

CHAPTER ONE

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1.1. The Background of the Study

Vocabulary knowledge is one most fundamental factor that enables EFL students to acquire the competence to communicate in the target language. Words are the tools we use to think, to express ideas, and to convey meaningful messages. We get across our ideas to others by expressing our feelings and thoughts through organized words. Likewise, EFL students need to know enough words to communicate in the target language society. It is indisputable, therefore, that the more words we learn, the better we can express ourselves and make people understand us. This is very obvious when we observe the gradual process of how beginning EFL students are progressing towards higher levels of performance. Every new EFL beginner always starts to communicate with very limited number of words they pick up from time to time along the course of their study. The extent of their performance simply relies on how much vocabulary knowledge they have acquired. As they go along to broaden their vocabulary power, they learn to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wider range of situations.

The importance of vocabulary acquisition has been increasingly recognized and emphasized in EFL teaching. Improving students' vocabulary knowledge has become an educational priority because words are the very foundation of learning. It has resulted in more interest in researching and developing a number of word learning

strategies to help learners succeed better in their learning. Many different perspectives are emerging with regard to how to teach vocabulary. Traditionally, new words are presented as they appear in reading and listening texts. This indirect approach is based on the assumption that vocabulary expansion will happen through the practice of other language skills. Another different point of view sees that new words should be taught in a well-planned and regular basis within a number of contexts to promote faster learning. Recent studies also attempt to look into how memory works might create effective ways to teach and learn vocabulary. Folse (2004) writes of the importance of providing learners with multiple exposures to new words, so that the words will move from short-term to long-term memory. Learners learn words faster by recycling. Memory retention involves the process of storing new words first in short-term memory, and afterwards in long-term memory during which word frequency becomes a dominant factor that affects words storage, as the most frequently used words are easier to retrieve. In other words, most frequently-used words are more easily learned and improved when taught through daily contexts. Thus, word frequency or repeated exposures and contexts become two crucial determinants in the success of vocabulary learning and development.

Despite numerous studies have proven that word use frequency and contexts can, to a great extent, ease and increase vocabulary learning, EFL teachers at schools have not so far made any significant efforts to prioritize the vocabulary teaching on these two principal bases. Teachers do not select most-frequently used words to suit students' needs for their most immediate purposes. Instead, students have to pick up new words now and then from their reading and listening passages without any effective practices to reinforce their memory retention through use repetitions and

contextualization. Words memorization from separate lists without sufficient examples of real contextual situations worsens this deeply-rooted pattern of EFL instruction. Consequently, students find it hard to learn and remember randomly taught out-of-context words which they hardly use to communicate and express their ideas in their real-life needs; while on the other hand, most frequently-used words when taught through real-life contexts will foster vocabulary mastery and build a strong sense of confidence to advance more successfully in their EFL learning.

In line with the above perspective, Paul Nation at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand developed the concept of First 1000 most frequently used words which were selected according to their frequency of use in hundreds of academic texts. Based on his researches, Nation (2001) claims that there are 1000 most distinct words which are most frequently found in students' academic textbooks. He analyzed and conceptualized these *First 1000 High Frequency Words* to help EFL students learn English better and faster in order to acquire the immediate competence to keep pace with their daily studies covering a wide range of academic subjects. These First 1000 Words provide EFL students with highly practical and relevant ways to develop a strong basis of vocabulary power upon which their further stages of EFL competence and performance in their respective academic studies are improved. This extraordinary discovery in English pedagogy has triggered the writer's mind to explore deeper into this concept. If Nation's claim is true, then EFL students of higher education who have read many academic textbooks should be well-familiar with these 1000 Most Frequent Words that will also be reflected in their expression of ideas. Based on this standpoint, he will conduct a research to collect supportive data to find

out the extent to which EFL students can really use these First 1000 Most Frequent Words when expressing and writing down their ideas on academic subjects. By collecting EFL students' written test papers and analyzing the use percentage of Nation's First 1000 High Frequency Words of all the words they used to express and write down their ideas on their academic subjects, the writer hopes to collect strong evidence to support the soundness of Nation's First 1000 High Frequency Words Concept as the foundation upon which EFL students' higher learning levels are built, shaped, and refined.

1.2. The Scope and Limitation of the Study

The writer in this research has limited the scope of his study by focusing only on finding out the extent to which EFL students can really use Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words in expressing and writing down their ideas on their academic issues. As for the subjects of this study, he will conduct his research by analyzing the use percentage of Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words of all the total number of words used by MPBI Students at Widya Mandala Catholic University in Surabaya when expressing and writing down their ideas as the answers to the written test items of Teaching English Speaking.

1.3. The Statement of the Problems

As teachers, we are often good at teaching what words mean, but we often neglect helping students understand the words conceptually. Brozo & Simpson (1995) distinguishes definitional knowledge from contextual understanding. The first means

the students know a dictionary definition of a word, while the latter means they have a well-developed understanding of the word's meaning in a variety of contexts as well as knowledge of how to use it in those contexts. Helping students to gain meanings of words within contexts will help them develop contextual understanding.

Among many different ways to induce a strong basis of vocabulary knowledge through contextual understanding is by relating EFL instruction to students' most urgent needs and real-life situations. While topics and materials of students' high interest and appeal keep students' learning motivation high and encourage them to engage in more active involvement, EFL words must be well-selected and prioritized on those of most practical usages which can immediately help EFL students to communicate on frequent basis. This means that EFL students are more likely to acquire and strengthen their memory of vocabulary knowledge when words taught are those which they can practice and use most frequently in a large variety of their daily communication purposes.

The success of vocabulary learning as the root of EFL learning lies in the closer link between what words to teach and what words students need to use first. Impractical words which students rarely find appropriate contextual situations to practice are hard to retain. Colleen (1999) describes that teaching vocabulary sometimes feels like throwing jello against the wall. It looks pretty for the few minutes it sticks, and then soon it just slides off the wall. On the contrary, words which students can put into more frequent usages stick hard to the mind. Not only can these words help EFL students express their ideas and communicate faster in the target language, but also reinforce their memory retention through most frequently-repeated routine practices.

While EFL instruction at schools has hardly touched on the above contextual principle of teaching vocabulary, one important question that arises now is how to determine which words are the most frequently used words that best suit the immediate needs of EFL students. One of the many attempts to answer this question was that of Nation's concept which summarized a total of First 1000 High Frequency Words (MFW-K1) which help EFL students to learn faster and be able to read and understand a variety of English academic texts. However, it has not yet been researched to what extent these 1000 words are really applicable in EFL students' needs to communicate and express their ideas on their daily academic purposes. It is based on this interest that the writer carried out his research to collect sufficient evidence to answer the following research question:

To what extent are Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words used by MPBI students at Widya Mandala Catholic University in Surabaya in their written expression of ideas?

1.4. The Objectives

The writer's efforts in seeking answers to the research question as formulated above are intended to find out the extent to which MPBI students at Widya Mandala Catholic University in Surabaya can really use Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words (MFW-K1) when expressing and writing down their ideas on their academic issues. By analyzing the total number of Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words (MFW-K1) of all the words used in their written answers to the test items, the levels of their use percentage of Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words (MFW-K1) in

their written expression of ideas can be calculated. Most importantly, these findings can be used to make significant inferences about the extent to which EFL students can really use these Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words when communicating in the target language, and when high use percentages are found, then, the teaching of Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words should be introduced and intensified at the beginning levels of all EFL instructions to build a strong basis of initial word knowledge as the most fundamental foundation of EFL acquisition and development.

1.5. The Assumptions

Briefly, in conducting this study, the writer bears in mind the following assumptions:

1. MPBI students at Widya Mandala Catholic University in Surabaya are assumed to have achieved adequately high and equal levels of English proficiency. They are assumed to have acquired sufficient vocabulary knowledge of Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words (MFW-K1) which makes them ideal samples to serve the purpose of this research.
2. MPBI students at Widya Mandala Catholic University in Surabaya are assumed to have read a large variety of academic textbooks and written many academic papers and are therefore assumed to be well-familiar with Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words (MFW-K1) that will be, to a large extent, reflected in their written expression of ideas.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

Like every learning process, the final goal of learning EFL is to acquire the competence to communicate in the target language. This ability to perform in communication is attributable to EFL students' linguistic knowledge. They must first receive comprehensible input that has arrangements and structures in order to acquire this performance (Krashen, 1994, p.57). The more input of linguistic knowledge EFL students acquire, the better output of communication he can perform.

Huckin (1986: 58) states a fundamental remark from his studies that vocabulary knowledge is the most important linguistic variable in SL acquisition and performance. The more vocabulary a student has, the more command of the language he has. In line with this point of view, Saville-Troike (1984: 199) explains that vocabulary knowledge in English is the most important aspect of oral English proficiency. According to Carter and McCarthy (1988), the study of vocabulary is at the heart of language teaching and learning. Of all the different perceptions, Harmer (1991) has his most interesting metaphorical description of the importance of vocabulary when he said that 'If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh. An ability to manipulate grammatical structure does not have any potential for expressing meanings unless words are used'.

Knowing that vocabulary constitutes the most essential component of linguistic knowledge which is the pre-requisite for successful linguistic performance, then EFL students should be well-equipped with this knowledge. The more they possess of this knowledge, the better they can perform in the language they are learning. This

pedagogical truth also conveys the message that students can acquire the ability to communicate English more easily and much faster if they are taught what of this linguistic knowledge which is most relevant to their most urgent real-life needs. In other words, EFL teachers should teach first the vocabulary which are most frequently used and most immediately needed in their students' daily communication purposes in the most effective and contextual ways of language acquisition. In this context, Gairns and Redman (1986:57–63) suggests that most frequently used words should be taught first, presented in a wide variety of contexts, and oriented to respond to students' needs. Based on these standpoints and belief, the writer will conduct his study as presented in this thesis within the framework of vocabulary acquisition and development theories, the principles and approaches in vocabulary instruction, the effects of frequency and contexts on vocabulary acquisition, and some previous studies on high frequency words as broadly reviewed in chapter 2.

1.7. The Significance of the Study

The reliable findings of this study are expected to give new sources of contribution to a better understanding on the nature of language learning, provide a new breakthrough of language teaching approach, and enrich EFL teachers' techniques in the unique world of language teaching and learning, especially in the field of EFL students' vocabulary development. Most importantly, these findings serve very well the needs of all EFL students who have always wanted to achieve the immediate results to communicate in the target language for their wide range of daily

communication purposes, particularly in their academic studies, within the shortest possible duration of time.

1.8. The Definitions of Key Terms

In order to give better clarity and understanding of the contextual specific terms used in this research, the following detailed explanations are given as references.

- Nation's First 1000 Most Frequent Words: The first 1000 headwords together with their word derivatives which constitute the most frequently used words in academic textbooks at university levels as analyzed by Paul Nation at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. These words are well known as the MFW-K1.

- Written Expression of Ideas: Way of getting across thoughts, feelings, and ideas in written forms as opposed to direct speech or spoken communication.