The relationship between General Proficiency in English Language and Inferring Vocabulary: The case of Tourism and Hotel management Students

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Abstract

Teaching English for specific purposes has always been challenging as it involves a skill-based teaching methodology to develop learning and use specific grammar and lexicon to understand texts in specialized texts. As for other professions, teaching EFL learners about tourism and hotel management also requires the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and general communication skills in varied situations and contexts. To this end, this paper focuses on the comparison and assessment of vocabulary inferring skills of ESP learners majoring in Tourism and Hotel Management. To conduct the present study, 10 contextualized vocabulary items were selected, then the VKS test (Vocabulary Knowledge Scale; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996) was administered to 56 Iranian students of Tourism and Hotel management studying at Islamic Azad University, South Tehran branch. It was hypothesized that learners who show better general English language knowledge perform more skillfully in inferring the meaning of specialized words in Tourism and hotel management texts than less competent ones. Descriptive as well as inferential statistics proved the hypothesis. The results of the present research have implications for ESP learners and teachers as well as materials developers of Tourism and Hotel management textbooks.

Keywords: English for tourism and hotel management; General English proficiency; Training in hospitality; Vocabulary inference.

1. Introduction

There is a very fast worldwide development in the industry of tourism in the last few decades. There is no question that knowing English language as an international means of communication is of outmost importance in this regard (Kacetl, 2018). ESP students majoring in Tourism and hospitality or other related fields need to communicate effectively with tourism organizations; therefore, having communicative linguistic skills is essential and facilitative in effective cooperation with the industry and ultimate success in tourism. According to Nawar Al-Saadi (2015) Vocabulary is one of the most essential aspects to have good English skill. The students in all specialized majors should have sufficient vocabularies to support their receptive and productive English skills that will be beneficial for their career development in the future. However, when we consider areas such as tourism and hospitality, we observe that because of the nature of this area, vocabulary knowledge does not have high specialized characters mostly because of the fact that tourism is world service industry; therefore, the language (English in this case) which is used for global communication should be of an international nature with global characteristics, comprehensible to all. English for Tourism, therefore, requires global features which make it comprehensible, clear, simple and common (Pignot-Shahov, 2012). Moreover, because of the global nature of the industry of tourism, and the need for cross-cultural communication, general knowledge of English language to be able to interact with other English speakers is of outmost importance. By the same token, because of the dynamic nature of this area, new words and expressions might daily be added; therefore, having the ability to infer the meaning of the new words from spoken and written context is required. Whether there is any relationship between vocabulary

inferring skills and general English proficiency is the topic we are going to focus on here.

2. Literature Review

Tourism is an international industry which is growing day by day and therefore, attempt should be made to enhance the students' knowledge in this area with regard to specialized vocabulary so that they can connect to this global industry more efficiently. Students of Tourism and Hotel management need to communicate with clients worldwide, therefore they require both international and intercultural communication skills (Eagles, 2007). To this end, they need to develop specific communication skills to meet the global demand of the market (Kluge, 1984).

It is a high requirement for the students of Tourism to have a rather strong command of English language communicative skills. Because of the nature of this industry, interaction skills in English and communicative competence are way more important than specialized vocabulary knowledge. Most recent ESP studies also suggest that focus should be shifted from teaching isolated vocabulary items to Tourism majored students to more communication and interaction skills in English.

Crystal (2003) believes that language proficiency level of learners of English for Tourism and Hospitality is exhibited through strong communication skills, intercultural communication competence, marketing communication and other aspects of competences within these service industries, rather than in knowledge of specialized vocabulary. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the need in teaching General English to Tourism and Hotel management students at first grade so that they can develop communicative skills for their future career in this industry. This is made possible by

developing a communicative approach which emphasizes using tasks and communicative activities above all. The students who are studying Tourism and Hotel management are required to learn specialized vocabulary from spoken as well as written texts and inferring skill is of outmost importance in this regard. What is essential is development of both receptive and productive vocabularies because language production through writing and speaking tasks are as important as reading and listening for the students. Kintsch (1988) argues that readers regularly use their world knowledge to make inferences to fill in details to construct a complete situation model of the text. Kendeou (2015) also shows that larger and denser networks of general knowledge enable activation and integration of this knowledge when forming inferences. This paper also encourages practitioners to pay attention on the language issue. Collaboration among educational providers and tourism organizations is required if they want to compete in the global market.

Based on the observation, the students generally feel that vocabulary is a very challenging part because they are mostly very weak in that area. Some other students also consider that vocabulary is demanding because of the reason that they do not know how to learn the vocabulary efficiently or how to choose appropriate words that go with other words. Lack of knowledge in vocabularies is definitely a hindrance because all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing require both active and passive vocabulary (Fauzi & Suradi, 2018). Unfortunately, there has been little focus on learning productive vocabulary, instead the focus has been on learning individual vocabulary items without required competency to use them in proper contexts; This eventually leads to lack of vocabulary retention skills in EFL learners. (Zhong, 2011). According to Richards (2006),

communicative approach to language teaching provides the learners with this knowledge. It involves using language for different functions and purposes, contextualizing the language based on different environments, observing the formality and informality, understanding different text genres, knowing how to sustain communication despite limitations in linguistic knowledge, and knowing how to use communication strategies. There are some available tests that measure the depth and breadth of productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge. One of the most widely used one which is commonly used by researchers is VKS (Vocabulary knowledge scale). The test targets learners' both receptive and productive competence in vocabulary. It is based on a self-reporting of vocabulary knowledge combined with a fabricated response; these two in coordination show the level of knowledge on each individual word. (Dougherty & Bravo, 2010). Through receptive skill, the learners are able to recognize the meaning of a word item in a text, in other words, it is a passive skill, while through a productive skill the learners are able to apply the learnt vocabulary knowledge in the production of spoken and written texts.

Inferencing is also a process that occurs when readers encounter words that they do not know in the text. While the readers' goal is to comprehend and understand the text in its entirety, the readers also give attention to a particular word and then infer the meaning of the word in order to comprehend the text. Because L2 readers do not have enough vocabulary knowledge, L2 readers have more chances to practice inferring the meanings of words they do not know. Haastrup (1991) defines vocabulary inferencing as the process that makes informed guesses as to the meaning of a word in the light of all available linguistic cues in combination with the learner's general knowledge of the world, her awareness of the context and her

relevant linguistic knowledge. To identify an appropriate meaning of a word, the readers need to find useful cues from the surrounding context clues, understand the flow of the text, and draw on previous knowledge. This research intends to show that Tourism and Hotel management students who have a higher general English proficiency have advantage in inferring the meaning of Tourism vocabulary over less proficient students. In other words, general English knowledge helps learners understand specialized texts in Tourism easier and as a result their communicative competence will be developed. The results of the present study highlight the need to enhance general language skills in learners majoring in Tourism and Hotel management before introducing them to professional vocabulary and communication in Tourism.

3. **Research Method**

3.1. Participants

The participants in this research are 56 students who study Tourism and Hotel management in Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch. The participants were selected according to the principle of convenient sampling since they were recruited from intact classes. The convenience sampling method is a non-probability sampling where the sample is chosen solely based on the convenience. Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to locate them into two groups of elementary and advanced students. 31 students were placed in advanced group while 25 of them belong to elementary level. Students in the advanced group showed higher general English knowledge than the other group.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The first instrument used in the present study is Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to homogenize and place the learners in different proficiency groups. The Oxford Placement Test is designed to provide a quick, accurate measurement of a test taker's English language ability. The test consists of two sections: Language Use and Listening. Within the Use of English Section, in addition to standard grammar, lexis and listening questions, the test design focuses on meaning beyond the sentence, including implied meaning; the language sampled in the test is an accurate predictor of general language ability.

3.2.2. Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS)

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) is a **5-point self-report scale** developed by Wesche & Paribakht (1996) that allows students to indicate how well they know items of vocabulary. It measures both receptive and productive knowledge in order to compare the effectiveness of different vocabulary instructional techniques. The rating scale is: 5=Words you know and can use in a sentence correctly. 4=Words you know, and the meanings is clear for you. 3=Words you think you have seen or heard before maybe from TV, conversations, magazines or in another subject and you think you know the meaning. 2=Words you have seen but don't know the meaning. 1= words you have never heard or seen before. This scale has been developed to test both receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary by the EFL learners.

3.3. Procedure

In order to answer the research question, the learners were first placed into two groups based on their proficiency level. This was achieved after administration of the Oxford Placement Test. Then ten target specialized

words in Tourism and Hotel management which had been selected from scientific papers and websites in Tourism, were presented to the learners in both groups. The words include: *room rate, amenity, itinerary, shuttle, sightseeing, monument, cuisine, concierge, reception, travel guide*

For the purpose of this research, target words were contextualized, i.e. a sample sentence was added after presenting each word to the learners so that they evaluate their ability to infer the meaning of that word from the provided context. We aim at showing whether learners who have higher proficiency in English are better at inferring the meaning of the specialized words from the context. As all the participants are on their first year of studies, the researcher assumes that they have little professional and specialized knowledge of the target words and their knowledge is basically limited to general English knowledge. Moreover, it was found (through discussion with the students) that these target words had not been presented to the learners in their other courses.

The following vocabulary knowledge scale was used to determine and receptive as well as productive vocabulary knowledge of the learners.

Vocabulary Knowledge Scale to aid Vocabulary development

1) I don't remember having seen this word before

2) I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means

3) I have seen this word before and I think it means _____ (synonym, explanation or translation)

4) I know this word. It means _____ (synonym, explanation or translation)

5) I can use this word in a sentence. e.g.: _____

For items 3 and 4 above, the students are required to provide related explanation and for item 5 they need to make a sentence using the target

word; this is applied to check the productive vocabulary knowledge in learners.

4. Results

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the learners based on their ages. Their age range start from 19 with 12 students to 37 who is the oldest. 84% of the learners are younger than 23 years old. The average age of the learners is 21.65 and the standard deviation is 1.93.
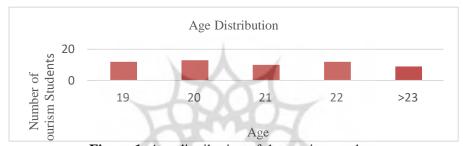

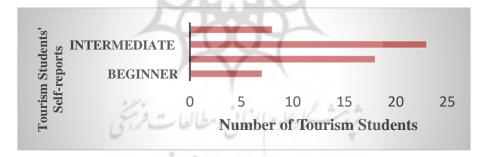**Figure 1.** Age distribution of the tourism students

Figure 2. Learners' Self-report of their English Language Knowledge

Figure 2 reveals Tourism students' self-reporting their English proficiency level. As can be seen, most of the learners (73.21%) consider their knowledge to be at either pre-intermediate or intermediate level. 12.5% of the Learners think that their knowledge is at a beginner level and 14.28% of them consider themselves as advanced learners. If we allocate number one to

four to beginner to advanced learners respectively, the mean score would be 2.85, and the standard deviation is 0.67.
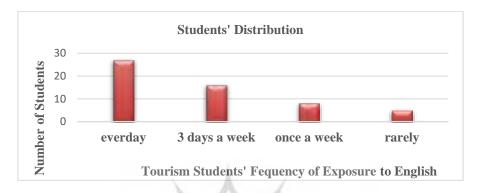

Figure 3. Tourism students' Frequency of Exposure to English Language

Figure 3 shows the frequency of exposure to English language by the learners. Although this is not a main variable in the present study but it widens our understanding on how much exposure the Tourism students normally have to General English during a week and how much they could benefit from this amount of exposure. As can be seen, a large number of students involve themselves with English everyday (48.21%) which is a high exposure level. The reason they provide is surfing in internet and being involved with social media which is basically in English. As few as 5 students (8.92%) reported that they are rarely exposed to English language. The amount of exposure can be considered as an intervening variable. However, the result is not included in the main analysis.

Table 1 below shows the distribution of answers in the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test. The mean of the chosen responses is 2.46 and the standard deviation is 1.24. Distribution of answers have been depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of answers in the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

VKS options	Number of Reponses
1	*106*
2	180
3	141
4	100
5	26

As it is shown in table 1, most of the learners selected number 2 (189 responses). It shows that for most of the cases, they have encountered the word but they don't remember the meaning. In 267 cases, they selected items 3, or 4, or 5. 120 explanations were incorrect (45%) while 147 explanations were correct (55%). For item number 5, 26 answers were provided out of which 34% was correct.

As another analysis for the data, English language proficiency level difference in learners were considered. The mean value for the chosen responses by beginner learners was 1.93 while for the advanced learners it was 2. 78. The significance level of difference was below 0.05 (0.006), therefore, it is clear that the performance of the advanced students was better than the beginners. As for another analysis of the present study, Spearman's correlation coefficient was done to see the significance of correlation between the learners' self-reporting of the knowledge and their selected responses. As the value is less than 0.05 (r = 0.396), there is a positive and significant correlation observed here. The researcher also tested whether the learners who self-reported their knowledge as being high performed better in items 3, 4 and 5. Spearman correlation coefficient is shown as r=0.277 and as p<0.05, it can be concluded that the correlation value is positive and significant, therefore the students who are reportedly more advanced, had better productive knowledge of the target words in this study. Another

Spearman's correlation coefficient test was conducted to measure the amount. of4 correlation between the learners' self-evaluation of their vocabulary knowledge through VKS and the frequency of exposure to English language. There is a positive correlation observed here again; $p = 0.002$ and $r = 0.313$, i.e., the more exposure the students have to English, the higher they consider their knowledge to be.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present research revealed that general knowledge and proficiency in English language results in higher word inference ability and ultimate development of vocabulary skills among Tourism students. The results of the present study showed that high and low proficiency Tourism and hotel management students performed differently in inferring the meaning of the new words. Based on the results advanced learners had obviously better performance in their inferring ability. The nature of the target words is worth consideration. Generally speaking, some words in Tourism are rarely seen in general English texts, therefore, there is little exposure to these words in daily language use (e.g., *concierge*) while some other words are more commonly used in daily conversation. (e.g., *sightseeing*). The other issue which is worth consideration is the low number of correct responses to item 5 of the VKS. It shows that learners are not skillful enough in using the vocabulary they have already learned in oral and written production of language. This shortcoming is probably related to current teaching methodology which is aiming at enhancing vocabulary recognition skills in students and not giving them chances to use their knowledge in constructing well-formed sentences in written and spoken forms (Abdel Ghany & Abdel Latif, 2012).

The findings of the present study showed that having general proficiency in English language helps the learners in having better comprehensibility of the texts and inferring the meanings of the specialized vocabulary from the context. One implication is that language teaching methodology should shift its focus from teaching vocabulary as isolated items to contextualize it and take syntax and grammar of the sentences into consideration when teaching the words. In this way learners will be acquainted with word use in the context and as a result their vocabulary inference ability would be enhanced. The effect of general knowledge has also been investigated on other language skills. In recent research by Tarlani, Tazik, and Azizi (2022), they indicated that English general knowledge had marked effects on the performances of the participants across three reading texts. It has also been confirmed that when a certain level of L2 proficiency has been reached, L2 reading is influenced positively by general proficiency (Cai & Kunnan, 2019). Future investigation should address the effect of enhancing general English knowledge on different skills such as summarizing, note-taking, paraphrasing, etc. The present study was conducted in an ESP setting with Tourism and hotel management students, however, future investigations might address other disciplines.

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