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Greetings as we close out the 2010s with another issue of VERB. In this issue, **Nicholas Miller and John Collins** bring up an interesting aspect of proper nouns when considering the comprehension of texts.

Our next deadline will be March 15, and we are looking forward to your submissions. Remember that we especially welcome short papers based on poster presentations at the SIG symposium and forum. We would also like to start up a community section with short pieces on classroom vocabulary activities, event synopses, and short book reviews. If anyone is interested in this type of submission, feel free to contact us about it.

Also please note that the news section holds information about the symposium that was cancelled this year due to typhoon Hagibis. The Vocabulary Learning and Assessment session of that symposium will be held at PanSIG 2020, so attendees will want to make plans for that trip in May.

Best wishes for the holiday season and a fruitful 2020.

Magda Kitano & Tim Stoeckel, VERB editors

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Short Article**The Relationship between Proper Nouns and
Names and the Comprehension of Texts:
Directions for Further Research**

Nicholas H. Miller nhmiller@hotmail.com

John B. Collins john.buchanan.collins@gmail.com

Literature Review

It is well established that vocabulary knowledge is a prerequisite to successful comprehension (Kobeleva, 2012). The relationship between the relative difficulty of texts and the number of unknown words in those texts has been studied in a number of contexts, including in terms of its implications for instruction (e.g. Carver, 1994). Calculating the “lexical coverage” of a text, defined as the percentage of words in a text that a reader understands (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010), has become commonplace in applied linguistics research as a simple way of establishing the vocabulary size needed to reach the lexical threshold required to adequately comprehend a reading or listening text. It is purported that this threshold is reached when 95% (Laufer, 1989) of the words in a text are understood by the reader or listener. Later studies have pointed to a threshold of 98% (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe 2011). Despite lexical coverage studies consistently operating on the premise that proper nouns are unproblematic, “the actual treatment of proper nouns varies” (Brown, 2010, p. 355). Brown describes three approaches with which researchers can deal with proper nouns when using the RANGE (Nation & Heatley, 2002) and VocabProfile (Cobb, n.d.) calculation applications: 1) deletion from the text prior to analysis, 2) separate calculation of proper noun coverage and subsequent addition to cumulative coverage totals, and 3) calculating proper nouns as 1K words. A number of researchers (e.g., Chujo & Oghigian, 2009; Chujo, 2004; Chujo & Utiyama, 2005) have opted for the first method, justifying their decision to delete proper nouns by citing Nation (2001, p. 19-20): “they are of high frequency in particular texts but not in others...and they could not be sensibly pre-taught because their use in the text reveals their meaning.” Other researchers (e.g., Nation, 2006; Kaneko, 2014; 2015; Nurmukhamedov, 2017; Webb & Rodgers, 2009; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010) have opted for the second approach, which rests on the assumption that proper nouns present a “minimal learning burden” (Webb & Rodgers, 2009, p. 18) and that the meaning of proper nouns can be easily understood from context or the progression of the text (Nation & Wang, 1999; Hirsh & Nation, 1992, as

cited in Brown, 2010). On the other hand, Brown (2010), focusing on factors relating to prior knowledge, recognition, word connotations, and reading sub-processes, argues that there are grounds to doubt the assumption that “proper nouns are unproblematic and can be treated as known words” (p. 358).

Aims

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the role that proper nouns play in the comprehension of English language texts, by drawing attention to an avenue of research that might help clarify whether, to what degree, and in what way proper nouns within texts affect comprehension. During the administration of a course focused on the development of advanced students’ English academic reading comprehension skills, an issue that appears relevant to the above debate presented itself. The course focused on academic purposes for reading, particularly reading to learn from texts, reading to integrate information, and reading to write (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). As Grabe and Stoller explain, reading to learn from texts “typically occurs in academic and professional contexts in which a person needs to learn a considerable amount from a text” (p. 7), and requires primarily the ability to identify the main ideas and supporting ideas in a text as well as details that elaborate them. To that end, students were required to write summaries of chapters from an authentic academic text, in this case Andrew Teverson’s *Fairy Tale* (2013). By the third and final of these activities, students were demonstrating far more proficiency in providing summaries of the material, but one passage presented unexpected difficulties for students, with even higher-level students unable to provide a coherent account of it within the broader summary. The passage provides an account of the Grimm Brothers’ procurement of the sources for the first two editions of their *Children’s and Household Tales* and the fact that the Grimms, in making Frau Katherina Dorothea Viehmann the iconic storyteller of the collection as she was “a better embodiment of the idea of the German *volk* than the young middle class ladies who formed the bulk of their informants” (Teverson, 2013, p. 66), promoted an unsustainable ideal of authenticity by romanticizing their sources. The passage didn’t appear to contain features such as complex theories or obscure terminology which might readily have accounted for students’ difficulties; on the contrary, it was, in comparison to much of the preceding text they had already studied, straightforward in its account of the Grimms’ procurement of narrative sources. As such, the students’ difficulties presented somewhat of a puzzle to be solved. What did stand out upon closer inspection of the passage, however, was the seemingly large number of proper nouns present.

Methods

In order to establish the percentage of proper nouns in the passage, it was analyzed using the RANGE (Nation & Heatley, 2002) software following the three approaches described above. A limitation of RANGE, however, is its inability to recognize multi-word units such as idioms, verb phrases and, critically for our present study, *proper names*, defined by Kobeleva (2008) as “words or institutionalized word groups whose primary function in communication is referring to a particular fixed entity and differentiating it from others” (p. 60). In order to ensure that such word groups were treated as one lexical unit, proper names were manually identified and tagged by way of hyphenation. For example, “Snow White” was tagged and counted as “Snow-White” and thereby counted as a particular fixed entity (the famous fairy tale) rather than two words that describe a meteorological phenomenon and a color respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and cumulative lexical coverage (%) of the text under each treatment condition

Word List	Proper nouns/names deleted		Counted separately		Counted as 1K words	
	List %	Cumulative %	List %	Cumulative %	List %	Cumulative %
1K	78.6	78.6	70.5	70.5	80.5	80.5
2K	10.1	88.7	9.1	79.6	9.1	89.7
3K	5.5	94.1	5.0	84.6	5.0	94.7
4K	0.8	94.9	0.7	85.3	0.7	95.4
5K	1.1	96.0	1.0	86.2	1.0	96.3
6K	0.5	96.5	0.5	86.8	0.5	96.8
7K	1.6	98.1	1.4	88.2	1.4	98.2
8K	0.2	98.3	0.2	88.3	0.2	98.4
9K	0.1	98.4	0.1	88.4	0.1	98.5
10K	0.2	98.6	0.2	88.6	0.2	98.7
11K	0.1	98.7	0.1	88.7	0.1	98.8
12K	0.2	98.9	0.2	88.9	0.2	99.0
13K	0.2	99.1	0.3	89.1	0.3	99.2
14K	0.3	99.4	0.3	89.4	0.3	99.5
Proper nouns/names	0.0	99.4	10.2	99.6	0.0	99.5
Not in the lists	0.6	100.0	0.4	100.0	0.4	99.9

Results

The results of the three treatments are shown in Table 1. It was calculated that 10.2% of the text consisted of proper nouns/names, an unusually high percentage in comparison to coverage figures previously calculated for other types of written texts, such as 1-2% in novels and 5-6% in newspapers (Nation, 2001). When proper nouns/names were deleted prior to analysis, the requisite 95% lexical threshold was reached between the 5K-6K levels. When counted as 1K words, the threshold was reached at the 4K level.

At these levels, we would not expect the text to present an insurmountable lexical burden to the advanced reader. When counted separately, however, the requisite threshold is impossible to achieve without knowledge of the proper nouns and names in the text.

Discussion and Conclusions

The unusually high number of proper nouns within the passage naturally raises the questions: does comprehension difficulty increase as the number of proper nouns within a passage increases? Could it be that there is a point at which a preponderance of proper nouns makes it difficult for students to understand them from context, and constitutes a significant learning burden? What is the exact nature of the relationship between the frequency of proper nouns in a text and ease of comprehension?

These questions require further research. While such research may be of value, it also needs to be borne in mind that it is less likely that there is a simple causal relationship between reading comprehension difficulty and the percentage of proper nouns in a text, and more likely that the percentage of proper nouns within a text is one factor that influences reading comprehension. As Kobeleva (2008) notes in a study of the impact of unfamiliar proper names on ESL learners’ listening comprehension, it is reasonable to assume that certain types of proper names will affect comprehension more than others, with the semantic and contextual types of proper names being instrumental in comprehension, as formulated in Figure 1 (pp. 78-79).

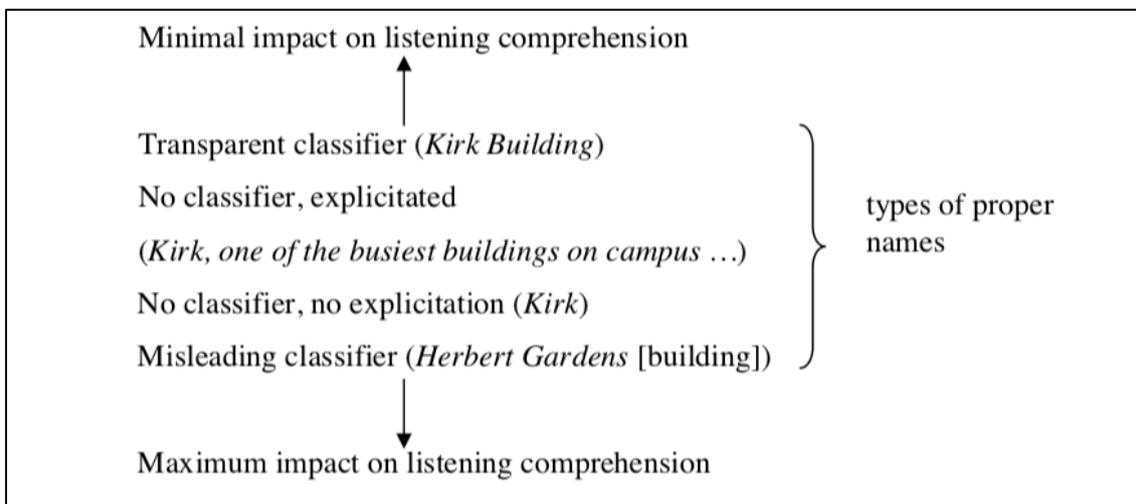


Figure 1. Potential impact of different types of proper names on ESL learners’ listening comprehension (Kobeleva, 2008, p. 79)

The *types* of proper nouns present in a text are worthwhile considering in order to contextualize and add nuance to further research into the role of proper nouns in

comprehension, and specifically whether, to what degree, and in what manner the frequency of proper nouns in a text informs difficulties in comprehension. As a starting point, possible further studies could begin either by revisiting the studies that were foundational in establishing the 95% and 98% lexical threshold but allowing participants to identify proper nouns in the sample texts as unknown words, or by conducting new studies using this methodology. The production of data from such studies would provide a hitherto missing empirical basis to evaluate the claim that proper nouns can be treated as known words. To the degree that the results of these studies may vary, that variation could in turn be studied in relation to the variation that exists between the types of proper nouns in the texts in question.

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SIG News

Upcoming Events

The JALT PanSIG Conference

University of Niigata Prefecture, Niigata City: May 30-31, 2020

At this event, the Vocabulary SIG will hold the Vocabulary Learning and Assessment session that had been scheduled for the JALT Vocab SIG 2019 Symposium, which was postponed due to Typhoon Hagibis.

Discussant: Irina Elgort (Victoria University of Wellington)

Speakers:

Chie Ogawa (Kyoto Sangyo University)

Michael Holsworth (Kyoto Sangyo University)

Haidee Thomson (Hokusei Gakuen University/Victoria University of Wellington)

Darrell Wilkinson (Tampere University, Tampere, Finland)

The 2020 Vocabulary SIG Symposium

Tokyo: September 19-20, 2020

The VERB salutes the cooperation and hard work of our reviewers:

VERB Reviewers: Phil Bennett, Thuy Bui, David Coulson, Tomoko Ishii, Brandon Kramer, Jenifer Larson-Hall, Mimi Masson, Atsushi Mizumoto, Ian Munby, John Racine, James Rogers, Rachel Ruegg, Jeff Stewart, Raymond Stubbe, and Yuka Yamamoto.

VERB Call for Papers

The VERB welcomes submissions related to vocabulary research and education.

Short papers are peer reviewed and may require rewriting and resubmission for acceptance. They must not exceed 1500 words, excluding references, tables, and titles. Short papers fall into the categories of completed research, ongoing research, and teaching and learning in practice.

Other submissions encouraged are classroom activities related to vocabulary, book reviews, opinion pieces, and event reports and commentary. All submissions are expected to adhere to APA 6th edition formatting guidelines.

Deadline for next issue: **March 15, 2020**

For submissions and all correspondence: <jaltvocabsig.verb@gmail.com>

Latest information: <https://jaltvocab.weebly.com/publications.html>

The following are guidelines for short paper submissions (please include these sections):

Completed research:	Ongoing research:	Teaching and learning in practice:
* Background	* Background	* Theoretical framework
* Aims	* Aims	* Teaching context
* Methods	* Methods	* Procedure
* Results	* Sample	* (Preliminary) Results
* Conclusions	* (Preliminary) Results	* (Preliminary) Conclusions
* Future directions	* (Preliminary) Conclusions	* Future directions
	* Future directions	

**If you are thinking about submitting, but your article doesn't fit into one of the above categories, please email us at the above address and let us know what you would like to submit and we can work it out.

***Vocabulary Learning & Instruction* Call for Papers**

The Vocabulary SIG's *Vocabulary Learning and Instruction* (VLI) journal is calling for submissions for an upcoming issue. Submissions will be published online upon acceptance, and combined into an issue later in the year.

VLI accepts long-form research papers (2000-7000 words) and brief reports, summaries, and commentaries (2000-3000 words) related to vocabulary acquisition, pedagogy, assessment, and lexical networks.

As an open journal, content is indexed on Google Scholar and made freely available on the internet without paywalls. Authors are free to also make their work available on sites such as academia.edu and researchgate.

All submissions are subject to a 2-step peer-review process:

A) Editors review manuscripts to ensure basic requirements are met, and that the work is of sufficient quality to merit external review. This process typically takes 1-2 weeks, at which point authors are informed of the outcome.

B) Submissions which meet these requirements are sent out for blind peer review by 2-3 experts in the field. This process takes approximately 1-2 months. Following external review, authors are sent copies of external reviewers' comments and notified of decisions (accept, accept pending changes, revise and resubmit, or reject).

Please see <http://vli-journal.org/submissions.html> for details