RESEARCH ARTICLE

VOCABULARY SIZE OF ESL IGCSE STUDENTS.

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Abstract

Vocabulary is axiomatic to be acquired by learners in learning a second language. Possessing a wide size of vocabulary is regarded as a key to understand a text or a conversation, highlighting the core of being proficient in the language is through acquiring extensive vocabulary. With the increasing number of international exams offered by the local secondary schools in Malaysia, the urgency to improve students' vocabulary size becomes a concern to ensure students' performance in the exam. This study examines the size of vocabulary of Malaysian students who were enrolled in an international examination, Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) English as a Second Language examination. 109 students participated in the study. The results were collected and analysed using descriptive statistics.

Introduction:-

Studies reported that there is a declining performance of English among Malaysian students in these few years (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah, Norshimah&Kesumawati, 2008). Reports from the National Certificate Examination (SPM) and Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) indicated a shocking reduction of percentages of students who performed well in their English subject (Kulasagaran, 2015). The reports indicated that, despite exposed by the language since pre-school, many Malaysian students are not proficient in English. This becomes a concern when many schools started to indulge their students with additional international English examination for higher chances of furthering their tertiary education abroad. With the current state of performance, enrolling students with high-stake international examination such as IELTS, TOEFL and Cambridge IGCSE might worsen the situation.

This issue potentially mirrored students' current size of vocabulary. Studies showed that a vocabulary size of 3000 words is a minimum requirement for comprehension in learning a second language (Coady&Huckin, 2003; Nation & Waring, 2002). Even so, findings from another studies by Asgari and Mustapha (2011; 2012) indicated that little attention was given by the respondents in vocabulary learning and their vocabulary size appeared to be limited. Despite the heaviness of this issue, little research have been conducted to gauge students vocabulary size in learning English as a second language in Malaysia and to identify whether their current size is extensive enough for students to perform well in the international assessments. Studies related to second language learning largely focused on language learning strategies that can improve vocabulary (see, Abu Bakar Ahmad, 2002; Fizahani Rahman, 2002; Mohamed Amin Embi, 2000; Punithavalli, 2002).

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Literature Review:-
Vocabulary
Vocabulary has long been regarded as an essential aspect in language acquisition (Schmitt, 2000). Acquiring adequate vocabulary knowledge is axiomatic for successful communication and language use to take place in activities such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Previous studies have been done on this area and showed reciprocal relationship of vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency (Lewis, 2002; Nguyen & Nation, 2011). Studies also have identified necessary vocabulary size for effective use of English language (Kurgat, 2014; Nation, 2001). Learners with limited vocabulary size may face problem comprehending the content, impairing their learning and thus affecting their academic progression. Certainly the recognition of word is essential for comprehension in reading, expressing idea in writing and fluency in speaking. Since knowing vocabulary size will be helpful for effective language learning, teachers may access and measure students' vocabulary size in class. A practical way to gauge students' sizes and knowledge of vocabulary is through assessment. There are different type of vocabulary knowledge tests introduced by previous researchers as a tool to measure vocabulary knowledge such as Vocabulary Size Test by Nation and Beglar (2007); Vocabulary Level Test by Laufer& Nation (1995), Schmitt (2000), Nation (2001), and Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham (2001).

Vocabulary Level Test
Vocabulary level test works as a diagnostic tool to gauge leaners' receptive vocabulary knowledge. This test measures vocabulary at five frequency of word level: 2000, 3000, 5000, 10000 Word Levels as well as Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word Level (AWL) (Nation, 2001). In other words, the 2000 Word Level covers the 1001 to 2000 high frequency words and so on. Meanwhile, the 3000 to 5000 Word Levels covers mid frequency vocabulary and 10000 Word Levels comprises low frequency vocabulary. Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2001) highlight the 2000 and 3000 Word Levels as fundamental since they comprises of the high frequency words needed by the second language learner to effectively function in English. The first two word levels are the words that all learners need to know to read basic texts and that should be concentrated on in class (Nation, 2001). 5000 Word Level representing the words in English which have lower frequency the previous two word levels and some of them are specialised words in particular field, for example, literary novel, science fiction book, etc. Mastery of this word level indicates the capability of comprehending more challenging reading materials such as novels and literary writing (Nation, 2001).

On the other hand, the 10000 Word Level covers the low frequency words of English which usually far beyond the capacity of ESL students who are in secondary level of education. Mastery of this level usually connoted with native like since it is the normal mastery of words for those who English is their first language (Nation, 2001). Academic Word Level represents the words needed for comprehension in reading academic materials. This level is different from other word levels in Vocabulary Level Test in which it comprises 570 word families that cover 10% words in general academic text (Coxhead, 2000).This study was designed to examine size of vocabulary of students who enrolled in international examination, ESL IGCSE. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, this study will utilised Vocabulary Level Test as the instrument to measure vocabulary size.

Methodology:-
Study Design
This study employed a quantitative approach since this approach addresses research objectives, examining the relationship or causal relationship between variables (Saunders et al., 2007). Using quantitative approach, data will be collected and analysed statistically without any bias (Creswell, 2004). For this study, a language test was selected and conducted as the main data collection instrument because it allows data to be analysed quantitatively and offers researcher the independence to investigate the correlation relationship between variables. The unit of analysis of this study was students who have sat for the IGCSE examination and still studying in the school. Due to small scale of data, the findings obtained would not be representative of the population.

Participants
The study participated by 109 students in a school which is located at the north region of peninsular Malaysia. This school has been running a Dual Certificate Programme for the past 10 years since operating in 2007. The participants were native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia and they have been learning English as their second language for about 10 years. The sample size is sufficient to be analysed descriptively since it has more than 30 participants involved (Creswell, 2004). Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of participants in order to understand the context and phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2012).

Instrument
Vocabulary Level Test
This research adopted Vocabulary Levels Test designed by Norbert Schmitt, Diane Schmitt and C. Clapham (2001). This test consists of five different categories of word levels: the 2000 Word Level, the 3000 Word Level, the 5000 Word Level, the Academic Words Level, and the 10000 Words Level. The 2000 Words Levels comprises of the high frequency English words (Nation, 1990). In each word level, there are 30 items in each section makes the total of items expected to be responded by the participants to be 150 all together. The items are grouped in 10 three-ten clusters with six words listed on the left side of the test. Three words will act as the distractor. The participants are required to match 3 items from each cluster to their respective definitions on the right side of the test (see Appendix B) as shown below:

    1 business
    2 clock   _____   part of a house
    3 horse   _____   animal with four legs
    4 pencil   _____   something used for writing
    5 show
    6 wall

One correct item represents the number of words at that level. For example, getting 12 items correct in 2000 Word Level indicates 40% coverage of words of that level which means the participant is currently possesses 400 high frequency words in English. The mastery point for each level is 24 which represent 80% coverage of vocabulary knowledge of particular level (Laufer& Nation, 1999; Schmitt, 2001).

Data Analysis and Procedure
A letter of consent was delivered for school approval to conduct the study. Then, the respondents who will be involved in the study were identified by gathering their personal data followed by the Vocabulary Level Test. Instructions and detailed explanations on the test were provided. After 50 minutes duration, all the responses were collected for data analysis. The data obtained then computed and analysed using Statistic Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 20 and the findings were presented using descriptive statistics.

Results:-
Students' Vocabulary Size
This section presents the descriptive statistics of participants' performance on Vocabulary Level Test by word level. The details of the analysis are summarised in Table 5.0. in terms of mean score, standard deviations, minimum scores, maximum scores, maximum possible scores as well as the percentage of students who have acquired the mastery level.

Table 1.0: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Performance in Vocabulary Level Test (n=109).

VLT	Min	Max	MPS	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	No. of students	Cumulative Percentage of Mastery
2000	22	30	30	28.81	1.607	13 (11.9%)	99.1% (108)
3000	17	30	30	26.83	2.505	49 (42.2%)	86.2% (94)
5000	2	30	30	21.55	5.512	42 (41.3%)	41.3% (45)
AWL	3	30	30	25.26	4.049	83 (76.1%)	76.1% (83)
10000	0	30	30	9.77	7.069	4 (3.7%)	3.7% (4)

Note: MPS, Maximum Possible Score

From Table 1.0, it can be seen that the participants did quite well on three Word Levels out of the total of five. The overall percentages of mastery for the 2000, 3000 and Academic Word Levels are 99.1%, 86.2% and 76.1% with the mean scores 28.81, 26.83 and 25.26 consecutively. In 2000 Word Level, only one participant did not reach the requirement score for mastery while the remaining 108 participants have acquired this fundamental Word Level. Same goes with the 3000 Word Level, majority of the participants (94 people) passed the minimum required mastery score with only 15 (13.8%) participants scored lower than 24. On the other hand, the mean score at 5000 Word Level is 21.55 and 9.77 at 10000 Word Level. These numbers are much lower than the three Word Levels mentioned, given the maximum possible scores of 30, indicating that majority of the students did not reached the criteria of mastery. Less than half (40.4%) of the participants passed the 5000 Word Level, while only 3.7% (4 out

of 109) of the participants got 24 items correct concerning the 10000 Word Level. Although the highest score the participants got is 30 for both these Word Levels, the mastery percentages for the overall performance are quite low. In terms of size of vocabulary, the statistics revealed that only one participant did not manage to reach the minimum mastery point of all levels. With score 22 out 30 for 2000 Word Level indicating that the participant only possess about 700 words in English. 13 participants fulfil the mastery of having the basic 2000 most frequent words in English while the rest of the participants possess a larger size of vocabulary. About 42.2% of the participants fulfil the mastery of the most 3000 high frequency words in English, while another 41.3% have about 5000 words which are quite high for a second language learner with the age of 16 years old. The data obtained from the study also indicated that there are four participants who reached the 10000 Word Level. Academic Word Level, which indicates the mastery of academic words, possessed by the majority of the participants (76.1%).

Discussion and Conclusion:-
The results on students' mastery performance in Vocabulary Level Test followed prior established research which indicated that the cutting point for each level is 24 (Laufer& Nation, 1999; Schmitt, 2001). This means that if the participants obtained 24 out of 30 items correct in 2000 Word Level, they are currently have 800 most frequent words of English. This also indicates that they have acquired 80% coverage of the word level which is adequate for comprehension in reading English text and for basic production of writing in English (Schmitt, 2001). Based on this guideline, almost all of the participants managed to fulfil the mastery score for the first two word levels. This result was expected since the participants were carefully selected into the school system based on their excellent performance in national UPSR and PT3 examinations, where English is one of the compulsory subject to be taken and required to excel (Mohamad, 2003). The present study is consistent with Staehr's study (2008) that students' ability to score above average in the test administered was predicted by vocabulary size and the participants who scored above average in the test were all passed the mastery of the first word level.

Of 108 participants who passed the 2000 Word Level, 49 (42.2%) of them mastered the 3000 Word Level while another 42 (41.3%) participants possessed the mastery of the most 5000 frequent words in English. On top of that, since 10000 Word Level covers the low frequency words of English, only 4 participants showed an extraordinary mastery on this level. Many participants scored really low and there were a few who just gave up answering this part. The results also indicated that 83 participants (76.1%) mastered the Academic Word Level. Only 26 students did not reach the mastery point of this Word Level which represents 23.9% of the sample. Although this number is not that huge, it is alarming since reading and writing assessment in ESL IGCSE mainly deal with academic words and if these 26 participants did not know how to use and interpret the academic words in the exam texts will impair their understanding and ability to answer the questions correctly. This in return will affect their performance and overall performance of the students who sit for ESL IGCSE.

The findings suggest top priority of widening and improving ESL students' vocabulary size which will help them in the acquisition of English. Also, the educators should administer Vocabulary Level Test as a diagnostic test at the beginning of a teaching semester to identify students' current size of vocabulary so they can decide on suitable approaches to help the students improving their vocabulary. The study also possesses some limitations on the settings and unit of study, thus the findings of this research cannot be a close representation to other ESLcandidates in Malaysia. An increase number of participants covering several educational institutions may strengthen the reliability if the results from the present study. Also, the study research should include the analyses of all the four skills for a more holistic view on the students' performance in the assessment.

Acknowledgement:-

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