

EFL Learners' Vocabulary Size: A Case in the Northeastern Region of Thailand

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Abstract

A large vocabulary size provides a foundation for language learners to achieve language skills and is substantially important for second/foreign language development. Previous studies on vocabulary size in Thailand mainly examined learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge with a small sample size. This present study, therefore, aimed to examine primary school students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge with a larger samples size adopting Nation's vocabulary size receptive and productive tests (2008). The data were collected from 453 Grade 6 students (201 males and 252 females) enrolled in the second semester of the 2014 academic year. The data were analyzed using mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (S.D.); Nation's formula for the calculation of vocabulary size was adopted. The findings of the study revealed that Grade 6 students had a vocabulary size of approximately 462 words, and their productive vocabulary size is approximately 292.05 words. It is notable that the size of the receptive vocabulary is almost two times greater than the productive vocabulary size. Important factors affecting vocabulary knowledge and guidance for English language development in Thailand will be discussed.

Keywords: Vocabulary Size, Receptive Vocabulary Knowledge, Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

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Introduction

English plays an important role in many countries throughout the world, including Thailand. It has been set as a foreign language for the Thai society. All Thai students are required to take English as a compulsory subject and it is a part of the national school curriculum. Thai students begin learning English as a foreign language in primary school, with many carrying on English studies through university. However, despite learning English for many years, many students continue to have problems using all the English skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Additionally, Thai students are poor at many sub-skills of English, such as knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The most significant difficulty in English language use faced by Thai students is a lack of vocabulary (Chawwang, 2008; Jantawee, 200; Supatranont, 2005)

One of the most critical factors contributing to effective second language development is the acquisition of vocabulary (Nation, 2001). Newton & Nation (1997) mentioned the importance of knowing more vocabulary, which allows learners to gain a greater capacity for using the language. Vocabulary is important because it helps English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners to understand context (Leki & Carson, 1994). It can also help ESL/EFL learners to develop the capability to learn and use language (Ellis, 1997; Nation, 2001). According to Krashen and Terrell (1983), vocabulary provides opportunities for students to be successful in the classroom because it relates to knowledge acquisition by the students. Vocabulary knowledge is considered an important factor in the comprehension of language. The number of words known is related to the capacity of the language used (Hell & Mahn, 1997). Meara (1996) claims that language learners who know a significant amount of vocabulary will likely use the four English skills well. In terms of communication, Nation (1990, 2001, 2008) points out that language learners have to know a lot of vocabulary in order to communicate effectively. This is because it serves as the foundation for learning a second language. When language learners have a larger vocabulary, they comprehend a language better. Furthermore, Moras and Carlos (2001) have discovered that advanced learners communicate well because they have a wide-ranging vocabulary to express their own ideas. Knowing English words can help people understand context when using the language (Leki & Carson, 1994).

The storage of numerous known words is called vocabulary size. Vocabulary size is a crucial factor in becoming a fluent English speaker (Coady, Magott, Hubbard, Graney and Mokhtari, 1993). According to Meara (1996), language learners who have a large vocabulary size are more proficient in using a language than those who have a smaller vocabulary size. Nation & Waring (1997) note that it is important to have a large vocabulary size, further suggesting that ESL and EFL learners have a command of 2,000 words and concentrate on the high frequency words of the language.

Nation (1990 and 2001) divides vocabulary knowledge into two types: receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2001) defines receptive vocabulary as knowledge of words or lexical units that the language learners recognize and understand the meaning from listening and reading, but cannot use the words productively in communication. According to Doff (1990), the words that teachers want students to understand when reading text, but cannot use productively themselves are called “passive” vocabulary. On the other hand, productive vocabulary refers to use of a target word from the language learners’ memories in speaking and writing (Read, 2000). Doff (1990) defines the words that students understand and are able to use themselves as “active” vocabulary.

Many previous research studies related to vocabulary are available. *Catalán* and *Gallego* (2005-2008) investigated the receptive vocabulary knowledge of students learning English in Spanish primary schools. Using a 1,000-word test and the 2,000-frequency band of The Vocabulary Level Test (VLT), they studied the differences between sexes by comparing their scores. Additionally, they evaluated the students’ scores correlated with their scores on a cloze test. The sample group was composed of 270 fourth-year primary school students who were studying English as a foreign language in four primary schools in La Rioja, Spain. There were 118 females and 152 males. The results showed that the English receptive vocabulary size of this group of students fell within the 1,000-word level and that the vocabulary knowledge of the students had a positive correlation between the frequency band and cloze test. Another study by *Kweldju* (1997) was conducted to examine learners’ vocabulary size in Indonesia. It was found that the students gained only one word per day. In one year, they gained only 439 base words or 263 word families. *Kweldju* found that the improvement of students’ knowledge of vocabulary required the improvement of vocabulary size. The results revealed that the more vocabulary they knew, the better they could understand the target language.

In Thailand, many studies have been conducted examining the relationship between vocabulary size and English language acquisition. *Patanasorn* and *Patanasorn* (2011a) studied the English vocabulary size of sixth grade students and examined the relationship between vocabulary size and O-NET, or Ordinary National Education Testing scores. The sample group consisted of 131 sixth grade students. A vocabulary size test and O-NET test were used in this study. The results revealed that the estimated vocabulary size of the sample group was 498 words. These results indicate that the vocabulary size of this group was comparatively low when examining the vocabulary size of sixth grade students set by the Ministry of Education. In addition, they found that the students in the sample group who had a larger vocabulary size tended to get higher scores on the O-NET test. Another study by *Patanasorn* and *Patanasorn* (2011b) on vocabulary knowledge looked at the effects of gender on second language vocabulary size and the language proficiency of primary school students. They examined the effects of gender on second language vocabulary size and language proficiency.

A vocabulary size test adapted from Nation (2009) was used in order to measure vocabulary size and an O-NET test was used to measure learners' proficiency. The sample group was 131 sixth grade students, including 78 boys and 53 girls. The findings showed that there was a significant difference in vocabulary size between boys and girls, indicated by $t(129) = (3.04)$, $p < 0.05$. Additionally, there was a significant difference in their English proficiency scores, $t(129) = (2.14)$, $p < 0.05$. From the results, it is probable that girls are better than boys at learning a second language due to having a larger vocabulary size and higher second language proficiency.

Srisawat and Poonpon (2014) investigated the vocabulary size of Thai university students. The population was 371 first-year students at Khon Kaen University. The instrument used for this study was a Revised Vocabulary Level Translation Test (RVLTT), which was adapted from a Vocabulary Level Test of VLT (Nation, 1990). The results revealed that the average vocabulary size of the 371 university students was approximately 1,039 English words (out of 2,570 words) or 40.43%. The average percentage was below 80%. That means the students did not reach any word level and did not meet the language requirements (2,000-3,000 words). They found that having a large word size was necessary for understanding a text.

Supatranont (2005) found that Thai students at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) had vocabulary sizes of only 56%, 24% and 18% in the 1000 Words Level, 2000 Words Level and academic words level, respectively. The study was done using a Vocabulary Level Test developed by Nation (1990). The results revealed that 2,000-3,000 word size is needed in order to understand a text.

According to The Ministry of Education (2008), it is required that Thai schools aim to have students acquire 150 - 200 English words in Grade 1, 250 - 300 words in Grade 2 and 350 - 450 words in Grade 3. Subsequent requirements include 450 - 700 words in Grade 4, 750-950 words in Grade 5 and 1,050- 1,200 words in order to listen, read, speak and write in sixth grade. The vocabulary should be about themselves, family, school, their environment, food and drink, relationships, hobbies, health, shopping and weather. Moreover, students should be able to use adjectives, adverbs, verbs, helping verbs, negative forms, pronouns, possessives, connectors, prepositions, question words and comparisons correctly (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Noom-ura (2013) mentions that the average English scores for Thai primary school students in 2010 and 2011 were 31.75 and 20.99 out of 100, respectively. It indicates that Thai EFL learners have low English proficiency. According to Wiriyachitra (2002), there may be various causes that contribute to Thai EFL learners having low English proficiency, such as teachers' heavy teaching loads, education technology, teachers' insufficient English language skills, lack of opportunity to use English in daily life or being too shy to speak

English with others. However, one problem for Thai students that causes difficulty in using English is insufficient vocabulary (Chawwang, 2008; Jamtawee, 2000; Supatranont, 2005).

In order to measure language learners' vocabulary size, researchers typically use the Vocabulary Size Test developed by Nation (1990, 2008). Therefore, the words should be from The General Service List of English Words (GLS) by Nation (2008), which is commonly used to measure vocabulary size. In the present study, the level of difficulty of English vocabulary from the General Service List (Nation, 2008) is similar to the English words from the Ministry of Education and can be seen in the level of sixth grade.

Previous research in Thailand regarding the study of vocabulary size has been limited to small sample sizes. Further, the aforementioned three studies focused only on receptive vocabulary knowledge and included only one factor, gender. Therefore, this study intends to increase the size of the sample group and examine primary school students' productive vocabulary knowledge as well as other factors (e.g., grades, type of school, parents' financial status and experience abroad). It is expected that such a study of the vocabulary size of sixth grade students in the Northeastern Region of Thailand will help teachers' understanding of students' vocabulary knowledge. Further, teachers will be able to use the results from this research as a guideline to create syllabi and/or classroom activities that are appropriate for students' vocabulary knowledge level. Finally, the results of this study will be beneficial for English policy makers in Thailand regarding the role of vocabulary in language learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

Objectives

To identify both the receptive and productive vocabulary size of sixth grade students.

Conceptual Framework

1. The population of this study was comprised of sixth grade students in government schools from the Primary Educational Service Area Office in the Northeastern Region of Thailand. All students were enrolled in the second semester of the 2014 academic year.

2. The words in the Vocabulary Size Tests were selected from the first 1,000 words of the General Service List adapted from Nation (2008) using a systematic sampling selection method.

Research Methodology

1. Population

The population of this study consisted of sixth grade students from the government schools in the Primary Educational Service Area Office in the Northeastern Region of Thailand. They were enrolled in the second semester of the academic year 2014. The size of the population was 1,328,410 students, determined by using the formula to calculate sample sizes proposed by Yamane (Yamane, 1967).

2. Sample Groups

The sample groups consist of sixth grade students from the government schools in Loei, Nong Khai, Bueng Kan and Nongbualamphu. These provinces were selected by using a simple random sampling method. They were selected due to the fact that students from Northeastern Thailand usually get lower scores on an Ordinary National Education Testing (O-NET) English exam. One of the most-cited formulas for selecting a sample group is Yamane's formula 1967.

Based on the selection method, the process of choosing the sample group can be described as follows:

Step 1 The number of sixth grade students in the North Eastern region of Thailand is 1,328,410. After using the Yamane's formula, we calculated that a sample size of 453 is representative of the students from government schools from the Primary Educational Service Area Office in Northeast Thailand.

Step 2 19 provinces in the Northeastern Region of Thailand were obtained by using a simple random sampling method, then the sample groups were classified into four groups (Loei, Nong Khai, Bueng Kan, and Nongbualamphu) by using random multi-stage cluster sampling (see Figure 1). Each group was divided into two subgroups: sixth grade students from urban schools and sixth grade students from schools in rural areas. Loei consisted of 52 sixth grade students from urban school and 63 sixth grade students from rural school. Nong Khai consisted of 50 sixth grade students from urban school and 50 sixth grade students from rural school. Bueng Kan consisted of 81 sixth grade students from urban school and 54 sixth grade students from rural school. Nongbualamphu consisted of 52 sixth grade students from urban school and 51 sixth grade students from rural school. (see Figure 2)

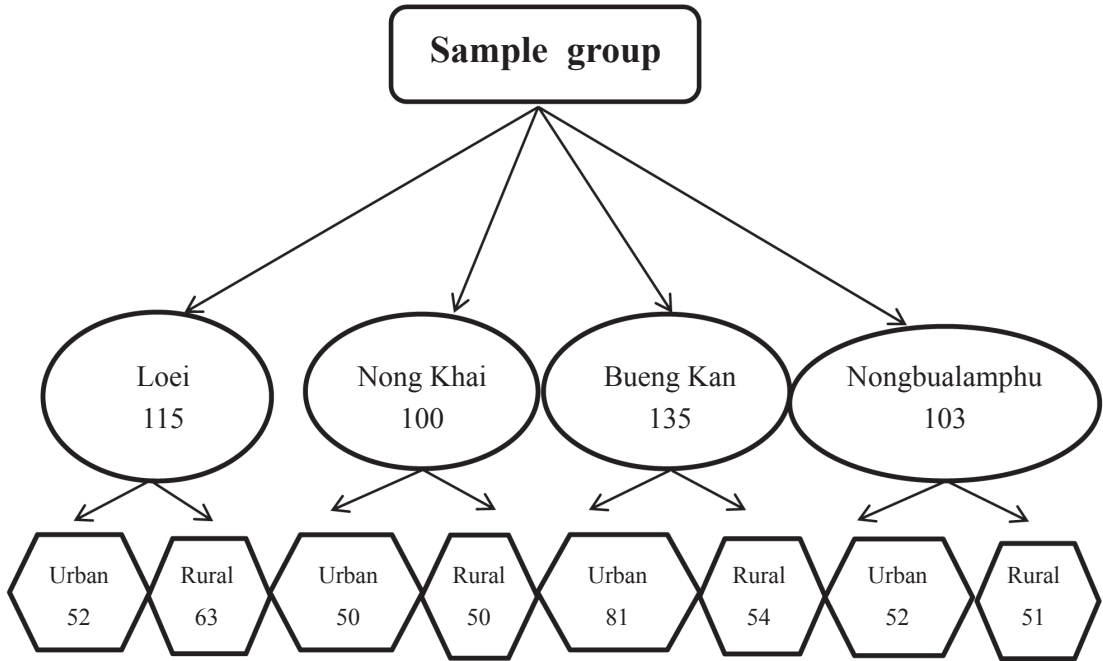


Figure1 : Multi-stage Cluster Sampling

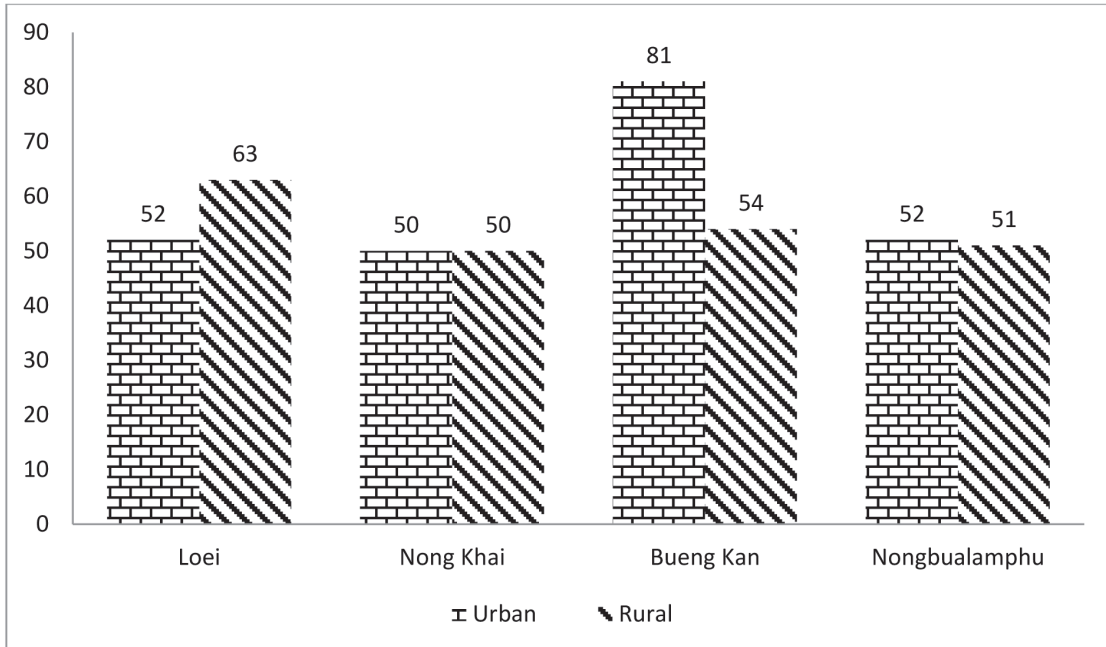


Figure 2 : This figure shows the number of students in each sample from Northeastern Region of Thailand

3. Measurement and Data collection design

3.1 English Vocabulary Size Tests

Two vocabulary size tests were used in this study to collect data: a receptive vocabulary size test and productive vocabulary size test. The formats of the two tests were suggested and used by Nation (2008) and other studies (Read, 2000). The target words were selected from the first 1,000 words of the General Service List of Nation (2008) by using a systematically sampling selection method. Each test contained 20 items, a reasonable size to complete within the allotted 25 minutes. The receptive vocabulary size test adopted a multiple-choice format, while the productive vocabulary size test required learners to fill in the blank to complete meaningful sentences (Nation, 2008). In this study, the English vocabulary size test (receptive vocabulary size test and productive vocabulary size test) were developed by the researcher and checked the validity by five experts. Based on

3.1.1 Receptive Vocabulary Size Test

This receptive vocabulary size test consisted of a single section. The learners were given a word in English then they had to choose the meaning of the word in Thai. There were 20 items in this test with four answer choices for each item.

The following are sample test items:

What does “**along**” mean?

- a. ด้วยกัน, ตาม b. ข้างบน c. แยกจากกัน d. อีกครั้ง

What does “**bit**” mean?

- a. นก b. จำนวนมาก c. ของเล็กน้อย d. เตี้ยนอน

What does “**car**” mean?

- a. รถมอเตอร์ไซด์ b. รถไฟ c. รถยนต์ d. รถตู้

In order to ensure the accuracy of the receptive vocabulary size test, it was examined by five experts in the field of English language teaching and research methodology. Item objective congruence (IOC) (Kaimook, 2002) was used as a tool to solicit the experts’ judgment regarding accuracy of items (See Appendix C). The rating scale for the IOC is illustrated as follows:

+1 represents the choices are appropriate.

0 represents the choices are uncertainly appropriate.

-1 represents the choices are inappropriate.

3.1.2 Productive Vocabulary Size Test

Similarly, the productive vocabulary size test consisted of a single section. The learners were asked to complete partially formed words in order to complete a meaningful sentence. There were 20 items in this test. This test format was adapted from Nation’s 2008 Productive Vocabulary Size Test. The following are sample test items:

Mother: Please, cl _ _ _ your bedroom. It is too dirty.

Son: Yes, mom.

I do not like to wear jeans. I like to wear pink dr _ _ _.

Father: What do you want to be in the future?

Daughter: I would like to be a fash _ _ _ designer.

In order to ensure the productive Vocabulary Size, it was examined by five experts in the field of English language teaching and research methodology. Item objective congruence (IOC) (Kaimook, 2002) was used as a tool to solicit experts’ judgments regarding its correctness (See Appendix C). The rating scale for the IOC is illustrated as follows:

+1 represents the question is appropriate for students' ability.

0 represents the language used is uncertainly appropriate for students' ability.

-1 represents the language used is inappropriate for students' ability.

3.1.3 Data Collection

The researcher contacted the directors of the government schools in the Primary Educational Service Area Office in the Northeastern region of Thailand in order to ask for permission to collect the data. The directors of the government schools from Loei, Nong Khai, Bueng Kan and Nongbualamphu gave permission to collect data. The data from the two vocabulary size tests (receptive vocabulary size test and productive vocabulary size test) were administered to the sample group of sixth grade students from the four provinces (Loei, Nong Khai, Bueng Kan, and Nongbualamphu) in the Northeastern Region of Thailand. Each group was classified into two subgroups: sixth grade students from urban schools and sixth grade students from schools in rural areas. Loei consisted of 52 sixth grade students from an urban school and 63 sixth grade students from a rural school. Nong Khai consisted of 50 sixth grade students from an urban school and 50 sixth grade students from a rural school. Bueng Kan consisted of 81 sixth grade students from an urban school and 54 sixth grade students from a rural school. Nongbualamphu consisted of 52 Grade 6 students from urban school and 51 sixth grade students from a rural school.

The learners had 50 minutes to complete the vocabulary size tests and a questionnaire. First, the researcher administered the receptive vocabulary size test; learners were given 25 minutes to complete the test. Then the learners were given the productive vocabulary size test; similarly, 25 minutes were given to finish the task.

4. Analytical design

Quantity of Receptive and Productive vocabulary of Grade 6 students in the Northeastern Region of Thailand

To calculate learners' vocabulary size from the receptive vocabulary size test and the productive vocabulary size test, Nation's (2008) assessment criteria were adopted. Each correct answer was counted as one, while incorrect answers or non-answers were counted as zero. The maximum test score, 20 points, is considered representative of a vocabulary size of the 1,000 words from the General Service List (Nation, 2008). For example, if a student received a score of 15, that means he would have a vocabulary size of 750 words. A test of standard error was also conducted in order to examine possible error in the number of vocabulary terms learners were obtained. An SPSS program was used to analyze mean scores (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (*S.D.*). A T-test was used for measuring the difference of factors in each group. A One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the factors

(parents' financial status and tutorial hours) associated with sixth grade students' receptive and productive vocabulary size.

Results

Table 1 Vocabulary Size of Sixth Grade Students in the Northeastern Region of Thailand, Receptive and Productive Vocabulary

Parameter	No. of Students	Mean size	Standard deviation	Max score	Min score
Receptive Vocabulary	453	462.91	203.55	1000	50
Productive Vocabulary	453	292.05	232.23	900	0

The table shows the mean size of Thai EFL learners' receptive vocabulary size, which is 462.91 out of 1,000 words, while the mean size of EFL learners' productive vocabulary size is 292.05 out of 1,000 words. It is important to note the receptive vocabulary size is almost double the productive vocabulary size. However, both receptive and productive vocabulary of sixth grade students in the Northeastern Region of Thailand were low relative to national standards. Specifically, it is expected that sixth grade students should possess a vocabulary composed of 1,050-1,200 high frequency words after completing primary school (Ministry of Education, 2008). Posthoc analyses of Thai EFL learners with different demographic backgrounds were also conducted to yield more insightful information about how demographic variables influence Thai EFL learners' vocabulary size.

Conclusion

Two main conclusions emerge from this research. First, the receptive vocabulary size of sixth grade students in the Northeastern region of Thailand is 462.91 words, while the productive vocabulary size is 292.05 words. These results indicate that Thai EFL learners have a small vocabulary size. This may cause problems for students when learning English. Problems about Thai students having insufficient vocabulary have been discussed in previous studies (Chawwang, 2008; Jamtawee, 2000; Pinyosunun, 2005; Supatranont, 2015). The insufficient vocabulary of Thai EFL learners could be attributed to a lack of opportunity to use English in their daily life, being shy to speak English with others, being passive learners, or lack of responsibility for their own learning (Wiriyaichitra, 2002).

Discussion

The results of this study show that their receptive vocabulary size was 462.91 words and productive vocabulary size was 292.05 words. The vocabulary size was lower than the average size. That means sixth grade students in the Northeastern region of Thailand have a small vocabulary size and have not attained the 1,000 word level. The results of the current study are similar to the study conducted by Patanasorn and Patanasorn (2011a), which studied the English vocabulary size of sixth grade students and examined the relationship between vocabulary size and O-NET scores. Their results revealed that the estimated vocabulary size of the sample group was 498 words.

Likewise, studies by Srisawat and Poonpon (2014) and Supatranont (2005) support the idea that the vocabulary size of Thai university students relatively small because they lacked sufficient time to study in the classroom, spending only a few hours per week studying English.

It is important to note that Thai EFL learners have a small vocabulary size, both receptive and productive, in comparison to the requirements of the English curriculum in Thailand, which stipulate that sixth grade students should have a command of 1,050- 1,200 high frequency words upon finishing primary school (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The present study shows that the size of Thai EFL learners' receptive vocabulary is almost double their productive vocabulary size. This is in agreement with the studies of Stoddard (1929), Waring (1997a), Ellis and Beaton (1993), and Stoddard (1929). These studies found that the scores for the receptive test were twice as high as the scores from the productive test. Likewise, Zhou (2010) conducted studies comparing the receptive and productive academic vocabulary of Chinese EFL learners. The results revealed that the mean score for receptive academic vocabulary size was 23.444, while the mean score for productive academic vocabulary size was 10.604. Thus, the participants of the study knew more receptive academic vocabulary than productive academic vocabulary.

Recommendations of the study

Recommendations for future studies:

1. Other criteria (e.g., income per head, economic growth rate) should be used when selecting provinces by adopting stratification techniques. Stratification techniques should be employed to select provinces of different economic and demographic groups for use in future studies.
2. Other related factors should be examined (e.g., hours spent on tasks, hours of self-study, the quality of teaching, classroom size, the quality of English content, etc.).

3. Stratification techniques to select provinces from different economic and demographic groups should be used in future studies.

Recommendations for pedagogy:

4. Thai EFL learners have a small vocabulary size, both receptive and productive vocabulary, compared to the requirements of the English curriculum in Thailand, which stipulate that sixth grade students should have a command of approximately 1,050- 1,200 words after finishing primary school (Ministry of Education, 2008). Therefore, it is important to design an effective curriculum, classroom materials and classroom activities that promote vocabulary acquisition to enhance students' vocabulary, which will lead to enrichment of their English reading, writing, speaking and listening abilities.

5. An achievable vocabulary size should be set for each grade.

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