Comparing Useful Words in Second Language Adult Learners’ Writings with BNC Wordlist: A Prototype Approach

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ABSTRACT

This research focusses on the preliminary investigation of vocabulary knowledge on teachers undergoing the Teacher Graduate Programme (PPG) in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). By conducting this research it is possible to determine whether these teachers are familiar with the same set of words listed in BNC therefore have sufficient vocabulary knowledge which they most probably impart to their students. Forty-four adult students were asked to write an English essay based on the topic given by the teacher. Soft copies of their essays were compiled and converted to .txt files which were then transferred and analyzed using the Simple Concordance Program 4.0.9 List of words in BNC (refer rank frequency order cited in ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/bncfreq/flists.html, Oct. 23, 2014)and list of words based on frequency gathered from the essays of the PPG students were then compared. It is found that the adult students are competent in using words that are common in BNC wordlist.

Keywords: word list, writing skill, adult students, concordance

Introduction

Academic Wordlist, University Wordlist and British National Corpus are some of the available wordlists aim to compile words for different purposes and for different target groups. These compiled words help teachers and second language learners ascertain what

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words are important to be learned. Why is it important to select what words to learn? According to Laufer (2014, 38) “Vocabulary selection is of vital importance since L2 learners do not have the time and the opportunity to learn words in the same way native speakers do, via language input”. As such, highlighting words that are useful might be helpful in teaching a language to second language learners. As recommended by Kaur (2013) word knowledge is vital because it helps to ensure sufficient literacy of the target language.

In Malaysia, English language went through various positioning (Thirunsaku & Melor, 2014). From a language for the elite during the British era to the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in technical subjects (Thirunsaku & Melor, 2012) and the recent restrengthening of English policy in 2012. The latest planning to bring in 300 US Fulbright scholars in Malaysia to help improve the English proficiency in urban and rural areas in 2015 showed how urgent it is to make sure that English language proficiency in schools are raised. Similarly, Teacher Graduate Program (PPG) was introduced in order to upgrade the qualifications of Malaysian school teachers in attaining at least a degree. All these efforts done by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia are to ensure that Malaysians will become a knowledge-based society (Thirunsaku & Melor, 2014).

With all these steps taken it is a question on whether the Malaysian government is approaching the issue of raising English language proficiency among language learners and teachers realistically. What should Malaysian learners learn and what should our teachers teach? Investigating vocabulary knowledge among second language learners is a small step to determine whether policies and measures taken are after all worth the pain.

**Purpose of the Study**

Specifically, the aim of this study is to conduct a preliminary investigation of vocabulary knowledge on teachers undergoing the Teacher Graduate Programme (PPG) in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). By conducting this research it is possible to determine whether these teachers are familiar with the same set of words listed in BNC therefore have sufficient vocabulary knowledge which they most probably impart to their students.

**Research questions**

The following research questions will be investigated:

1) What words do these PPG teachers use in their writings?

2) Do these PPG teachers demonstrate significant frequency of preferred words compared to British National Corpus wordlist?

**Significance of the study**

This study acknowledges the level of vocabulary knowledge these PPG teachers have. With the current measures taken by the Ministry of Education (see Thirusanku & Melor, 2014) it might be discriminatory to imply that teachers are not proficient enough because the state of English language that Malaysia holds can vary according to the target group background, the location of the language being used and purpose of using the English language to name a few. Although it is not the focus of this study to measure the level of proficiency of these PPG second language learners, it is significant to reveal the ability of these teachers in using similar frequently used words as compared to BNC wordlist.
Literature review

Vocabulary knowledge deals with many spectrums. It can be simply familiarity towards such words, ability to use them and being able to explain how they can be used (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). Wordlists are basically words counted based on frequency. The words are ranked by frequency of occurrence grouped either by alphabetical order, theme, purposes, subject matter etc. which in a way assists vocabulary learning. A word list by frequency "provides a rational basis for making sure that learners get the best return for their vocabulary learning effort", (Nation, 1997). Nation (1997) added that it is mainly intended for course writers, not directly for learners.

The British National Corpus (BNC) is a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written. The latest edition is the BNC XML Edition, released in 2007. The written part of the BNC (90%) includes, for example, extracts from regional and national newspapers, specialist periodicals and journals for all ages and interests, academic books and popular fiction, published and unpublished letters and memoranda, school and university essays, among many other kinds of text. The spoken part (10%) consists of orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations (recorded by volunteers selected from different age, region and social classes in a demographically balanced way) and spoken language collected in different contexts, ranging from formal business or government meetings to radio shows. (http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/, retrieved Oct 24, 2014)

Methodology

Prototype Theory by Eleanor Rosch underlies the methodology of this research. This theory asserts that every category is associated to a set of networking criteria and that for each there is a ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ boundaries (Tsohatzidis, 1992). In this research it is hypothesize that the participants share a common preferred words which they might probably use if they were to be given the same stimulus which, in this case, the same topic to write. Therefore, in this research the ‘core’ or preferred word of the group will be identified based on how frequent words are being used in their writings. Since prototype theory focuses on an ideal exemplar for instance chair is considered as a better chair than stool (http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Prototype-Theory, Oct. 25), the concept of sharing a mutual preference towards a category (in this research words) will be used to discuss the collected data.

Forty-four PPG students majoring in TESL participated in this research. As part of their assessments students were asked to write an essay based on the topic “A Day at Work” which generally looked at how they used some tenses in their writings. In this research however, identifying what words the PPG group commonly used was the aim. Students were asked to send their works via email to the instructor. Soft copies of their essays were compiled and converted to .txt files which were then transferred and analyzed using the Simple Concordance Program 4.0.9 List of words in BNC (refer rank frequency order cited in ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/bncfreq/flists.html, Oct. 23, 2014)and list of words based on frequency gathered from the essays of the PPG students were then compared.
Discussion

The first objective of this research is to investigate what words the PPG teachers use in their writings. The following screen capture displays part of the output showing words that were used in the collected essays and their frequency of occurrences. It should be clarified here that since this is a small-scale study it is not possible to use all words listed in BNC wordlist. As such only ten most frequent words in BNC wordlist are identified to be compared to ten most frequent words used by the PPG group.

Based on the data it was found that ‘the’ is the most preferred word used by the subjects with 2200 occurrences and ‘for’ received 409 occurrences. The following table shows the list of ten most preferred words and the number of occurrences of each word being used by the PPG learners in their essays.

As mentioned before the main objective of the task given to the L2 learners was to test them on their grammar. It is therefore clearly seen that such activity stimulate the use of many grammatical components such as articles, pronouns, prepositions, past tenses etc.
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In order to look at how the word ‘the’ and ‘to’ are being used in their writings the following screen captures give insights of such occurrences. However, it is not the intention of this paper to analyze how these frequently used words are being used in L2 writings.
The second objective of this study is to investigate whether the PPG teachers demonstrate significant frequency of preferred words compared to British National Corpus wordlist? The following is a comparison in terms of ranking between twenty most frequently used words by the PPG learners and the first twenty words listed in BNC wordlist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>BNC wordlist</th>
<th>PPG frequent words</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The</td>
<td>The</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>of</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>6 &amp; 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>in</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>to (inf)</td>
<td>my</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>Of</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>to (prep)</td>
<td>that</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>it</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>for</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>with</td>
<td>school</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>as</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Since the topic of the essay given was “A Day at Work” some of the words used might not be the first twenty words listed in BNC wordlist. Nonetheless, thirteen out of twenty (65%) of the frequently used words that the PPG learners used are listed in the BNC wordlist. The other seven words (35%) are not listed as the first twenty words in BNC (note: these words are listed in the BNC wordlist but the rank will not be highlighted).

From these two research questions it is found that the PPG teachers revealed that they share similar set of useful words as a group which when compared to BNC wordlist showed that they use words that are mostly ranked the highest. Because the nature of the essay writing is not to investigate category, it was not clear whether the participants actually shared a preference towards an ideal exemplar as proposed in Prototype theory. However, the fact that the set of words used by these teachers fall among words that BNC wordlist deemed important shows that these teachers are using words that are important to be known and used.

Inevitably, these teachers show the competence in using words that are common in BNC wordlist. These words were gathered from samples of written and spoken language of various sources representing British English (www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk, Oct. 24, 2014). Thus, the teachers can be concluded as to be in the right platform as far as the Ministry of Education is concerned.

**Future research**

There are some limitations to the study which will be good to be carried out later in future research. Firstly, the samples of written works merely represent a one event episode. It will be beneficial to look at several samples of writings from the same group of participants at different occasions. Next, the topic of the essay restricts the use of words that can demonstrate preference towards an ideal exemplar. An essay that uses many adjectives and verbs might be better than an essay that tested on grammar tenses or items. In addition, it is also good to look at how such grammatical items being used by each individual. The word ‘to’ for example can sometimes functions as infinitive or preposition. This study did not separate the function because the main aim was to see what words the participants used more frequent than the other.

**Conclusion**

As a conclusion, this study is a small step of looking at what teachers have been using which might not be of much significant to be overgeneralized. However, it is significant to help demonstrate the notion that Malaysian teachers are in fact using words that are
common to native speakers. Although the words are not content words, which would be more informative, they are significant words to be known and used. These teachers showed that they prefer using them, competent (though not discussed in this paper) to use them and might be of high probability to be proficient enough to teach these words. It comes back to the question whether it is necessary for Malaysian government to rely on external sources to nurture our future generations. As Thirunsaku & Melor (2014) suggested in their research “an appropriate approach and teaching materials have to be selected” and that “… the government should guide our teachers to perform better based on endonormative model instead of spending money on foreign teachers and an appropriate learning theory relevant to our students…” (p.259). Malaysia is a multi-linguistic and multi-cultural country with its own character and multi-faceted environment. Bringing in expertise who might have little knowledge on these aspects could be of little help. Using local variety might be a better option after all.

References


