

Learners' Vocabulary Levels and Their Subjective Judgment on Books

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This study looks into learners' vocabulary levels and their "subjective judgment" based on books they have read during a half-year extensive reading course. Participants are non-English-major university students in Japan. They took vocabulary tests (Nation 2001) at 1000, 2000 and 3000 word levels before they started reading books. They read 8-16 books during the course and rated each book by difficulty and by preference on a scale of one to five respectively. The paper analyzes the relation between their vocabulary levels and their ratings on books and we also offer observations about individual learner characteristics to suggest necessary factors to be considered in supporting learners effectively in potential extensive reading programs.

In extensive reading programs, students need to learn how to select books within their "comfort zone" as Day and Bamford (1998) and other studies have pointed out. Vocabulary should be one important element that determines each learner's comfort zone. However, observing the class and individual students through the course, a question came up: are students' vocabulary levels and their subjective judgments, such as difficulty, comfort zone, and preference really correlated?

The goal of this study is to figure out learners' vocabulary levels and other factors that would influence their subjective judgment on books so that teachers can help each student choose comfortable and enjoyable books in the extensive reading programs.

Participants and Method

Participants of this study were 99 first year students at nursing university who participated in an extensive reading (ER) program. During the course, students were required to read at least 8 books and 96,000 words, and to write reaction reports on Mizuno's (2009) Interactive Reading Community (IRC ver. 4) after each reading.

The data collected from participants' reaction reports through October, 2010, to February, 2011, are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

- 1) The relation of students' vocabulary levels and their subjective judgments on books is analyzed. Students' vocabulary level is measured using vocabulary level tests (1000, 2000, and 3000 word level) produced by Nation and Schmitt

(Nation 2001). Two kinds of subjective judgment are measured using participants' records after reading each book: they score subjective difficulty (very easy: 1, easy: 2, normal: 3, slightly difficult: 4, very difficult: 5) and indicated preference from * to *****. If they found the book very interesting, they put 5 stars.

- 2) Individual learners are examined to find some other factors that seem to have influences on participants' book selection and subjective judgment on books.

Results

Vocabulary Level

Hu and Nation (2000) state that most readers would need to know 98% of the running words in a text to gain adequate comprehension.

In order to help students choose books to start with, and learn to be aware of their "comfort zone", vocabulary level tests at 1,000, 2,000 and 3,000 word levels were conducted.

As to the results, in the 1,000 word level test, no one scored 98 or higher. 84% of the test takers scored in the 60-80 range and the average score was 77. Two participants scored 98 or higher at the 2,000 word level. 78% of them scored in the 60-80 range, and the average score was 73. At the 3,000 word level, no one scored 98 or higher. 75% of test-takers scored in the 50-70 range, and the average score was 63.

Vocabulary Level and Subjective Difficulty

Figure 1 compares participants' vocabulary levels and book levels that the participants rated as "slightly

difficult" and "very difficult", which are shown as 4 and 5 respectively in the graphs. The bubbles above the line represent cases in which non-graded books were read and rated "slightly difficult" or "very difficult".

There is no significant correlation between the participants' vocabulary test scores and their subjective judgment of difficulty.

Subjective Judgment of Difficulty and Preference

Figure 2 compares participants' subjective difficulty and their preference on books. It denotes general observations such as:

- 📖 Many students select books which they find not very easy or not very difficult.
- 📖 More than 80 % of the books read are rated 3 stars or higher, indicating that the participants find most of the books they select okay or enjoyable.
- 📖 Once books are selected, significant correlation between subjective difficulty and preference is not necessarily found.

Quantitative analysis does not show significant correlation between students' vocabulary levels and their subjective judgment of books.

Although many cases in the present study are judged "normal(3)", Group A-D in Figure 2 show different characteristics in terms of the relation of "comfort zone" and preference. The cases in Group A and Group D are straightforward: readers enjoyed easy books while they couldn't enjoy difficult books. The cases in Group B and Group C, however, cannot be accounted for in the same way. Those in Group D read difficult books beyond their comfort zone and still found them enjoyable. Group A read books within their comfort zone but didn't enjoy the books.

In order to find some other factors that would influence learners' book selection and preference individual learners need to be observed.

Observation of Individual Learners

Through the observation of individual cases, some factors other

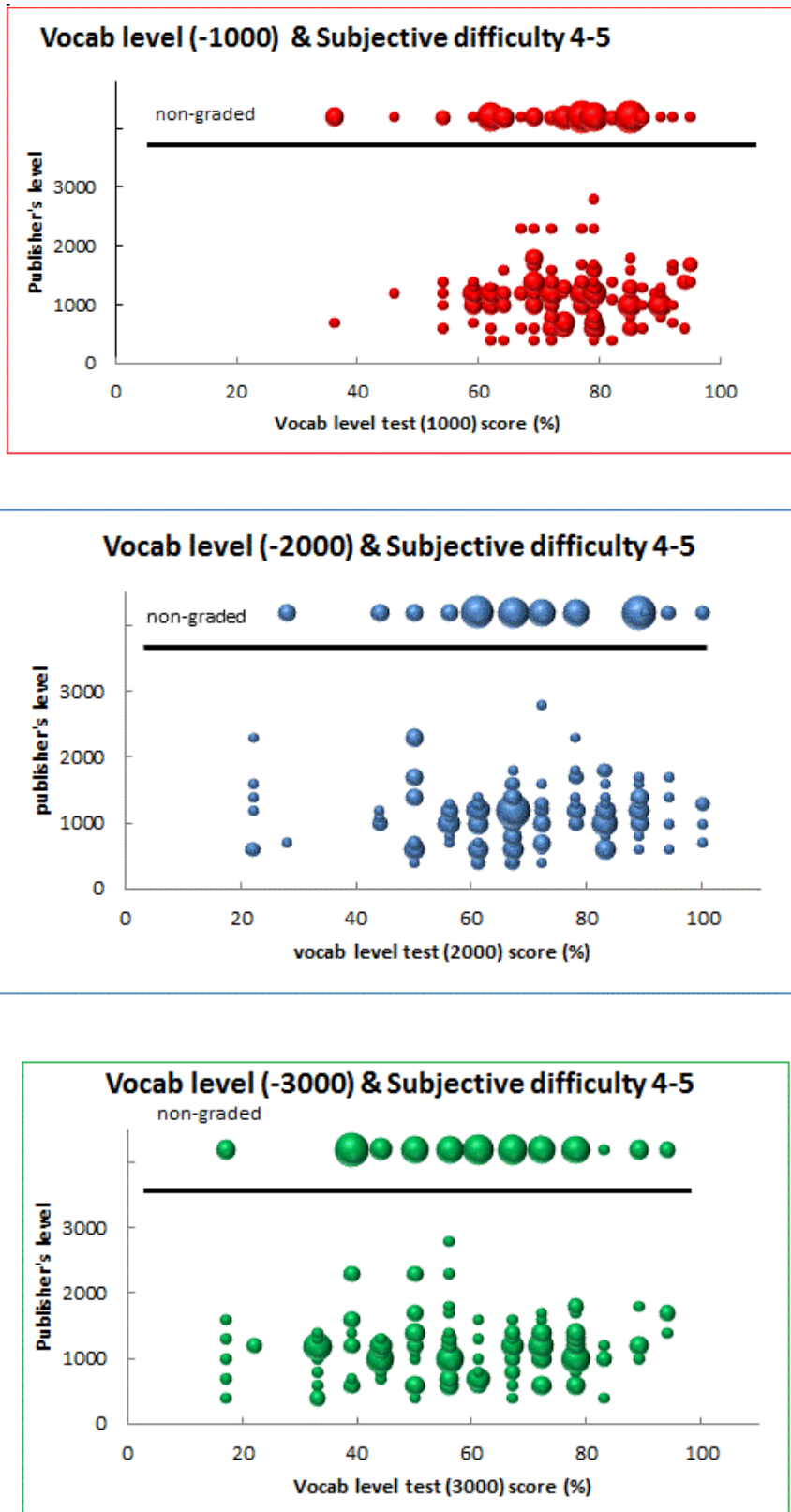


Figure 1. Participants' vocabulary level and subjective difficulty

Subjective difficulty & Preference

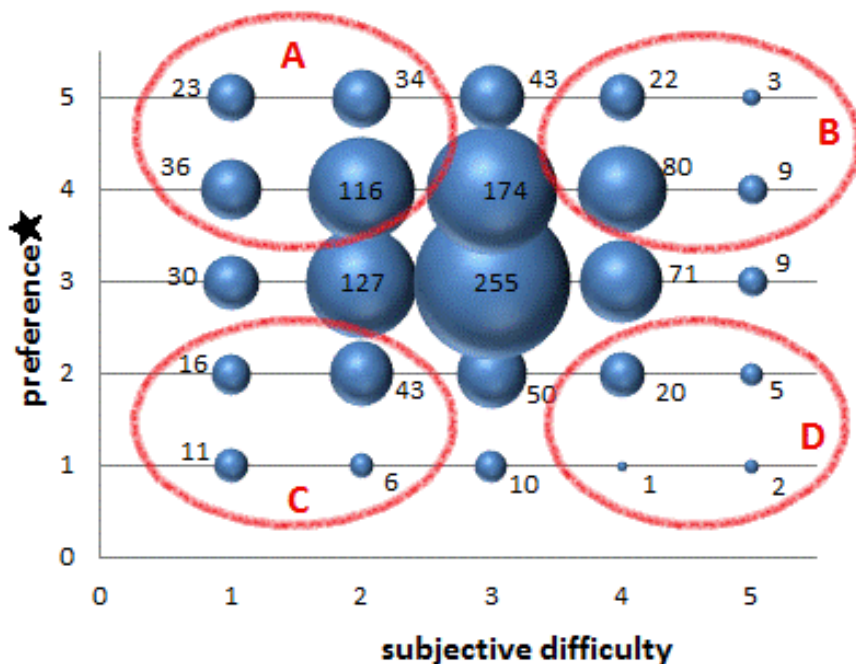


Figure 2. The relation of subjective difficulty and preference

than vocabulary level have been found out that would influence book selection and preference on books.

Brown (2009) gives an example of "desultory readers", who jump up to higher levels, get frustrated by difficulty, descend to a much lower level, and continue to make erratic progress. Some participants in this study also go back and forth between higher grade and lower grade readers, but some of them found difficult books "interesting" and "enjoyable". They are found to select these books recommended by other learners in the reading exchange activities in/ across the classes.

Strong genre preference also influences some learners' book selection and preference on books. Participant M enjoyed love stories even if they were beyond her comfort zone. Participant P enjoyed reading animal stories sometimes beyond her comfort zone.

Logan and Johnston (2009) and many previous studies have pointed out that girls have a more positive attitude to recreational reading than boys. A male participant K found difficulty in reading a book apparently within his comfort zone. His problems were lack of confidence in English ability and less interest in reading books. With teachers' support in selecting books considering his ability, confidence and personality, however, he finished the course after all and he found all the books he finally read "not

difficult".

Analysis and Conclusion

📖 Vocabulary level does not correlate with subjective judgment in a straightforward way.

📖 Subjective difficulty and preference are not necessarily correlated.

📖 Weak correlation between vocabulary levels and subjective judgment (and book selection) are caused by some factors working on individual learners that trigger different behaviors in the extensive reading program.

📖 Interactive post-reading activities in/across the classes might also affect learners, which causing weak correlation between vocabulary levels and subjective judgment on books.

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