

# INVESTIGATING THE GENERAL ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEVEL OF VOCATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS IN CHINA UNDER CSE STANDARD\*

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## **Abstract**

This study employed a quantitative method using the English Vocabulary Size Test (Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) and Word Association Test (Read, 2014) to investigate vocational college students' English Vocabulary levels in breadth and depth, hoping to find out the long-living problems existing in English learning and teaching in China's vocational colleges. The main findings are that vocational college students' vocabulary breadth remains at approximately 2500 words, failing up to the requirements of CSE (2018) as prescribed. 2) Their vocabulary depth is much lower than the vocabulary size, far short of the required level.

**Keywords:** English vocabulary level, Vocational college students

## **Introduction**

The new framework of China Standards of English Language (CSE) was proposed by the examination centre of the Ministry of Education and the text information management department of the Ministry of Education, and examined and approved by the Language Standard Examination and Approval Committee of the State language and writing Working Committee of China (2018).

The English language ability of Chinese English learners and users is divided into one to nine levels from low to high. Learners and users whose abilities are divided into three stages: primary learners and users, intermediate learners and users, and advanced learners and users.

According to the CSE released in 2018, the English proficiency of Chinese learners and English users has been refined. The characteristics of their English language proficiency are defined as three stages: primary, intermediate, and advanced. Their English ability is divided into nine levels, each of which corresponds to a stage.

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**Table 1** English language proficiency level

Capacity development stage	Capability level
	Level 9
<b>Proficiency stage</b> (advanced learners and users)	Level 8
	Level 7
	Level 6
<b>Improvement stage</b> (intermediate learners and users)	Level 5
	Level 4
	Tertiary
<b>Basic stage</b> (primary learners and users)	Second level
	Class A

**Table 2** Summary of language ability

Level 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to accurately and thoroughly understand and grasp various language materials.</li> <li>● Be able to freely use various ways of expression to conduct in-depth communication and exchange on various topics, express accurately, naturally and purely, and reflect a certain language style.</li> </ul>
Level 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the language materials of different genres and topics, and understand their connotation and discourse characteristics, including language style.</li> <li>● Be able to skillfully use various expression methods and strategies on various occasions for effective academic exchanges or professional related exchanges, and fully, accurately and properly elaborate, demonstrate and evaluate different related topics, so as to express accurately, smoothly, coherently and properly.</li> </ul>
Level 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the language materials of a variety of topics, including the academic materials in their professional fields, accurately grasp the theme and main idea, objectively examine and evaluate the content of the materials, and understand the deep meaning.</li> <li>● Be able to conduct in-depth communication and Discussion on a variety of relevant academic and social topics, effectively describe, explain, explain, demonstrate and evaluate, and express standardized, clear, appropriate and smooth.</li> </ul>
Level 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the language materials of various topics (including general professional topics), grasp the key points and their logical relations, and analyze, judge and evaluate the views, attitudes and implied meanings in the materials.</li> <li>● Be able to participate in discussions on a variety of topics in familiar</li> </ul>

	academic or work exchanges, effectively transmit information, compare and evaluate different opinions, express opinions, express coherent, appropriate and smooth, and meet relevant stylistic norms and stylistic requirements.
Level 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the language materials of general topics in different occasions, grasp the theme, grasp the key points, clarify the facts, views and details, and understand the intentions and attitudes of others.</li> <li>● Be able to communicate, discuss and negotiate on topics such as study and work on familiar occasions, express views and attitudes, and effectively describe, explain or elaborate on general topics, with accurate, coherent and appropriate expression.</li> </ul>
Level 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the language materials of common topics in general social occasions, grasp the theme and main content, grasp the main facts and views, and understand the intentions and attitudes of others.</li> <li>● Be able to communicate on familiar topics on familiar occasions, describe the development of events, describe the situation of things, introduce relevant activities, explain the main points of things, briefly discuss personal views, etc., and express them more accurately, clearly and coherently.</li> </ul>
Tertiary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand simple language materials in daily life, obtain specific or key information, grasp key points and infer others' intentions.</li> <li>● Be able to communicate with others in simple language in daily life or general social occasions, describe personal experiences and aspirations, explain reasons and express opinions, and the expression is basically accurate, coherent and smooth.</li> </ul>
Second level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand common simple language materials in daily life, obtain basic factual information and grasp the main content.</li> <li>● Be able to communicate with familiar topics or things around you in simple language, state information, describe events, describe situations, express basic communication intentions and achieve basic communication purposes.</li> </ul>
Class A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be able to understand the familiar simple language materials in daily life, identify the basic information of relevant activities or things around you, and understand the meaning of basic words.</li> <li>● Be able to communicate with others in basic and short words, greet each other, introduce or describe each other, state the basic information of things around you, and express attitude, sometimes with the help of repetition or nonverbal means such as gestures and expressions.</li> </ul>

Just as Foley (2019) mentioned that CSE criteria are targeted at Chinese English learners at all stages of education. As the object of this study, vocational college students in China are expected to reach the intermediate stage (levels 4, 5, and 6) upon graduation. Taking CSE 5 as a reference, this paper defines the refined overall language ability and vocabulary ability:

At CSE level 5, English learners need to understand the general theme materials in various situations, including the main points and points, and understand the facts, views, and complex details; Be able to communicate, discuss, and negotiate with others on familiar topics. ability to describe, clarify, and explain things effectively; The ability to express yourself accurately, consistently, and appropriately (CSE, 2018, p. 6). In terms of vocabulary ability, CSE level 5 English learners should understand the meaning differences between synonyms, use appropriate words to express emotions and attitudes, use highly complex words to describe highly complex objects, thoughts, behaviors, or characteristics, explain concepts, use relevant words and phrases to discuss familiar topics, and correctly use common fixed expressions (CSE, 2018, page 22).

Reviewing the specific requirements for English vocabulary ability, the current situation is not optimistic. A large number of Chinese English learners still have a long way to go on the journey of English vocabulary learning.

For many years, higher vocational colleges have faced a serious problem: no matter how hard teachers and students work, students' English levels do not significantly improve after three years of college education. In this context, how to cultivate and cultivate high-quality graduates with a competitive English level for society has become a strategic problem for China's higher vocational colleges, in which the level of English vocabulary is the most critical part.

Many undergraduates who are studying English as a new language have trouble because they do not know many English words. Many students say that learning a new language is hard for them, but many students say that vocabulary learning is their single biggest problem. However, vocabulary has not been given much attention throughout foreign language education. Children in Asian nations have a lot of trouble with their vocabulary. China has around 128,000 "word families" in it (Nation, 2011). The average student learned about 5800 familiar "basic words," 17,000 unexpected "basic words," as well as 9600 variants and compounds, among other things (Nation, 2011).

In recent years, the pursuit of the best method of teaching a foreign language has been put on hold. Instead, the focus has been on how teachers and students actually achieve their goals effectively. As it has already been mentioned before, vocabulary learning is very important in communication and in learning a language. Many Chinese English learners struggled because they lack vocabulary.

Much research on the vocabulary size of language learning (university and graduate students) around the world has found that their vocabulary is less than 4,000 words. For example, Nurwen discovered that Indonesian university students have a vocabulary of roughly 1226 words, but Japanese university students have a vocabulary of 2000–3300 words (Barrow, 2019). Liu (2016) conducted a study on undergraduate students at Jiangsu Technical University in China and discovered that none of the 108 participants achieved levels of 3000 words or higher, with the majority falling below the 2000-word range.

Qian (1998) pointed out that there are two primary dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth. "Breadth of vocabulary knowledge refers to the size of one's vocabulary or the number of words about which one has at least a cursory understanding," and "depth of vocabulary knowledge relates to how well one knows a word" (Qian, 2002:515). Nation (2012) claimed in his study that knowing at least

3000 elevated English words can help EFL students deal with university-level reading assignments.

Furthermore, Li and Kirby (2014) claimed that vocabulary breadth and depth were moderately related, with the breadth contributing more to word reading and the depth contributing more to summary writing, which contradicted the finding that vocabulary breadth played a much more significant role in text instruction (Kang, Kang and Park, 2012; Farvardin and Koosha, 2011). There is a lot of other empirical research that supports the notion that both vocabulary breadth and depth are positively associated and assist in the prediction of learners' success in lexical inference and reading ability (Hatamiand & Tavakoli, 2012; Qian, 2002).

### **Research Objective**

The study commonly investigates the general English vocabulary level of vocational college students in China.

### **Methods**

This study employed quantitative methods using English vocabulary level tests to examine the students' vocabulary breadth and depth. The breadth of the vocabulary knowledge test (Vocabulary Size Test) adopted the test developed by Schmitt, which included five vocabulary levels: 2000, 3000, 5000, 10000, and academic word levels. Considering the objects' actual situation, the test in this study selected the levels of 2500 vocabulary items to test the student's vocabulary size. There were 6 vocabulary items in one group, 10 in all. In each group, six answer options were displayed, of which three were distractors for each item. For every vocabulary item, the test takers were guided to select only one answer option and get one score for each right choice, totalling 100 scores. This test was considered one of the most commonly used tests to estimate learners' vocabulary size, and several past studies (Qian, 2002; Teng, 2014b; Xiang & Fulcher, 2007) adopted it.

### **Population and samples**

The population are students in Shandong Vocational College of Science and Technology (SVCST), selecting 350 samples majoring in Business English, preschool education, international trade, civil engineering, and Korean language in SVCST. The selected five disciplines can represent the general situation of two branches in the college: Literal Arts and Science & Engineering.

### **Collection of Data**

The teachers divided the 350 students into two classes and distributed two pieces of test paper to both classes, including VST (breadth) and WAT (depth). A total of 700 questionnaires were sent out and 644 were taken back with a recovery rate of 92%. The students were required to complete the test within 50 minutes, and students were not allowed to consult books and dictionaries during the test.

## Findings

The data was processed by the SPSS software. From the perspective of vocabulary breadth, the lowest score is only 35 points, the highest score is 100 points, the average score reaches 65 points, and the standard deviation is 16.87, indicating that there is a large gap in students' breadth.

In the aspect of vocabulary depth, the lowest score is 20 points, the maximum value is 90 points, and the average value is 45, indicating that the situation in depth is much worse than that in breadth. As shown from median, the value of depth is 38, its standard deviation is 12.76, and the performance gap is smaller than breadth.

**Table 3** Breadth and Depth Distribution

	Min	Max	Average	Median	Standard deviation
breadth	35	100	65	58	16.87
depth	20	90	45	38	12.76

The "Higher Vocational Education English Curriculum Teaching Basic Requirements" clearly states that higher vocational college students should pass College English Test 4 during college time, while they could be successful in College English Test 4 (CET 4) only under the condition of mastering roughly 4200 English words, which is not met at all through the vocabulary level survey result.

## Conclusion and suggestion

However, through the above experimental tests, it can be seen that the English vocabulary of higher vocational college students is roughly summarized as a low starting point and a poor foundation. The author still believes that there are many reasons leading to vocabulary learning problems, such as lack of desire and initiative of learning English, rote memorization, no proper guidance, etc. The author also find a common phenomenon that a large number of students spend a lot of time and energy in English words, but with little effect and they can't use vocabulary learning strategies properly and effectively. What students need most is the accurate guidance on appropriate vocabulary learning strategies. Therefore, EFL teachers can design different kinds of tasks to facilitate the students' vocabulary study.

Firstly, the SCE scale can be used as a benchmark to pay attention to the design means of English course teaching. In today's social situation, the rapid development of information technology has been widely used in various parts of education and teaching. Based on this development trend, to improve the English learners' ability to apply English, it is necessary to take the scale as the benchmark, and timely update the teaching purpose according to the student's actual English level to develop appropriate teaching methods. For example, English teachers can use multimedia devices to have students practice vocabulary learned by watching videos or listening to the radio. In this way, students can vividly have a deeper understanding of words and phrases in different contexts, which undoubtedly strengthens their memory of words.

In this way, both the role of the teacher's guide and the student's main body status is fully reflected, ensuring that students learning English improve their English learning initiative and enthusiasm. The traditional English teaching structure will be changed so that students' English practice abilities can be effectively cultivated. The teacher always uses scale as a benchmark for higher vocational students of different ability levels for different learning tasks. They can make full use of existing resources by using the multimedia platform for each level of students of different English learning tasks. They can have any time, anywhere access to the teacher to student's study trends and progress. Thus, teachers, according to the learning task progress and result using the scale standard, To objectively obtain students' English ability level and then formulate the next step of English learning strategies to help students achieve a greater degree of English comprehensive ability and level improvement.

Secondly, teachers can also take the CSE scale as the norm and comprehensively optimize English teaching design in various aspects to improve students' English listening, speaking, and practical application ability. According to the specific scale standards at the present stage, it mainly requires students to have a higher level of English listening, speaking, and practical expression ability, such as: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation ability, which has a unique advantage. On the one hand, the higher vocational English teachers use informatization means a structure close to the most vivid English learning environment, letting the students watch the social and cultural situations in different countries, feel the English way of thinking, and consciously help students to reduce the occurrence of Chinese pronunciation in English. On the other hand, the smart use of language listening, speaking, and writing equipment, such as intelligent language classrooms, as far possible to let students access diverse learning resources and have more intimate contact with the English language, to improve their cognition of English. Over time, the language will be improved. Teachers can be tailored for different students of different levels and the difficulty of the English exam, students in the learning progress and scale through standard both clever unions, undertake to the student stage encouraging and rewarding, to a certain extent, improving the students' English learning initiative and eventually making students improve English skills.

Besides, in English classes, EFL teachers should concentrate more on the factors that influence students' English vocabulary learning strategies, such as educational background, cultural background, different mother tongues, motivation, etc. The teachers should also realize that students might have a weaker basis in English so they need more patience in teaching students. EFL teachers are supposed to stimulate the students to use the most effective learning strategies on their own.

In the English class, EFL teachers are supposed to set up a comfortable and positive atmosphere for students to learn English vocabulary and introduce diverse approaches to learning English vocabulary. In addition, the more input, the more output. The EFL teachers should assign appropriate reading materials to the students to read regularly on their own in their spare time. After all, textbooks are limited in content and quantity. For example, the original novel and newspapers, as well as magazines, are good choices, especially those to their liking and interest, which can help a lot in their vocabulary study

in that interest is the best teacher. EFL teachers are supposed to master different kinds of English vocabulary learning strategies before introducing them to the students.

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