



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**LEXIS IN COMPOSITIONS OF ESL STUDENTS IN A SELECTED  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE IN NILAI, MALAYSIA**

**TEOH LAI NEO**

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**LEXIS IN COMPOSITIONS OF ESL STUDENTS IN A SELECTED  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE IN NILAI, MALAYSIA**

**By**

**TEOH LAI NEO**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**May 2009**



## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, and especially to P.B. Jenkins, for their moral support.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**LEXIS IN COMPOSITIONS OF ESL STUDNETS IN A SELECTED  
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By

**TEOH LAI NEO**

**May 2009**

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**Faculty: Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication**

This study aimed to address the gap in studies on lexical frequency profiles (LFP) of compositions among young adult ESL learners in a selected private university college in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia. The objectives of the study were to examine the quality of ESL writing in terms of the LFP, and to explore whether vocabulary learning strategies treatment would result in an improvement in vocabulary knowledge that would generate a rich lexical profile and subsequently quality in writing.

In the study, two intact groups, formed the experimental and control groups. Each group comprised 31 participants enrolled in a writing course in the American Transfer Degree Programme in a selected private university college in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. In the first phase of the study, for pre-post tests, both groups wrote a composition of between 300 and 450 words. A computer programme, *VocabProfile* categorized the vocabulary produced in the compositions into four levels of word frequency: first

1000-, second 1000-, Academic Word List, and not-in-the-list word levels, which determined the LFP of the compositions produced by the ESL learners. The compositions were also holistically scored for vocabulary. Second, the Vocabulary Levels Test and the Productive Levels Test were administered to the learners in the pre-test and post-test to determine the vocabulary size and depth.

In addition to regular instruction as prescribed by the syllabus, the experimental group received treatment for eight weeks in the use of vocabulary learning strategies through vocabulary tasks, whilst the control group received regular instruction according to the prescribed syllabus. Data collected consisted of ESL compositions, LFP, vocabulary scores, journal writing reports, and a questionnaire data.

The findings revealed that the vocabulary learning strategies frequently used by the ESL learners, in descending order, were cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation and social. The experimental group had improved significantly in their vocabulary size at the first 2000- and 10,000-word levels, and in their productive vocabulary (depth) at the 3000- and Academic Word List word levels. Data analysis showed that the LFP of the experimental group was at the first 2000-word level, and that there was a weak relationship between the holistic vocabulary scores and the LFP.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KOSA KATA DALAM KARANGAN BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA (ESL) DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR SEBUAH KOLEJ UNIVERSITI DI NILAI**

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengemukakan jurang perbezaan dalam kajian-kajian terhadap *profil kekerapan leksikal (LFP)* dalam karangan *Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua (ESL)* dalam kalangan pelajar sebuah kolej universiti di Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Objektif-objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidik kualiti penulisan ESL daripada aspek LFP, dan meneliti sama ada perlakuan strategi-strategi pembelajaran kosa kata akan mengakibatkan perubahan dalam pengetahuan kosa kata yang boleh meningkatkan profil leksikal (LFP) dan seterusnya menghasilkan penulisan yang berkualiti.

Dalam kajian ini, dua kumpulan tetap dibentuk, iaitu kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan. Setiap kumpulan mengandungi 31 peserta yang telah mendaftar dalam kursus penulisan di bawah Program Ijazah Pertukaran Amerika di sebuah kolej universiti swasta di Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. Dalam fasa pertama kajian, dua kumpulan tersebut telah menulis sebuah karangan yang mengandungi 300 hingga 450 patah

perkataan bagi ujian pra-pasca. Sebuah program komputer, *VocabProfile* telah mengkategorikan kosa kata yang telah dihasilkan dalam karangan-karangan kepada empat tahap kekerapan perkataan: tahap *1000-perkataan pertama*, tahap *1000-perkataan kedua*, , tahap *Senarai Perkataan Akademi*, dan tahap *Tiada Dalam Senarai Perkataan*, yang telah menentukan LFP dalam karangan yang dihasilkan oleh pelajar-pelajar ESL. Karangan tersebut juga telah dinilai secara holistik bagi kosa kata. Seterusnya, Ujian Tahap Kosa Kata (*Vocabulary Levels Test*) dan Ujian Tahap Produktif (*Productive Levels Test*) telah dilaksanakan ke atas pelajar-pelajar dalam pra-ujian dan pasca-ujian untuk menentukan saiz dan kedalaman kosa kata.

Selain daripada pengajaran biasa yang telah ditentukan dalam sukatan pelajaran, kumpulan eksperimen telah menerima latihan selama lapan minggu dalam strategi-strategi pembelajaran kosa kata melalui tugas-tugas kosa kata, manakala kumpulan kawalan telah menerima pengajaran biasa mengikut sukatan pelajaran yang telah ditetapkan. Data yang telah diperolehi mengandungi karangan ESL, LFP, skor kosan kata, laporan penulisan jurnal, dan data soal selidik.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa strategi-strategi pembelajaran kosa kata yang sering digunakan oleh pelajar-pelajar ESL, mengikut susunan menurun, adalah kognitif, metakognitif, daya ingatan, daya mengganti dan sosial. Kumpulan eksperimen telah menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam saiz kosa kata pada tahap 2000-perkataan pertama dan tahap 10,000-perkataan, serta dalam kosa kata produktif (kedalaman) pada tahap 3000-perkataan dan tahap Senarai Perkataan Akademi. Analisa data telah menunjukkan bahawa LFP bagi kumpulan eksperimen adalah pada tahap 2000-

perkataan pertama, serta terdapat perkaitan yang lemah di antara skor kosa kata holistik dan LFP.



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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 19 May, 2009 to conduct the final examination of Teoh Lai Neo on her thesis entitled “Lexis in Compositions of ESL Students in a Selected University College in Nilai, Malaysia” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Pertanian Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

.....  
Teoh Lai Neo

25 August 2009

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## CHAPTER 1

### 1.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the background of the study, statement of the research problem and the research questions, the purpose and significance of the study. In addition, the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study and the definitions of the key terms are presented.

### 1.1 Background to the study

Studies on the acquisition of vocabulary have increased in recent years. According to Schmitt (1995), there is a lack of a general theory on the acquisition of vocabulary and the knowledge on the stages of acquisition that specific words may shift through. In other words, researchers have not arrived at a clear model on vocabulary acquisition. Most studies have focused on the measurement of vocabulary size and depth (Laufer, 2003; Hirsch & Nation, 1993) on the number of words an average native speaker knows (D'Anna, Zeichmeister, & Hall, 1991; Goulden, Nation & Read, 1990) and on the number of words non-native speakers need to know (see for example, Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Laufer, 1992). In the classroom situation, the learning and or the acquisition of vocabulary has been treated as part of the learning of other skills, such as reading comprehension.

Reading provides the exposure to vocabulary which is stored as passive or active vocabulary (Laufer & Nation, 1995, 1999) in the mental lexicon. Passive vocabulary



is declarative knowledge that is knowledge *that* something is ... (Anderson, 1983, 1985) in the short-term memory. More encounters with, and more practice in the use of this vocabulary through vocabulary tasks enable the vocabulary to be integrated into fluent performance (McLaughlin, 1987; cited in Ellis, 2000, p. 32) and subsequently, become automatized as procedural knowledge; that is, the knowledge of *how to do* something (Anderson, 1983, 1985). This vocabulary that has become proceduralized is stored in and retrieved automatically from the long-term memory at any time. In other words, this vocabulary becomes active vocabulary.

Lexis or vocabulary is important for competence and fluency in speech and in writing, and it is an indicator of general proficiency (Lewis, 2002; Singleton, 2000). One's lexical vocabulary knowledge also indicates general language proficiency (Lewis, 2002; Singleton, 2000). Inadequate vocabulary hampers communication. This is usually the case among less proficient writers (Raimes, 1985) who find it difficult to express their ideas due to a lack of vocabulary. Learners have expressed that lexis or vocabulary is important for academic writing (see for example Leki & Carson, 1994). When it comes to evaluation of compositions, lexis becomes an important criterion for the quality of writing among raters (for example, Engber, 1995).

In the Malaysian context, especially in private and in public institutions of higher learning, many learners face problems with writing academic papers due their low to intermediate language proficiency. In private institutions, especially in university colleges, in the current context, most learners graduate from high schools or secondary schools where efficient English language skills are less emphasized. For

instance, a private university college in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan enrolls learners that mostly graduate from secondary schools where the language often used for communication is Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia. Such learners then face serious language problems coping with their courses in the first year of study. This may be common too among learners in the public universities whenever instruction of courses is conducted in English. These learners are hampered by inadequate vocabulary skills and vocabulary knowledge to express their ideas clearly when it comes to the task of writing academic papers in English. Due to this setback, many learners often resort to plagiarizing from books, journals and the Internet. This situation provides a good environment for investigating the connection between lexical knowledge, lexical richness, and writing. Thus on this basis, this study was conducted.

This particular university college was selected for investigating the relationship between lexical knowledge and writing activity because of a number of factors. From the historical perspective, it was one of the earliest private colleges to offer a variety of courses to cater to the educational needs of the young graduating high school population in the country. This college, now designated the status of a university college offers a variety of courses and programs that are transferable to universities overseas. For example, there are twinning and transferable programs or courses between this university college and universities in Britain, Australia and United States of America. Since this is the case, the medium of instruction is English for all the courses except for the required Malaysian compulsory courses. To pass such courses conducted in English, it is crucial for the learners to develop their

English language proficiency, in particular vocabulary skills, to a level where they are able to cope with the courses.

Next, this university college offers programs that are almost similarly offered in other private university colleges in Malaysia too. For instance, this university college offers a range of business-related courses. One such example is Finance and Accounting that may also be found in other programmes offered in other private university colleges such as University College Sedaya International (or UCSI University), University College Sunway, and several other colleges and university colleges.

Finally, this private university college was selected on the basis of its relatively large number of international students (20% of the total student population) that come from different language backgrounds and language proficiency levels. This multifaceted feature probably exists in other private university colleges too, and perhaps the upcoming trend in public universities as well. As a result of this, the university college served as a good place to conduct a study on the relationship between lexical richness and writing quality in written compositions.

Schmitt (1998) says that there must be studies to determine the development of vocabulary within individuals and procedures to measure and identify the levels of lexical knowledge. There should be studies to “capture degrees of lexical knowledge” (Schmitt, 1998, p. 283). There must also be studies to find out what goes beyond the knowledge of meaning and form (Nation, 1990; Richards, 1976) in the mastery of a word. They should include tracking of the mastery of various

component types of word knowledge. Nation (1990) proposed eight-categories of word knowledge: spoken form of the word, written form, grammatical behaviour, collocational behaviour, frequency of the word, stylistic register constraints of the word, conceptual meaning of the word and associations the word has with other related words (pp. 30-33). Though it is impractical to include these word knowledge types for each individual word in the classroom, it is useful for teachers to use it as a guide for vocabulary tests and vocabulary learning activities (Schmitt, 1995).

In second language acquisition studies, several theories have been proposed to account for acquisition and learning. For example, two well-cited and established frameworks for skill development and performance are those of Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) theory of automaticity and of Anderson's (1983, 1990) Adaptive Control Theory (ACT/ACT\*) of skill acquisition.

Though there is no model for vocabulary acquisition, attempts to account for it are related to the cognitive information processing model proposed by Anderson. Anderson's (1983, 1990) ACT/ ACT\* approach includes three stages: the cognitive information processes that begin from the *cognitive stage* whereby a learner is involved in conscious activity (Ellis, 2000, p. 533) through the *associative stage* when the learner strengthens the various elements of learning a skill (Ellis, 2000, p. 533) and end with the *autonomous stage* when performance of a skill becomes "more or less autonomous and subconscious" (Ellis, 2000, p. 533). In the three stages, the processing of input of information shifts from the declarative knowledge (of that) to the procedural knowledge (of how to do). Within the information-processing framework, the acquisition of language skills is described as a gradual change from

the declarative mental representations towards procedural representations, and a gradual change from controlled to automatic processing of those mental representations (Hulstijn, 1990). Vocabulary skill acquisition in the information-processing framework will undergo changes that include restructuring (McLaughlin, 1987, 1990) and automatization. Automaticity involves routinisation of skills, and little effort is required to execute the processes and it is due to “the activation” of some parts of memory whenever there are appropriate patterns of input that have been activated several times (McLaughlin, 1987, cited in Ellis, 2000, p. 390). Restructuring on the other hand, involves change in the underlying knowledge (McLaughlin & Heredia, 1996; McLaughlin, 1990) and the reorganization of mental representations from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1983, 1990, 1995).

This cognitive processing framework forms the basis for a descriptive account of how lexical items may become “mentally represented and stored as knowledge and then produced in performance” (Paribakht & Wesche, 1996, p. 158). Cognitive psychologists agree that processing new lexical information elaborately such as “elaborating associates” (Baddeley, 1997, cited in Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001, p. 1) will lead to better retention than if processed less elaborately.

In the processing of information, the mechanism that triggers learning is that of noticing or conscious awareness. In Schmitt’s (1990) view “awareness at the level of noticing is necessary for converting second language input to intake” (p. 139); that is, conscious noticing of certain features about a language is necessary for learning to take place. The concept of attention can be used to explain processes involved in



selecting information of input to be processed and stored in memory (Robinson, 1995).

Learning takes place when there is awareness at the level of noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1994). Awareness is important to noticing because activation and encoding of information occur in the short-term memory when there is rehearsal and elaboration (Robinson, 1995, p. 299). Besides, information processing for acquisition and learning requires attention to input that will become available for further mental processing (Schmidt, 1995; Carr & Curran, 1994; van Patten, 1994; Gass, 1988). The noticing hypothesis states that what learners notice in input becomes intake for learning (Schmidt, 1995, 1990). Gass (1997) counter argued that some input that is noticed may not become intake. However, not all aspects of second language learning rely on input, and successful learning extends beyond the input content (Schmidt, 2001).

Another aspect of the cognitive information processing theory is the cognitive strategy. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggest that learning strategies are part of cognitive processes. Intervention in the form of instruction in the use of such strategies increase noticing and conscious awareness of learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1996; Carr & Curren, 1994) of input. With focused input through instruction and selective tasks, noticing will lead to intake. Instruction in second language vocabulary (and grammar) improves a learner's receptive and productive skills, and it provides opportunities for expanding a learner's lexical (and syntactic) knowledge. A number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of and necessity for teaching second language