2,229</u>	
		= 142	→ 142
5	4	3,035	
4	0	<u>-2,365</u>	
		= 670	→ 670
4	8	1,250	
3	4	<u>-1,175</u>	
		= 75	→ 75
4	4	2,229	
3	0	<u>-1,526</u>	
		= 703	→ +703
			= 1,590 → 1,590
			<u>        </u> /4
			= 397.5

\*As found in Table 1

A one-way ANOVA was performed to see if there is a statistical difference between the vocabulary size of 0-month, 4-month, and 8-month students. The results in Table 3 show that the three groups of students are statistically different from each other at the .05 level. The null-hypothesis must therefore be rejected, and an alternate hypothesis is accepted that there is a statistically significant difference between the vocabulary size scores of newly placed and continuing students within the same institutional placement level, as measured by the PVLТ.

**Table 3**  
**Analysis of Variance for Months Enrolled**

Source	df	<i>f</i> *	<i>P</i>
Months at ELC	2	3.65	0.0281

\*Adjusted F test.

$p = <.05$ .

A post-hoc Tukey-adjusted *t* test was performed on the overall scores to find which groups of students were significantly different from the others at the  $p = .05$  level (Table 4). Results showed that the vocabulary size of 0- and 4-month students is significantly higher than the vocabulary size of the 8-month students at the  $p = .05$  level. However, there was no statistical difference between the 0- and 4-month students.

**Table 4**  
**Test of Differences Between Newly Placed  
and Continuing Students**

Months of ELC	0	4	8
0	---	9.7616	0.0174
4		---	0.0094
8			

\*Significant at the  $p = .05$  level

## Conclusion

In the current study, vocabulary assessment was applied in a novel way to measure the perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students.

This study found that newly placed students at any given level indeed have larger vocabularies than continuing students at the same levels. On average, newly placed students know about 377 word families more than students placed 4 months ago, and 950 more word families than students placed 8 months ago. These findings are similar to those of Brown (1980). Given that vocabulary provides the enabling knowledge to perform other language skills, this finding may go far to explain the English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students that teachers may have intuitively observed.

## Implications

Based on the findings here, continuing students are not learning enough vocabulary during the course to match the vocabulary size of their newly placed classmates. It is recommended, therefore, that teachers and administrators at intensive English programs explore ways of teaching vocabulary in a more systematic and focused way than they perhaps are teaching currently. In addition, if extensive reading is the primary method of increasing students' vocabulary size, it is recommended that the readings be supplemented by more explicit vocabulary instruction. Furthermore, if narrative texts make up the bulk of the reading, more expository texts may be required in the reading classes since they contain more academic and low frequency words. Reading more expository texts would also seem more appropriate preparation for many students whose primary objective is to pass the IELTS, TOEIC, or TOEFL and enter an English-medium university or to be promoted in their business.

Secondly, this study found that a one-time placement exam upon entering a language program sooner or later results in classes filled with students with widely varying vocabulary sizes, which most likely influences their general proficiency. It would be appropriate, therefore, to require students to pass an end-of-term exam to correctly place continuing students. The disadvantage of doing this is that students may find it unfair that they all pay the same tuition, yet some may advance in the program while others are held back. A possible solution to this dilemma is to divide the levels into subgroups, for example, 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, or to label them in some other way, so that smaller levels of achievement can be recognized. Students whose end-of-term exam scores do not merit a full level advancement can feel like they are progressing (and in fact they are) although perhaps more slowly than others, while reviewing and mastering the same materials with a different textbook.



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