Relationship Between Vocabulary Size, Syntactic Awareness and Reading Comprehension in Low- and High-Level Korean High School EFL Students

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This present study sought to investigate the relative contribution of vocabulary size and grammar awareness for L2 reading comprehension (RC) for Korean high school EFL learners. 74 eleventh grade students attending a Korean high school were asked to take a vocabulary test, a grammar awareness test, and a reading comprehension test. Vocabulary knowledge was measured using the Korean version of the Vocabulary Levels Test and syntactic awareness was estimated with a subset of the Grammaticality Judgement Test (20 items). RC items were adopted from the Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (GSAT) Mock Test. The results showed a significant correlation between vocabulary size and RC. However, grammar awareness and RC showed no significant correlation. This study also found that for high-level students, there was a significant correlation between vocabulary size and RC especially for words taken from the 3,000-word family level. In contrast, for low-level students, there was a significant correlation between vocabulary size and RC but for words taken from the 5,000-word family level. Furthermore, there was not a significant correlation between syntactic awareness and RC for either low or high-level students. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge predicts both low and high-level students' RC, whereas syntactic awareness does not predict the students' RC.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is recognized as a key skill that underlies academic success for both first and second language learners (Catherine, Snow, Burns, &
Griffin, 1998; Rosenfeld, Leung, & Oltman, 2001; Sherwood, 1977). Reading ability is also related to a large set of skills and knowledge, but it has been shown that vocabulary knowledge is of particular importance in predicting reading comprehension ability (Laufer, 1992; Nation 2001; Qian, 1999; Ulijn & Strother, 1990). Schmitt (2000) argued that “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language” (p. 55). This is an argument that is especially important for second language readers who rely strongly on vocabulary knowledge. It has been suggested that a limited vocabulary is the most significant barrier for second language readers (Huckin & Bloch, 1993). Hence, it is essential to ensure that second language learners have enough vocabulary to read well (Grabe, 2009; Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005).\(^\text{1}\) Laufer's (1992) study reported that readers needed to be familiar with the 3000 most common word families to read academic material with little difficulty (Hudson, 2007). Hirsh and Nation (1992) found that in order for readers to comprehend complicated novels they should have a vocabulary size of about 5,000-word families. Nevertheless, there are other factors that also influence an individual's ability to comprehend a text. A knowledge of syntax is also vital if a person is to understand what they are reading. Therefore, in addition to vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge is a important factor in assisting reading comprehension (Kirajima, 1997; Verhoeve, 1990).

Syntactic awareness refers to "the ability to manipulate and reflect on the grammatical structure of language" (Cain, 2007). This ability enables an individual to appreciate word-order and grammatical structure. Recent studies have provided support for the importance of syntactic awareness as a critical linguistic skill. Research has shown that syntactic awareness is positively related to the process of language acquisition (Jia, Aaronson, & Wu, 2002) and reading skills involving word recognition (Gaux & Gombert, 1999), reading fluency (Mokhtari & Thompson, 2006), and reading comprehension (Katz, 2004; Nation & Snowling, 2000). Syntactic awareness extends beyond simple grammar knowledge; a test of syntactic awareness the knowledge of linguistic structure as well as aptitude in manipulating this knowledge based on task demands. Therefore, many researchers have considered the relationship between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension. For