



Examining the Vocabulary Levels of Indonesia's English National Examination Texts

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Bio Data:

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Abstract:

This study is designed to create a corpus of junior high school (JHS) and senior high school (SHS) English National Examination (NE) texts used in Indonesia throughout four years of administration to form the basis of analysis. By means of corpus analysis, it sought to find out the vocabulary levels of junior and senior high school English NE texts (distribution among the K1 – K20 vocabulary levels, where K refers to the one-thousand- word band in the word frequency list), the number of interdisciplinary academic words the texts contain, and the number of words beyond the 2,000 high frequency English words the texts hold. Research results show that while JHS students are presumed to have lower English proficiency NE vocabulary of the level indicates the opposite. Though both JHS and SHS NE texts belong to the same K4 (4,000-word) level (the number of words required for the 95% comprehension of these texts), the 4,000 words cover only 95.80% of the running words in JHS NE texts and 95.96% of that of SHS NE texts. With regard to the words beyond the 2,000 basic words, the coverage in JHS NE texts is 7.83% compared to that in SHS NE texts, which is only 7.61%. However, SHS NE texts contain more interdisciplinary academic words in Coxhead's AWL, where they contain 3.85% while the JHS NE texts contain 2.47% of the tokens in the texts.

Introduction

National examination (NE) was first initiated in Indonesia in 1985 for four core

subjects: mathematics, science, Indonesian language, and English. The purposes of its administration are firstly to map the quality of education service across regions and secondly to set criterion for graduation. For English subject, despite changes in curricular approach, reading has been the dominant skill tested. On the basis of reading passages, such language components as vocabulary and grammar are tested as well. In SHS level, however, listening is also tested.

In JHS level, listening skill is not tested. Examination questions make use of texts, which may amount up to 16 texts of varied length. At the last part of the test, six questions are given on three different tasks, namely arranging words, arranging sentences, and filling in missing words in cloze procedure. Since 2006, along with a curriculum switch to School Level Curriculum (KTSP), reading texts supplied in SHS NE cover a variety of genres: narrative, descriptive, recount, procedure, report, news items, spoof, analytical exposition, hortatory exposition, anecdote, and review. As for JHS NE, texts are limited to five genres: narrative, descriptive, procedure, report, and recount.

Texts are generally adopted from authentic material, such as newspapers, reference books, emails, short stories, and magazines. There is indeed some concern over the situation, as this may pose candidates with texts filled with plenty of words beyond their vocabulary level. Under such circumstances, reading might no longer be a meaning-focused activity because in contexts other than examination so much attention will be given to dictionary work. Though successful comprehension involves more than being able to decode vocabulary in a text, a lack of familiarity with more than 5% of the running words in a text can make reading a formidable task (Laufer, 1989).

2. Literature Review

As Nation (2001) states, non-fiction texts have four vocabulary categories: (1) high-frequency or general service vocabulary, (2) academic vocabulary (also called sub-technical or semi-technical vocabulary), (3) technical vocabulary, and (4) low-

frequency vocabulary. High-frequency vocabulary refers to the general service English words which constitute the majority of all words occurring in all types of texts. West's (1953) General Service List of English Words (GSL) is the most well-known list. The GSL's 2,000 most frequent word families of English (comprising 3,372 types) constitute approximately 75% of the non-fiction tokens and around 90% of the running words in fiction (Hirsch and Nation, 1992; Nation and Hwan, 1995).

Interdisciplinary academic vocabulary (i.e. somewhere between the high-frequency words and technical words) with medium-frequency of occurrence serve some rhetorical functions and communicative purposes. Coxhead's (2000) 570 academic word families were claimed to cover almost 10% of the total words in a general academic text. Her study suggested that for English learners who wish to pursue academic goals, the knowledge of 570 academic word families would give more significant return than the knowledge of further 1,000 words. This is because the third 1000-word level accounts for only 3 – 5% coverage. Technical vocabulary as defined in Nation's (2001) study refers to words used in specialized field and considerably different from subject to subject. Around 5% of the running words in an academic text are made up of technical vocabulary, with each subject containing roughly 1,000 word families (Nation, 2001).

In one of Chujo's studies (2004), using his self-created non-fiction corpus of TOEFL and TOEIC preparation tests to gauge vocabulary levels of the proficiency tests with the assumed text coverage of 95% in the BNC HFWL 1st – 14th 1000-word levels, TOEFL is reported to hold more vocabulary than TOEIC (6,000 – 6,500 vocabulary level for TOEFL versus 4,500 – 5,000 level for TOEIC).

A study in Taiwan (Hsu, 2009) revealed that General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), which is regularly administered at four levels, i.e. elementary, intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced level, involved 2,263 words, 4,947 words (including the 2,263), and more than 8,000 words (2,263 and 4,947 are inclusive) respectively. The GEPT elementary level is presumed to be appropriate for students who have studied English through junior high school (Grade 7 – 9). The GEPT intermediate level is seen suitable for senior high school graduates (Grade 10 – 12) or university

freshmen. The GEPT high-intermediate level is considered to be suitable for university graduates majoring in English. The GEPT advanced level is considered adequately difficult such that only someone with a graduate degree from a university in an English-speaking country would be able to pass it. Following Taiwan's Ministry of Education guide (Hsu, 2009) that set vocabulary goal of 2,000 basic English words for primary and secondary schools, it was therefore presumed that in order to pass the senior high school examination a student had to have a vocabulary size of at least 2,000 words.

3. Method

This study was conducted to examine the vocabulary profile of Indonesia's JHS and SHS English NE texts. By means of corpus analysis of JHS and SHS NE texts, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the vocabulary levels of JHS and SHS English NE texts (distribution among the K1 – K20 vocabulary levels)? In addition, what percentage of the words in JHS and SHS English NE texts do the K1 – K20 vocabulary levels cover?
2. If 2,000 English word families are required to accomplish 80% comprehension of a text, how many new words should one learn to attain the 95% comprehension?
3. What percentage of the words in JHS and SHS English NE texts does Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List cover?

To answer the questions this research took place in three main stages. First, English NE documents from four years of administration were selected as the corpus creation basis. The four NE documents were selected as they were set under the same current curriculum. Second, vocabulary levels of the JHS and SHS English NE texts were measured using Web VocabProfilers program developed by Cobb (2009) from UQAM. Third, using the same program, the 2,000 basic English words and the interdisciplinary academic words (Coxhead's AWL) coverage were gauged.

3.1 The Instrument

Cobb developed Web VocabProfilers program which was inspired and based on RANGE program. RANGE itself was created by Heatly, Nation and Coxhead (n.d).

RANGE program incorporates the General Service List of English Words (GSL), Academic Word List (AWL) and British National Corpus High Frequency Word List (BNC HFWL). VocabProfilers program has some sub-programs and this study used two of them. The first sub-program used is VocabProfile BNC which compares targeted texts with 20 1000-word bands (K1 – K20). The outputs of this sub-program include the number of word families, types, tokens, text coverage, cumulative coverage, type-token ratio, tokens per type, tokens per family and types per family. The second sub-program used is VocabProfile Classic, which compares targeted texts with the 2,000 basic English words (K1 – K2) and Academic Word List (AWL). This program generates the number of families, types, tokens, and percentage that the K1 and K2 levels and AWL cover.

3.2 *Creating a corpus of NE texts*

The first step in creating the corpus as the basis of analysis is selecting the NE texts at the two education levels: JHS and SHS. Since the NE under the current curriculum began in 2006, there are then eight documents for analysis, i.e. 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 English NE texts for the two levels. All the eight documents were used as the material for corpus building.

Excluding questions and listening section texts, the passages were scanned into eight computer files and proofread for completeness. Upon completion of the raw corpus, exclusion of some words was then carried out (see Table 1). This was done because if some words were not excluded the vocabulary size may be inflated and text coverage may shrink.

Table 1. Words excluded from the raw corpus

	Part of speech	Examples
1.	Proper nouns	Jakarta, Denny
2.	Numerals	1950, 24
3.	Interjections	Oh, Gosh,
4.	Unclassified	er, www
5.	Alphabetical symbols	a, b,
6.	Units	km., mm,
7.	Abbreviations	TV, Ltd

Unlike Chujo's (2009) exclusion, this study did not exclude days of the week, months of the year, numerals in words, and prepositional phrases. This is mainly due to the fact that all the items mentioned are included as parts of the English learning goals at the primary education. The number of types and tokens in these NE documents are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Types and tokens in JHS and SHS English NE texts

Texts		Types	Tokens
JHS NE	2007	473	1,115
	2008	593	1,450
	2009	739	1,955
	2010	800	2,076
SHS NE	2007	428	992
	2008	729	1,859
	2009	683	1,721
	2010	644	1,583

As Table 2 shows JHS English NE reading texts hold more tokens and types. In total the tokens in JHS texts amount up to 6,605 and the types 2,605. In the meantime, SHS English NE texts contain only 6,160 tokens and 2,484 types.

3.3 Measuring English NE texts

The next step was to measure the vocabulary levels of each text shown in Table 2 by comparing each text with the 20 1000-word bands of VocabProfilers List, partly taken from the BNC HFWL. For the purpose, the author established the percent level of comprehension coverage. The comprehension level targeted was 95%. As discussed above, Nation (2001) and other leading researchers emphasis that learners would need at least a 95% coverage of the running words in the input in order to gain reasonable comprehension and to have reasonable success at guessing from context (Laufer 1989, Laufer 1992, Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, Read 2000).

Using the 20 1000-word bands of BNC HFWL, the researcher assessed how many words from the top of the bands that a reader would need to know in order to achieve a roughly 95% coverage of the targeted texts. In other words, each targeted text vocabulary level was determined in terms of the number of words counted from the

top of BNC HFWL that account for 95% or more of the running words in that text. Each 1,000-word band's text coverage over the targeted text was measured by counting the number of 1,000-word bands needed until the total coverage reached approximately 95%. However, since the number of words within the 1,000 words may cover more than 1% of the words in the targeted text, vocabulary level of each text could not be determined precisely. To give an example, a text may gain its 94.05% comprehension at 3,000-word level, but at 4,000-word level its comprehension percentage has already reached 97.18%. The same procedure was taken to assess the 2,000-word level and AWL coverage.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The vocabulary levels of NE texts

Vocabulary levels in this study were defined as the number of words counted from the top of BNC HFWL accounting for 95% of the running words in that textbook if we accept the assumption of 95% text coverage as the minimum for successfully guessing meanings from context and gaining reasonable comprehension (Hsu 2009). The text coverage of each 1,000-word band in the target NE text was measured by calculating the number of 1,000-word bands accumulated to reach the total coverage of 95%.

After running the NE texts one by one on the base words, the BNC HFWL 20, the results show that the level of JHS 2007 NE texts was roughly 4,000, but at this level the cumulated text coverage already reached 95.51%. And then, as shown in Table 3 the vocabulary level of JHS 2008, 2009, and 2010 NE texts was 4,000, though at this level the text coverage already attained 95.52%, 95.66%, and 96.31% for each text respectively.

The 4,000-word level implies that reading these texts would lead candidates to working on quite a number of new words. However, a different picture is displayed in 2010 NE texts, where at level 4,000 JHS texts reaches the coverage of 96.31% and for SHS texts only 94.47%. This hints that it needs more word knowledge for the candidates to read SHS texts with 95% comprehension than it needs for JHS texts. Because the BNC 1st – 20th 1,000 English words are ranked in accordance with their

frequency of occurrence, with the 1st 1,000 words being the most frequent and correspondingly the 20th 1,000 words the least frequent, a text with a higher vocabulary level can be translated as having more English words occurring in the latter 1,000-word bands. Table 3 lists the vocabulary levels that the JHS and SHS NE texts of 2007 – 2010 administration might belong to.

Table 3 Vocabulary level of English NE texts by year of administration

Vocabulary Levels Texts	1,000	2,000	3,000	4,000
JHS NE 2007	83.23%	91.84%	93.90%	95.51%
2008	80.10%	89.60%	93.25%	95.52%
2009	80.72%	90.18%	93.97%	95.66%
2010	80.07%	90.18%	94.59%	96.31%
SHS NE 2007	81.45%	90.52%	94.05%	97.18%
2008	79.88%	90.26%	93.97%	96.01%
2009	83.90%	92.79%	95.35%	96.57%
2010	80.42%	89.36%	92.45%	94.47%

When the total JHS and SHS NE texts of the four years of administration were run on the base words through the VocabProfiler BNC program, the outputs depict a converging profile. As Table 4 shows, the 4,000-word level covers 95.96% of the running words in SHS NE texts, but only 95.80% of the JHS NE texts. This is quite surprising since JHS graduates are presumed to have lower English proficiency than the SHS graduates.

Table 4 Vocabulary level of English NE texts

Vocabulary Level Texts	1,000	2,000	3,000	4,000
JHS NE 2007 – 2010	80.83%	90.35%	93.98%	95.80%
SHS NE 2007 - 2010	81.40%	90.78%	93.98%	95.96%

The situation implies that test constructors may not apply a systematic approach to the selection of words in developing the reading passages.

4.2 Interdisciplinary academic words in English NE texts

Coxhead's (2000) 570 interdisciplinary academic words in AWL are claimed to cover almost 10% of the total words in a general academic text. Because its coverage is around 10%, it gives more return to learners who wish to pursue further study than the

next 1,000 words after the 2,000 basic English words.

The right column in Table 5, which displays the AWL occurrence in tokens, shows the coverage of interdisciplinary academic words in each document of English NE administration. It shows that 2010 NE texts bear the most academic words for both levels of education (3.18% for JHS and 4.80% for SHS) and 2007 NE texts the least (1.79% for JHS and 1.92% for SHS).

Table 5 AWL coverage in English NE texts by year of administration

Texts		Number of Words	AWL occurrence in tokens
JHS NE	2007	1,115	1.79%
	2008	1,450	2.41%
	2009	1,955	2.20%
	2010	2,076	3.18%
SHS NE	2007	992	1.92%
	2008	1,859	4.36%
	2009	1,721	3.54%
	2010	1,583	4.80%

Running in total the JHS and SHS NE texts resulted in almost the same picture, where JHS NE texts contain less interdisciplinary words than the SHS NE texts. This is in contrast with the total number of tokens in both texts.

Table 6 AWL coverage in English NE texts in total

Texts	Number of Words	AWL occurrence in tokens
JHS NE 2007-2010	6,605	2.47%
SHS NE 2007-2010	6,160	3.85%

Table 6 demonstrates that in 6,605 tokens of JHS NE texts AWL words cover 2.47%, while in 6,160 tokens of SHS texts AWL words cover 3.85%. The 2.47% of AWL in JHS texts translate into 163 words and 3.85% in SHS NE texts translate into 237 words.

4.3 Words beyond 2,000-word level contained in English NE texts

As the word list used in this study is BNC HFWL, the number of words contained in the list is exactly 2,000 word families. Provided the 2,000 basic English words are

considered the minimum number of words known by senior high school students, the question is then “How many new words would a candidate encounter in NE texts and how many of them would enable them to comprehend the texts?”

Table 7 Text coverage by BNC HFWL 2000 at four years of NE administration

NE Texts	BNC HFWL 2000		Not in BNC HFWL		TOTAL	
	tokens/%	types/%	tokens/%	types/%	tokens	types
JHS 2007	1,024/91.84	399/84.35	91/8.10	74/15.64	1,115	473
JHS 2008	1,301/89.60	493/83.14	149/10.27	100/16.86	1,450	593
JHS 2009	1,763/90.18	601/81.32	192/9.82	138/18.67	1,955	739
JHS 2010	1,882/90.18	648/81.00	194/9.34	152/19.00	2,076	800
SHS 2007	898/90.52	371/86.68	94/9.47	57/13.31	992	428
SHS 2008	1,678/90.26	596/81.75	181/9.73	133/18.24	1,859	729
SHS 2009	1,597/92.79	586/85.39	124/7.20	97/14.20	1,721	683
SHS 2010	1,419/89.36	537/83.39	169/10.68	107/16.61	1,583	644

As demonstrated in Table 7 above, the first column presents the number of words in the NE texts which belong to the 2,000 words in BNC HFWL, while the second column presents the number of words in NE texts which are beyond the BNC HFWL, and the third column presents the number of words in the NE texts. In JHS NE texts of 2007 administration, for example, of the 1,115 tokens, 1,024 words were familiar to the students and 91 were not. These 91 running words made up of 74 different words (types) could likely belong to university students' vocabulary. In average, as we can see in Table 8, during the four years of administration, each JHS NE document contains 1,492 tokens and 340 types, out of which 159 tokens and 109 types are unfamiliar to students.

Table 8 The text coverage by BNC HFWL 2000 at NE texts of two education levels

Texts	BNC HFWL 2000		Not in BNC HFWL		TOTAL	
	tokens/%	types/%	tokens/%	types/%	tokens	types
JHS NE	1,492/90.35	340/75.70	159/9.64	109/24.29	1,651	450
SHS NE	1,398/90.78	336/78.39	142/9.22	93/21.60	1,540	429

In contrast, the SHS NE document in average holds 1,398 running words and 336 different words, out of which 142 tokens and 93 types are unfamiliar to students.

Conclusion

On average JHS and SHS English NE texts belong to the 4,000-word level (the number of words required for a 95% comprehension of these texts). However, the VocabProfiler program analysis also shows that a slight margin exists in the text coverage, where the 4,000-word level covers only 95.80% of the words occurring in JHS NE texts and 95.96% of the words in SHS NE texts. That means if a learner knows the top 4,000 words in the BNC HFWL he/she will know 95.96% of the running words in SHS NE texts but only 95.80% of those in JHS NE texts.

Beyond the 2,000-word level, JHS NE texts require students to know 109 new word families or 24.29% of the total types (different words) in the texts, while SHS NE texts require them to know 93 new word families or 21.60% of the total types in the texts. This figure sends us a signal about the significance of considering appropriate vocabulary load, especially when we realize that the candidates will have to work unassisted. Interdisciplinary academic words in Coxhead's (2000) AWL account for around 2.47% and 3.85% in JHS and SHS NE texts respectively. The difference in the figure may be caused by the proportion of text types covered in the texts. Larger proportion of dialogues for instance was found in JHS NE texts than in SHS NE texts. Hopefully the findings of the present study are beneficial in raising awareness among teachers, textbook writers, and test constructors of the importance of vocabulary level when writing textbooks and constructing tests. That means taking care of the vocabulary load of every text they select. By so doing, the texts presented in textbooks and tests would be set at a reasonable level for the target learners and test takers.

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