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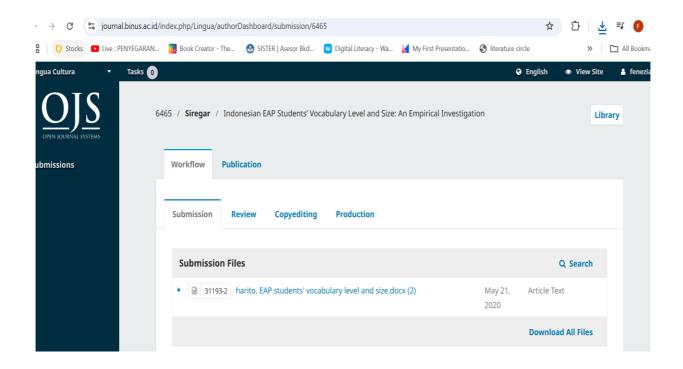
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Penulis: Fenty Lidya Siregar

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# INDONESIAN EAP STUDENTS' VOCABULARY LEVEL AND SIZE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Abstract Vocabulary knowledge is important for all language learners including EAP learners. However, previous research that investigated EAPstudents' vocabulary knowledge is limited. To fill the gap, the study examined 128 Indonesian EAP students from two private universities in Indonesia. To gather its data, the study employed the Vocabulary Level Test of Webb et al. (2017) and the Vocabulary Size Test of Nation & Beglar (2007). The findings of the study found that the participants have not yet mastered the high frequency words as well as the mid-frequency words from 4000-5000 word-families. The finding also revealed that the mean scores and the range of the mean scores of the students' vocabulary size is big. The range was between 6000 and 10000. However, the students also informed that they made many guesses when completing the test. Collectively, the findings of the study imply that the previous learning of the participants has not yet facilitated them to learn important vocabulary from 1000 to 5000 wordfamilies. They might have focused on learning words from low-frequency word lists. As a result, although they have a big vocabulary size, they might face problems when they try to understand some texts. The findings of the study are expected to increase English teachers' awareness in general, and EAP teachers' awareness specifically of the importance of facilitating their students to learn high frequency words.

Keywords: vocabulary size, level, English, EAP

#### **INTRODUCTION**

EAP programmes in Indonesia are context dependent. For example, the learning aim of English for Economics might be students' mastery of English grammar; however, the goal of the English for Chemistry programme might be students' high TOEFL score (Kusni, 2013). In the study of Poedjiastutie and Oliver (2017) some employers and teachers believe that reading is as an important skill to develop because there is a need for students to be able to read English journals and books to support them in their studies and when they write their thesis at the end of their studies. Although the objectives of these EAP programmes and the beliefs of the stakeholders are different, increasing students' vocabulary knowledge seems to be the answer to make sure the different goals to be attained. As Milton (2013) claims that vocabulary knowledge plays a role as a significant predictor of foreign language proficiency. Also, previous studies have found vocabulary knowledge and comprehension tests correlate significantly (e.g. Li & Kirby, 2015; Qian, 2002). The study of Alavi and Akbarian (2012) found that knowing the students' vocabulary level will allow teachers to predict the students' TOEFL performance when dealing with questions related to vocabulary, main ideas, and details of the text.

Although it is useful to know the vocabulary knowledge of our students so that we can predict their language ability, limited research on EAP students' vocabulary size and vocabulary level that focuses on high-frequency words is noticeable. Regarding the vocabulary size of EAP learners, one study is present. Khodabakhshi et al. (2014) investigated the vocabulary size of Iranian EAP students from three faculties (Engineering, Sciences, and Humanities) at the University of Kashan. The study found that the students of Engineering Faculty obtain the mean score which was 4593.75 or the highest mean score. The mean scores of the students from the Sciences Faculty and the humanities Faculty respectively were 3188 and 3432. In addition to that, the findings of the previous studies indicate that the highfrequency word knowledge of EAP students is inadequate. For example, Akbarian (2010) investigated 112 Iranian EAP learner by their receptive measuring vocabulary knowledge. He found that only 24 % of the participants had acquired the first 2000 wordfamilies. In other words, more than threequarter of the students failed to master the words. In a similar vein, the study of Cheng and Matthews, (2018) that examined 167 Chinese EAP students found that they only knew about 77% of the most frequent 2000 word-families. Recently, Dang (2020) investigated the rates of high-frequency words that were present in academic spoken and written English as well as exploring 66 Vietnamese EAP students' vocabulary knowledge of the words. The findings show that despite the fact that a significant role of high-frequency words is present in academic spoken English, most participants in the study have not yet mastered the words.

In the Indonesian context, studies on EAP students' vocabulary knowledge seem to be absent. There are only a number of previous research projects that examined the vocabulary knowledge of Indonesian EFL learners who major in English. Also, most of them investigate students' high frequency knowledge, or their vocabulary size and do not examine both of them in a single study. The studies that examined EFL students' knowledge of high-frequency words revealed that most of the participants have not mastered highfrequency words. For example, the study of Kurniawan (2017) that examined 290 EFL undergraduates at UIN Raden Intan revealed that 11 students of the participants have not yet mastered 1000 word-level. Sudarman's and Chinokul's (2018) study, which examined EFL students at Kutai Kartanegara University also found that the participants have not yet mastered both 2000 and 3000 word-levels. Thus, the findings of these studies are similar to the findings of other studies with EAP students outside Indonesia.

Regarding previous studies that examined Indonesian EFL students' vocabulary size, the findings of these studies showed that averagely the students' mean scores are between 5000 and 8700. For example, the average vocabulary size of the EFL students in the study of Umam

(2016) was 5873 word-families. The highest and the lowest scores of the participants in the study respectively are 8800 and 2800 wordfamilies. Another study of Kusumarasdyati and Ramadhani (2018) which examined 216 EFL students from the first to the fourth years found that the mean scores of vocabulary size of the first to the fourth-year participants respectively were 5425, 5641.8, 5987.8, and 6141.3 wordfamilies. A study of Romadloni (2019) that researched the vocabulary size of 242 EFL students found that the average vocabulary size for 2015-2018 batch respectively were 6519.78, 7028.13, 7040.91 and 8202.33 word-families. In other words, the previous studies found that averagely the students have a quite high vocabulary size. Although having a big vocabulary size is important, Clark and Ishida (2005) argue that it is important to pay attention to high-frequency words and we cannot learn "any random 5000 words" (p. 227). Also, Nation and Newton (1997) suggest that EAP learners should master high frequency words first before focusing on academic vocabulary.

A number of previous studies have found that certain vocabulary size has to be reached to make sure comprehension take place. For instance, Sutarsyah et al. (1994) found that undergraduate students need to have a knowledge about 4000 to 5000 English words to understand an undergraduate economics textbook. Specifically Nation's (2006) argues that learners should know respectively 9000 word-families to be able to read English novels, 8000 word-families to comprehend English newspapers, 6000 word-families to understand English movies for children, and 7000 wordfamilies to understand spoken English. Also, 98% threshold is needed for learners to comprehend various types of texts (Nation. 2006). Milton (2010) agrees with the argument of Nation (2006) that level of adequate comprehension will need 98 % text coverage and he explains that it is comparable to the CEFR C2 level. Knowing only 89% of the words in a text might lead to learners' failure in guessing the meaning of new words in a text (Nation, 1990; Read, 2000). In other words, having 98% text coverage should be reached to make sure comprehension. Nurmukhamedov (2017) explains that when a leaner masters 95% of a text, it means that she might not know 1

word out of 20 in the text; however, if she masters 98% of a text, she will only not know 1 word out of 50. Thus, the coverage figures can provide teachers and learners "a useful indication of whether or not a text may be understood" (Webb & Nation, 2013, p.1). In addition to that Stæhr (2008) investigation asserts that the first 2000 word-families are a for L2 of departure learners' comprehension performance. The importance of the threshold seems to be in line with a recent study by Dang et al. (2017) found that 70% of the most frequent words in academic spoken English are from high-frequency words. The finding of the study of Nurmukhamedov's (2017) also corroborates the study of Dang et al. (2017). Nurmukhamedov (2017) explains before teachers use TED presentations, they need to ensure that their students have mastered the first 2000 wordfamilies because these words together with plus "proper nouns and marginal words, account for 92.17% coverage of the TED Corpus" (p.781) that he examined.

Taken together, the findings of the previous studies that have been reviewed suggest that to be able to comprehend texts well, not only do EAP students need to have a high vocabulary size, but they must have a good knowledge of high-frequency words. Thus, having a big vocabulary size, but not yet mastering high frequency words will be ineffective. Also, as mentioned earlier, no studies have attempted to measure Indonesian EAP students' vocabulary level and size in the same study. Therefore, the present research project aimed to fill this gap. The study investigated the students' vocabulary level as well as their vocabulary size. While the former was to know which frequency bands are required the most attention in the students' learning later on, the latter was to identify learners' lexical readiness. Specifically, the study examined vocabulary level and size of Indonesian learners who enrolled in EAP programmes at two private universities in Indonesia. The research questions are as follows:

- 1. To what extent do Indonesian EAP students master high and mid-frequency words (4000-5000)?
- 2. What is the vocabulary size of Indonesian EAP students?

#### **METHODS**

In total, there are 128 students participated in the study. They were second-semester students at two private universities in Indonesia. 54 students were from A University (pseudonym). They were majoring in Management. 74 students were from B University (pseudonym). They were majoring in Business Administration.

In this research project, two vocabulary tests were employed as instruments for collecting data. A detailed description of the tests are as follows:

First, the students had to take the vocabulary level test (VLT) of Webb et al. (2017). Nation and Waring (2019), suggest that the test created by Webb et al. (2017) is an appropriate test for assessing students' vocabulary level.

This test was employed to get information about students' vocabulary level (1000-5000). When creating VLT, Webb et al. (2017) used the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). In the test, each level (1000-5000) has 10 clusters. The students had to match the given definitions with three correct words (see Figure 1). The tests can be accessed in the following link <a href="https://vuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV 6Wrb5">https://vuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV 6Wrb5</a> aUvXjIAs6h?Q\_JFE=qdg.

Figure 1 A sample question from VLT

	game	island	mouth	movie	song	yard
land with water all around it		X				
part of your body for eating and talking			X			
piece of music					X	

For this test, the analysis followed the recommendation of Webb et al. (2017). Thus, the cutting point for mastering 1000 to 3000 word-level was set 97 % or it is similar to 27 correct answers out of 30 questions and for mastering 4000 and 5000 word-levels was set at 80% or it is similar to 24 correct answers out of 30 questions.

Second the students took the vocabulary size test (VST) of Nation & Beglar (2007). This test is widely used test with many bilingual versions. However, there is no bilingual version in Indonesian. Thus, this study used its English monolingual version. The test has two versions: 14000 (A) or 20000 (B) and they are equivalent (Nation, 2012). Unlike the VLT contains words from COCA and BNC, the VST only consists word lists from BNC. The VST format was a four-option multiple-choice with an additional "I don't know" choice that can be chosen if the text takers have never seen the word before. The question example is as follows:

#### Write:

Please write it here.

- o make words on paper
- o cut into pieces
- o make something better
- o move to a new place
- o I don't know

The A and B tests respectively contain 140 and 100 questions. The tests can be accessed in the following link <a href="https://my.vocabularysize.com/">https://my.vocabularysize.com/</a>. When counting the results of the tests, the correct answers in the former was multiplied by 100 and the correct answers in the latter was multiplied by 200. Thus, 50 correct answers in A test equal 6000 words, but in B test equal 12000 words. Also, when doing the test, the students were also asked to count how many "I don't know" option they made and how many guesses they made. The information was valuable for interpreting the data.

#### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this research project 128 EAP students at two private universities in Indonesia completed two vocabulary tests: Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) and Vocabulary Size Test (VST). The following section will present the results and then discuss them.

Table 1 and Table 2 respectively present the results of the vocabulary level test at A University AU) and B University (BU) that answered the first research question about EAP learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge. Overall, the findings from both universities show that the students' mean scores of 1000-5000 word-levels have not reached the cutting points (97%-100% for the first 3000 word-level and 80%-100% for the next 2000 word-levels). It can also be noticed that the higher the word level is, the bigger standard deviation of the students' mean scores of AU and BU is. In other words, the higher the word level is, the wider the students' vocabulary knowledge range is.

Also, it can be seen that only one of BU's students has mastered 1000- 5000 word-levels and none of AU's students has mastered all the levels. There are more students who have mastered each level (1000-5000 word-levels) in BU than in AU. Regarding the high-frequency words in 1000-2000 word-levels, the cutting points for passing the 1000 to 2000 word-level only are from 97% to 100%. The findings show that about 16% of AU's students have mastered the first 1000 word-level and less than 2% of AU's students have acquired the second 1000 word-level. The results of BU's students are better. Almost 60% of BU's students have mastered the first 1000 word-families and about 16% of their students have mastered the second 1000 word-families. Also, none of AU's students has mastered 3000 word-families and only about 4% of BU's students have mastered the level. It means that most of the students of both universities failed to master this level. The higher the word-level is, the lower the mean score of the students' VLT scores of AU is. However, it is different from the mean score of the students of BU. At BU the lowest mean score is in 3000 word-families.

Table 1 and Table 2 respectively also show the results of mid-frequency words that the students

of AU and BU have mastered. The cutting points for the 4<sup>th</sup> 1000 word-families and the 5<sup>th</sup> 1000 word-families are from 80% to 100%. As it can be seen, at AU there are more students have mastered the 5<sup>th</sup> 1000 word-families (about 14%) than the 4<sup>th</sup> 1000-word-families (about 9%), while at BU the percentage of the students who have mastered both levels is the same (50%).

Table 1 Vocabulary level of students at A University

				V		ersity (AU) y level (N:				
Cutting point	L	evel 1000	Le	vel 2000	Le	vel 3000	Le	vel 4000	Le	vel 5000
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
100%	3	5.56	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
97%	6	11.11	1	1.85	0	0	0	0	0	0
>80 - <97%	28	51.86	10	18.52	4	7.4	4	7.4	7	12.96
80%	4	7.4	3	5.56	1	1.85	1	1.85	1	1.85
< 80 %	13	24.07	40	74.07	49	90.75	49	90.75	46	85.19
Total	54	100	54	100	54	100	54	100	54	100
Mean		84.52		65.05		50.28		49.7		45.7
SD		11.77		19.72		19.92		24.78		24.78

Table 2 Vocabulary level of students at B University

						rsity (BU) Level (N: 7	74)			
Cutting point	10	000	2	2000		3000		1000	5000	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
100%	20	27	5	6.76	1	1.35	1	1.35	5	6.76
97%	24	32.5	7	9.46	2	2.71	5	6.75	5	6.76
>80 - <97%	28	37.8	39	52.7	17	22.97	25	33.79	22	29.72
80%	0	0	9	12.16	17	22.97	6	8.11	5	6.76
< 80 %	2	2.7	14	18.92	37	50	37	50	37	50
Total	74	100	74	100	74	100	74	100	74	100
Mean	94	.75	8	3.64	7	2.54	7	5.23	7	6.69
SD	5.	.40	1:	2.75	1	6.99	1	9.16	2	20.24

Table 3 presents the vocabulary size of AU's and BU's students. Overall, the students' mean

score was above 6000. The highest mean score was 10707.3. Although the mean score is high, the standard deviation (SD) was also high. It

means that the range of students' vocabulary knowledge is high. The big vocabulary size difference can be seen clearly in the highest score and the lowest score in each group. The highest and the lowest scores in AU's groups correspondingly were 12400 and 1000 (for students who answered 100 questions) and 9400 and 1600 (for students who answered 100 questions). The highest and the lowest scores in BU's groups correspondingly were 16400 and

2297 (for students who answered 100 questions) and 12400 and 4700 (for students who answered 100 questions). The percentages of students' guesses and their "I don't know" answers are quite high. The highest guesses percentage was 36.83% and the highest "I don't know" answer percentage was 23.75%.

Table 3 Vocabulary size of students

University		AU (	N:54)		BU (N:74)					
Number of	100 qı	uestions		140 questions		uestions	140 questions			
questions Vocabulary size	F	%		%	F	%	F	%		
≥10000	3	12.5	0	0	17	62.96	13	27.66		
9000-9999	5	20.84	4	13.33	1	3.7	10	21.28		
8000 – 8999	3	12.5	5	16.67	4	14.82	7	14.9		
7000 – 7999	3	12.5	2	6.67	1	3.7	8	17.02		
6000 – 6999	1	4.16	6	20	3	11.12	5	10.63		
5000 - 5999	0	0	4	13.33	0	0	3	6.39		
4000 –4999	5	20.84	3	10	0	0	1	2.12		
3000-3999	2	8.34	3	10	0	0	0	0		
2000-2999	1	4.16	2	6.67	1	3.7	0	0		
1000-1999	1	4.16	1	3.33	0	0	0	0		
Total	24	100	30	100	27	100	47	100		
Mean	706	66.66	6150		10707.3		8651.06			
SD	305	51.96	2277.89		3229.60		1893.56			
Highest score	12400		9400		16400		12200			
Lowest score	10	000	16	500	2.	2297		700		
Mean of guessing answers	36.83	36.83%	40.07	28.62%	16.89	16.89%	23.87	17.05%		
Mean of "I don't know"	23.75	23.75%	24.27	17.14%	14.26	14.26%	14.53	10.37%		

After presenting the findings, the following paragraphs will discuss them. First, regarding the vocabulary level, the findings of this study clearly indicate that only one of BU's students has mastered 1000- 5000 word-levels and none of AU's students has mastered all the levels. Most of the participants failed to master the high-frequency words (the 1<sup>st</sup> 1000 word-families and the 2<sup>nd</sup> 1000 word-families). These findings are similar to the findings of the previous studies (Akbarian, 2010; Cheng & Matthews, 2018; Dang, 2020) with EAP students from other countries as well as with the

EFL students in Indonesia in the studies of Kurniawan (2017) and, Sudarman and Chinokul (2018). Also, the fact that none of AU's students has mastered 3000 word-families and only about 4% of BU's students have mastered the level is alarming. Knowing limited words from most frequent the first 1000 word-families to the third 1000 word-families will cause the students have a comprehension problem. As Nation (2006) states that 86 % of the running words in the texts is from the first 1000 word-families and the second 1000 word-families. If learners master the first 3000 word-families, it

means that they have already had 89% of the lexical coverage of the texts. However, 89% is still inadequate because it still cannot guarantee one to correctly guess the meaning of new words in a passage (Nation, 1990; Read, 2000). The students need 98% threshold to be able read a wide range of texts. The findings corroborate the argument of Akbarian, (2010, p. 399) that, "the low vocabulary proficiency level of all of our ESP/EAP learners raises a great concern for their academic future and a formidable challenge for the language instructors".

With respect to the second research question about the vocabulary size of the Indonesian EAP students in this study, averagely the students had above 6000 vocabulary size and the biggest mean score was about 10000. The former is almost similar to the mean score of the third year students in the study of Kusumarasdyati and Ramadhani (2018). The latter is higher than the mean score found in these previous studies (Kusumarasdyati & Ramadhani, 2018; Romadloni, 2019; Umam, 2016).

Based on the results of the two vocabulary tests, it is noticeable that despite the high mean score of the students' vocabulary size, only one student has mastered the first 2000 highfrequency words and the first 3000 midfrequency words. It suggests that although the students have a big vocabulary size, they might still have a problem in comprehending texts. Thus, it is important to make sure that students will be able to learn frequent vocabulary in their learning. As argued by Clark and Ishida (2005) argue that it is important to pay attention to high-frequency words and we cannot learn "any random 5000 words" (p. 227). It is important that EAP learners have mastered highfrequency words first before learning academic vocabulary (Nation & Newton, 1997). In addition to that, the participants of the current study made many guesses when completing the VST. Thus, their high vocabulary size mean score seems to suggest their partial knowledge of low-frequency words, as explained by Nguyen and Nation (2011) and Nation and Webb (2011) that learners might be able to correctly guess the meaning of the less frequentused words in VST when they have obtained partial knowledge of words.

#### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the present findings of the current study showed that most of the EAP students have not yet mastered the high frequency words as well as the mid-frequency words from 4000 to 5000 word-families in the Vocabulary Level Test. The mean score of the students' vocabulary size is big; however, they also informed that they made many guesses when completing the Vocabulary Size test. Taken together, the findings indicate that the students' previous learning has not yet facilitated them to learn important vocabulary from 1000 to 5000 word-families and that the students' high vocabulary sizes might be due to their vocabulary learning that focuses on lowfrequency word lists and their impartial vocabulary knowledge of the low-frequency words. The impartial knowledge enabled them to make correct guesses in the VST. Consequently, despite the big vocabulary size, the students might have difficulties in understanding texts.

The current study has some limitations that can inform further researchers who are interested in doing a similar study. Although the study involved participants from two universities, the universities are both private universities and the students belonged to a similar economic field. As mentioned previously in the study, that EAP programmes in Indonesian universities are context dependent. Thus, should future studies involve participants from different faculties at private and public universities, the findings will yield rich information for stakeholders. This study only tested the students' receptive vocabulary knowledge. The future research projects can include both receptive and productive vocabulary tests to get a complete picture of the students' vocabulary knowledge. All in all, despite the limitations that the study has, the findings of the study are expected to make EAP teachers aware of the importance of facilitating their students to learn high frequency words and encourage them to inform their students that it is ineffective to learn words randomly. It is crucial to pay attention to the frequency level of words.

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# **CONTENT REVIEW FORM**

No. :

Title : INDONESIAN EAP STUDENTS' VOCABULARY LEVEL AND

SIZE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Journal : Period :

Please give ✓ on the appropriate column

Please give ✓ on the appropriate column		
Objectof Evaluation	Yes	No
Title		
Title represents the content	✓	
2. Title has never been mentioned in other journals	✓	
Comment: OK		
Abstract		
Provide research problem and objective	<b>√</b>	
Provide applied research method	· ·	
Provide applied research metriod     Provide the result of the research	<b>√</b>	
Provide the research     Provide relevant keyword	· ·	
Comment: OK		
Tutus dustina		
Introduction		
Provide research problem	✓	
2. Provide writer's insight and plan to the problem-solving effort	<b>√</b>	
3. Provide research objective	✓	
4. Provide theoretical studies to the problems examined	✓	
5. Provide expectations of the results and benefits of research	✓	
<b>Comment:</b> Author's claim: "In the Indonesian context, studies on EAP studies absent ". Author then mentioned some related studies. The word absent is replaced.		
Method		
Describe method clearly	✓	
Comment: OK		
Result and Discussion		
1. Data presentation and explanation valid and reasonable	✓	
Tables and figures are useful in the explanation	✓	
3. Discussion / analysis is relevant to research results	✓	

Comment: OK					
Conclusions					
1. Summary main finding	✓				
2. Research contribution	✓				
3. Research implication	✓				
4. Research limitation	✓				
5. Future research	✓				
Comment: OK					
References					
1. Relevant reference	✓				
Comment: OK	-				

	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor
Contribution to science	✓			
Originality		✓		
Systematics	✓			
Language	✓			
Writing accuracy	✓			

## Result

Accepted with Minor Revision Accepted with Major Revision Rejected

✓

#### **Overall Comments**

The article is well written. The claims and arguments are clear supported with relevant evidence. I don't mind if the article is published as it is. If needed, minor correction may be made to improve the article (see the above comment)

22 June 2020

