# An Assessment of Students' Achievement in Vocabulary at College Level

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## Abstract

Vocabulary achievement and its role by college students have received much less attention due to decoding, promoting and achieving in the process of language learning. Thus, students with insufficient vocabulary level have difficulties in understanding and using vocabulary, especially when they are not familiarized with the vocabulary in terms of its meaning and use. Furthermore, students who read less will acquire fewer new words, while students who read more will have better recognition for vocabularies; hence, they would be able to improve their language learning.

The aim of the current quantitative research is not only to assess the students' vocabulary achievements, but it tries to display the difficulties that students encounter during achieving their vocabulary as well.

The recent research investigates the students' difficulties in dealing with English language because of their limited vocabulary. The researchers try to answer a number of questions concerning the college students' ability to achieve vocabulary and use it in its appropriate way, recognizing the difficulties that they encounter for achieving their vocabularies, and identifying their level in vocabularies achievement.

To obtain the research goals, a test is designed and it is used as a main tool for collecting the required data. For this purpose, 50 students have been chosen randomly at the College of Basic Education / English Department Salahaddin University-Erbil for the academic year (2017-2018). The sample was junior students as they have been studied and expected of achieving their vocabulary throughout the previous years.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary assessment, types of vocabulary, importance of vocabulary.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is an important element in second language learning. By learning g new words, students can increase their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and can increase their receiving and producing of vocabulary in their second language. Thus, vocabulary is a crucial building block of language and it is convenient to measure students' knowledge and the way it is used. However, less time and attention are devoted to the teaching and thereby testing of vocabulary than to that of the other language skills. Hornby (2000) states that vocabulary includes words that someone knows or uses, the words that are typically used when talking about particular subject or a list of words with the explanation of their meanings in a book for foreign language.

Since, vocabulary achievement is a process of acquiring new words to use in daily life, and the basis for learning any new language, therefore; vocabulary achievement focuses on helping students to learn the meaning of new words and concepts in various contexts and across all academic content areas. Assessing students' achievement in vocabulary, on the other hand, means to observe students' level at using words independently. Meanwhile, assessment is a task that teachers implement in classes to test students' level of proficiency so as to know whether the students have learned the words for a specific purpose.

## 2. DEFINITIONS OF VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is one of the language aspects that has to be learned when people learn a foreign or second language. By learning new vocabulary, students can improve their skills. It is

important to define the term vocabulary because it is the basic foundation in any language and through reviewing the literature, the researchers have found the following definition that share some similarities. For instance; according to Neuman and Dwyer(2009) vocabulary can be defined as "words we must know to communicate effectively, words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary). However, Read (2000) asserts that a new item of vocabulary may be more than just a single word: such as, father-in-law, and good morning, which are made up of two or three words but are expressed in a single idea.

In addition,(Nation, 2001 and Schmitt, 1997) claim that vocabulary is one of the linguistic components influencing the development of a communicative competence and students' language skills. Saputra (2007) gives a comprehensive definition of vocabulary and describes it as all the words that are used in a language, have meanings and consist of some parts like verbs, idioms, pronunciation, and the like.

Based on the previous definitions of vocabulary, it is clear that vocabulary embraces all the words in any language that have meaning and used by students to express themselves in various situations. Students face difficulties in reading, writing, listening and speaking a foreign language without having sufficient knowledge of vocabulary. Thus, the lack of needed vocabulary is the most cause of students" inability to say what they want to say during communication activities. So, achieving new vocabulary does not merely mean memorizing the form of the word, but also comprehending its meaning in order to use it properly.

## 3. TYPES OF VOCABULARY

Regarding the fact that there are various ideas and classifications of the kinds of vocabulary, the present research mainly focuses on the receptive and productive vocabulary which is discussed by Nation (2001)who divides vocabulary according to its use into two types; receptive and productive/expressive vocabulary.

A. Receptive vocabulary is defined as carrying "the idea that we receive language input from others through listening or reading and try to comprehend it". In other words, receptive vocabulary would involve reading or listening to a word and retrieving its meaning.

B. Productive vocabulary is the words that students understand and pronounce correctly then they can use them constructively in speaking and writing. It involves what is needed for receptive vocabulary in addition to the ability to speak or write at the appropriate time. Therefore, productive vocabulary can be addressed as an active process, because the students can produce the words to express their thoughts to others.

## 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Achieving vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a language, and text comprehension or production heavily depends on the command of vocabulary knowledge (Schimmt,2001; Anderson and Freebody,1985; Meara, 1992; Coombe, Folse& Hubley,2007).

Hence, vocabulary is fundamental to English language teaching and learning because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others to express their opinions. Nation(2001), argues that students' vocabulary development is an important feature in the process of language learning. Although it has been neglected for a long time, researchers have increasingly been turning their attention to vocabulary. On the other side Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. He further affirms that it seems almost impossible to overstate the power of words; they literary have changed and will continue to change the language.

To sum up, one can say that  the greatest tools which can be given to students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large and rich vocabulary and

having the abilities for using those words in communication efficiently. For this purpose, students' ability to function in today's complex social and economic worlds is mightily affected by their language skills and vocabulary knowledge. Even if he/she knows all the grammatical rules of English, he/she would never be able to use them without sufficient vocabulary input. One can say that, vocabulary is the basic tool for shaping and transmitting meaning because a student may learn all the pronouns in English, but if he does not know the denotation of these words, he will never be capable of using these words in the real context of language.

## 5. REVIEW OF PREVIUS STUDIES

Assessing vocabulary is not very different from assessing other areas of language knowledge. However, the construct of vocabulary is not a simple one and this complexity makes it necessary to assess vocabulary from multifarious standpoints. Thus, there are many studies that were basically concerned with this issue. Precisely, their main issue was about vocabulary assessment and its relation with comprehension ability.

 The main objective of the research has done by Read and Chapelle (2001), they assert that there is a well-documented connection between good vocabulary knowledge and the ability to read. On the other hand, one of the most important researchers in this area of study is Nation (2001). He has a considerable experience in the assessment of vocabulary, both in its receptive and productive dimensions. Nation developed Vocabulary assessment as the tool that allows researchers to maintain their ideas, if students know how to accomplish the form and meaning of the most frequent words. In addition, Read (2000) asserts that a very popular way of measuring vocabulary is Nation's Level Test. This test presents decontextualized words and expects students to match them with one of a similar meaning, and words are arranged into different frequency levels and distractors have been involved. According to him the assumption behind this test is that "words that occur more frequently in the language are more likely to be known by students than less frequent words".

In another source which is written by him in (2004), he developed three fields for designing and evaluating vocabulary assessments. His work was based on an evaluation of vocabulary assessments for English language students, and his three assessment dimensions are relevant to all vocabulary assessments.

Saputra (2007) conducted a research to find out whether there was an influence of contextual teaching learning to the students' vocabulary achievement. The sample of this research was the first-grade students, consisting of (60) students. The sample consisted of two classes with (30)students in each class, and it was a random sampling. The research method applied was Quasi Experimental Design. This research had proved empirically that there was positive influence of using contextual teaching learning on English vocabulary achievement.

Cervatiuc (2007) in her article which is entitled "Assessing Second Language Vocabulary Knowledge" proposed a framework for the assessment of second language vocabulary knowledge, by juxtaposing to major theoretical distinctions: 'breadth' versus 'depth' and 'receptive' versus 'productive'. The article aimed at juxtaposing these two criteria to generate a more detailed classification that responded to the complexity of the vocabulary knowledge construct. As a result, he found out that through lexical assessment protocol should consist in the administration of an instrument from each of the four categories presented; receptive vocabulary breadth, productive vocabulary breadth, receptive vocabulary depth, and productive vocabulary depth. According to her this approach may be impractical and time consuming because the choice of a lexical test should depend on the learning context and the purpose for which the vocabulary assessment is conducted.

After reviewing the previous researches, the researchers attempt to conduct this research in order to find the answers of the research questions concerning the students' vocabulary

achievement as well as the difficulties have been encountered by them for achieving vocabularies at college level.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

### 6.1 Sample

The sample of the present research is composed of students who are the junior students at the English department/ college of basic Education/ Salahaddin university, for this purpose (50) students have been chosen randomly during the academic year 2017/2018.

### 6.2 The Instrument of the Research

Different instruments have been used in data collection, in the current research, the administration of the test is used as a main tool in the research methodology for data collection to asses students' achievement in vocabulary, for this purpose the researchers have got benefit from some books for constructing the test. The time allocated to the test was 50 minutes (as it has been set at English department). The test consists of two questions and it is out of (100) marks. The first one includes ten items, each one is given three marks, and the second question includes four sub questions A,B,C, and D. Ten marks are given to A, the others are given twenty marks as it is shown in Appendix1.

In this research final test and test-retest reliability administrated. They were conducted separately over two different days. In the final test, (50) students were selected randomly as a sample. The test was conducted on Wednesday 15th of Nov.2017. After about a month 24th of Dec. the same test as a post test was administered for the second time to determine the reliability of the test, for this purpose, (15) students were selected randomly in the previous sample

### 6.3 Scoring

After designing the test, scoring and grading must be considered (Brown 2003). The ways of scoring vary according to the types of tests. Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995) state that it is possible that some items could be more important than the other items. Thus, they could be given extra value than the others.

### 6.4 The Research Questions

The aim was to find answers to the following three questions concerning an assessment of college students' ability in vocabulary achievement:

1. To what extent students are able to achieve their vocabulary that they have learned at the college?
2. What is the most difficulty area that students face in achieving their vocabulary?
3. To what extent they are able to recognize similar words depending on the context?

### 6.5 Procedures:

Firstly, the researchers gave an overview of the aim of the research, and the description of the test with an explanation of the steps involved in completing it. Later, the students were given the vocabulary test to answer the questions in 50 minutes time-limited.

### 6.6 Validity and Reliability of the Test

Cramer and Howitt (2004) state that face validity concerns "the extent to which a measure appears to be measuring what it is supposed to be measuring", for this purpose, the test was given to a number of jury experts those who well-experienced university lecturers, to address the accuracy and acceptability of items of the test. Some items were changed, others modified according to the recommendations and suggestions of the jury members. For reliability, fifteen students (on the basis of the students' total number in the sample which was 50) from the same sample participants in the final test were selected to redo the same test after period of time. This was to find out whether they manifest a stable and consistent performance with

the test they had before (i.e. with the final test). The results recorded by all the fifteen students in both final and test retest reliability.

On the basis of the statistical results, the correlation between the two tests is (0.513573) and the P.value of the two tests is 0.258279 which is considered highly significant. See table (1)

*Table (1) correlation between final test and test retest*

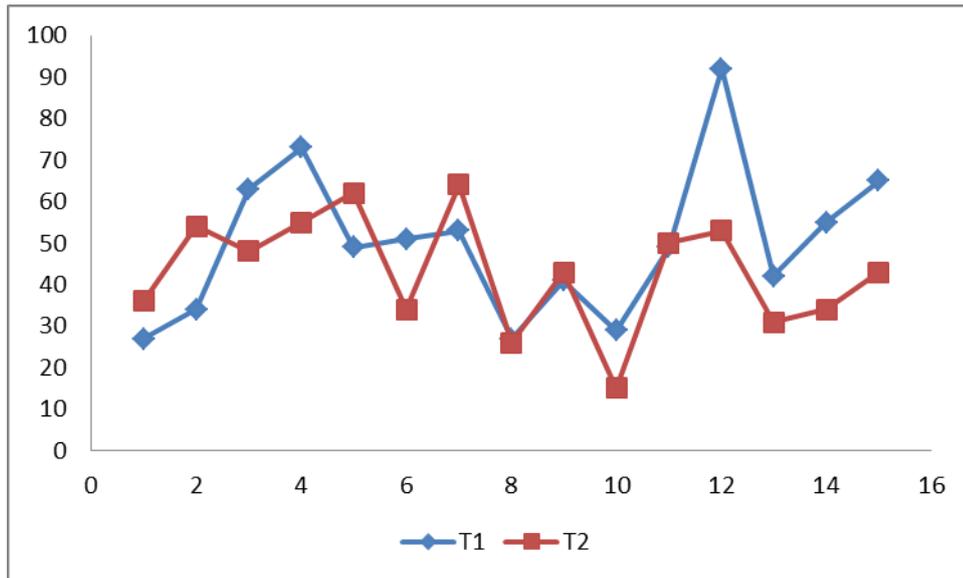| correlation coefficient | No. of students | correlation | p-value (sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Final Test & Test Retest | 15 | 0.513573 | 0.258279 (HS) |



*Fig (1) Reliability between final test and test-retest*

## 6.7 Results

Statistically, table 2 is interpreted as follows: The test included 14 items which were given to 50 students for assessing students' achievement in vocabulary. This means that 700 items were supposed to be achieved. As shown in the next table only 244 items were answered correctly representing 35.82%, 437items were incorrect, representing 64.17%, and 19 items were not attempted to answer, representing 1%. It can be deduced that the majority of students have a lack of achieving their vocabulary that they have learned at college.

*Table (2)simplify the identification of the Frequency and percentage in each item.*

| Items of Q.1 | Total Answers | Correct Answers | Percentage of Correct Answers | Incorrect Answers | Percentage of Incorrect Answers | Skipped Questions | Percentage of Skipped Questions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 50 | 4 | 8% | 46 | 92% | 0 | 0 |
| 2 | 50 | 28 | 56% | 22 | 44% | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | 49 | 34 | 69.38% | 15 | 30.61% | 1 | 2.04% |
| 4 | 48 | 4 | 8.33% | 44 | 91.66% | 2 | 4.16% |
| 5 | 49 | 5 | 10.20% | 44 | 89.79% | 1 | 2.04% |
| 6 | 50 | 9 | 18% | 41 | 82% | 0 | |
| 7 | 50 | 12 | 24% | 38 | 76% | 0 | |

| 8 | 50 | 20 | 40% | 30 | 60% | 0 | |
| 9 | 50 | 7 | 14% | 43 | 86% | 0 | |
| 10 | 49 | 19 | 38.77% | 30 | 61.22% | 1 | 2.04% |
| Total | 495 | 142 | 28% | 353 | 71% | 5 | 1% |
| Items of Q.2 | Total Answers | Correct Answers | Percentage of Correct Answers | Incorrect Answers | Percentage of Incorrect Answers | Skipped Questions | Percentage of Skipped Questions |
| 1 | 47 | 23 | 48.93% | 24 | 51.06% | 3 | 6.38% |
| 2 | 49 | 20 | 40.81% | 29 | 59.18% | 1 | 2.04% |
| 3 | 47 | 32 | 68.08% | 15 | 31.91% | 3 | 6.38% |
| 4 | 43 | 27 | 62.79% | 16 | 37.20% | 7 | 14.89% |
| Total | 186 | 102 | 54.83% | 84 | 45% | 14 | 7% |
| Total Q1+Q2 | 681 | 244 | 35.82% | 437 | 64.17% | 19 | 2.79% |
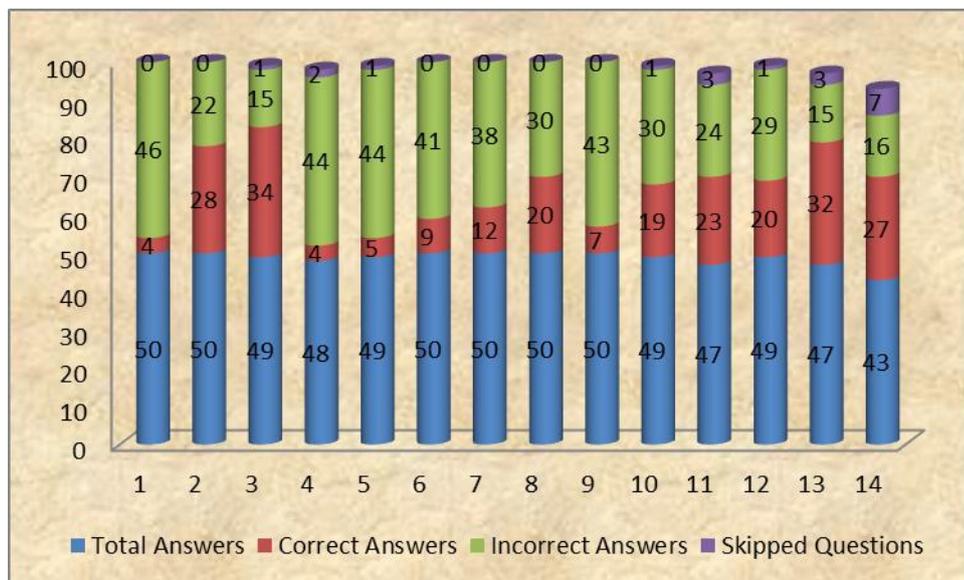


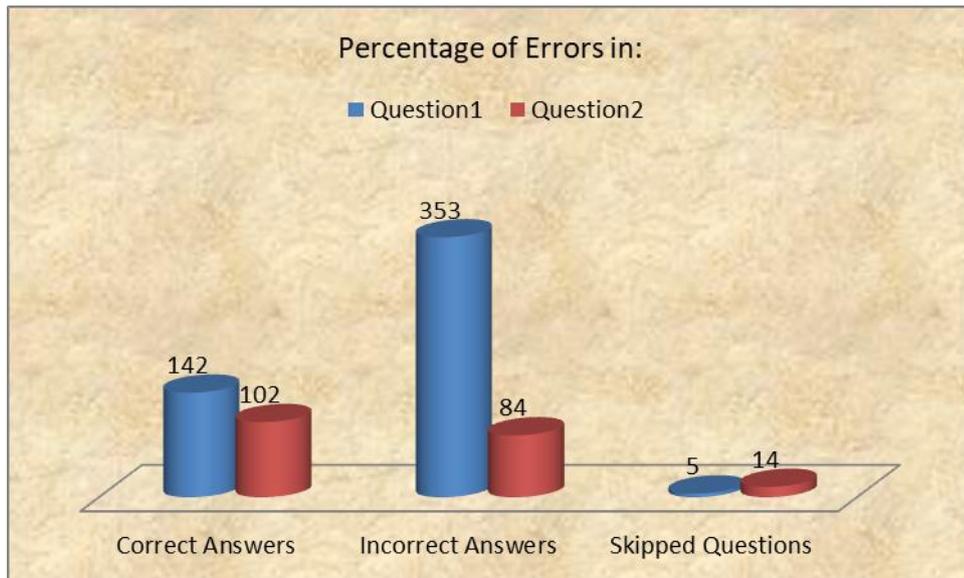*Figure (2) ) displays the percentage of errors in each item*

*Fig.(3) displays the percentage of errors overall the test*

## 6.8 DISCUSSION OF THE ERRORS

Depending on the statistical results, it is found that the majority of students are lacking ability in recognizing correct answer. The average of incorrect responses which is 64% is higher than the average of correct responses 35%, By this means the college students' level of achievement is very low in vocabulary.

By calculating the frequency and percentage of each error, the researchers were able to identify the most frequent error and the least frequent error made by the students. The results in the table (3) show that the most frequent error is due to the incorrect use of similar vocabulary in meaning according to context which is 300 errors, and the least frequent error is the error in using of vocabulary in the sentence that includes70 errors.

*Table (3) simplifies the identification of the percentage of each error.*

| Types of Errors | No.of Errors | % |
|---|---|---|
| Errors in recognizing the form of the vocabulary | 110 | %19.2 |
| Errors in misusing vocabulary in the sentence | 70 | %12.3 |
| Errors in giving the meaning of vocabulary | 92 | %16 |
| Errors in using of similar vocabulary in meaning according to context. | 300 | %52.4 |
| Total | 572 | %100 |

**Errors in using similar vocabulary in meaning according to context.**
The results show that a large number of students were unable to achieve English vocabulary accurately, although they had studied it very intensively during of their first three years. Their errors were perceived as a misuse of comprehending similar meaning of different vocabularies in context. The research results show that there are 300 errors which means 52% of student have difficulty in vocabulary achievement.

**Errors in recognizing the form of the vocabulary.**
Depending on the results, 19.2% of students have difficulties in identifying vocabulary forms, they made (110) errors. Their errors belong to their lack and inability of knowing prefixes and suffixes of the vocabularies because by adding Prefixes and suffixes to words can cause changing in the word class.

**Errors in giving the meaning of vocabulary**

In this type students have made (92) errors, which signifies 16% of them. Their errors belong to the lack of their understanding of the concepts used in the context.

**Errors in using of vocabulary in the sentence**

It seems not to be a common problem by the students because it is the least found error by them, there were (70) errors, that represent 12.3%. It displays students' unawareness of using words, as it is known that a word includes more than one meaning.
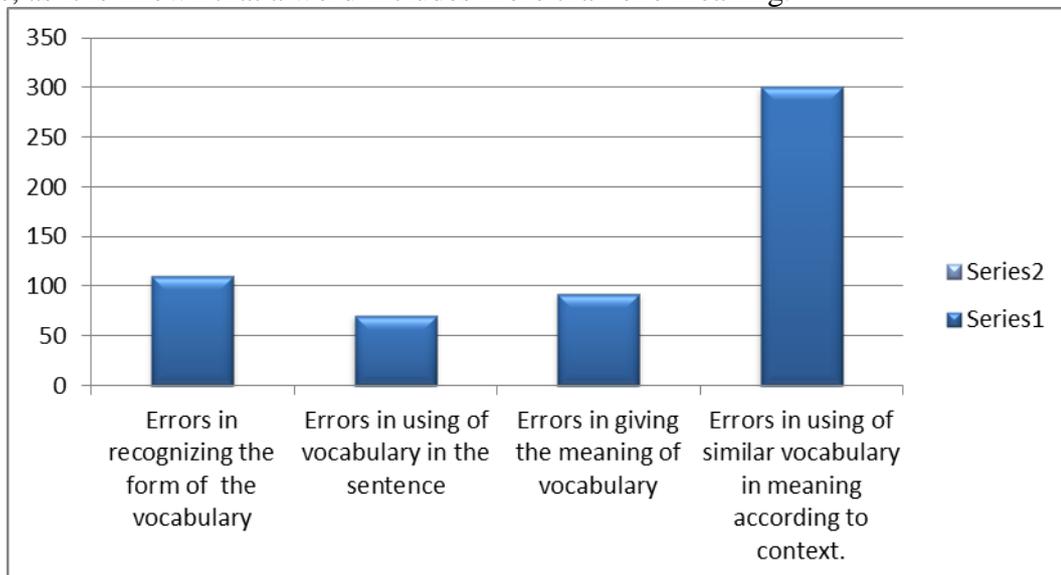


*Figure (4) Types and Percentages of Errors in Vocabulary Achievement*

## 6.9 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, students' deficiency in vocabulary achievement can be concluded in the following reasons:

- Poor reading skills by students will affect their vocabulary recognition.
- Students are lack of having a good understanding of the structure of language; including parts of speech and word parts, prefixes, suffixes and word roots as they are essential in vocabulary building.
- Having difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words is another reason. Sometimes, students overlap the meaning of the vocabularies, and they confuse in using the word based on the context; for example the use of (take) and (do) with the word (exam).
- The lack of insufficient numbers of the specialist lecturers in teaching vocabulary could be another reason.

## 6.10 RECOMMENDATIONS

- As far as the English students are concerned, teachers need to encourage them to use vocabulary in their speech and writing, and try to raise their awareness of the significance and usefulness of vocabulary they have got in different context.

- Depending on the results achieved in the tests,, it is noticed that the building of vocabulary use is a valuable means of assessing not only the students 'recognition but also their linguistic competence in a broader sense. Therefore, it is recommended that certain changes could be made in the materials that are given to students to expand their vocabulary achievement.

- To inform the students' awareness about the nature of vocabulary, comprehensive materials have to be selected by the teachers for the students in dealing with vocabulary.

- To capture vocabulary fast and easy, the students need to think of the vocabulary constituent parts, and they have to try to memorize them like any other single word.

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**APPENDIX1**

Dear students this test is a part of research requirement at English Department/College of Basic Education to assess student's achievement in vocabulary at College Level. Please read the questions carefully, your contribution is highly appreciated.

Regards

College …………………………………….. Age …….. Gender ……… Stage …….

**Time: 50 minutes**

**Q1/ Fill the gaps with the following words.**

**show - display - indicate - illustrate - point – explain- agree - accept - approve - admit**

1. This traffic sign……………… that there is a curve ahead.

2. I want you to ………………….me how this digital machine works!

3. Can you …………….. what the word "demonstration" means?

4. The newly designed racing car is ……………………in the gallery.

5. The chief of the gang …………………… his gun at the cashier.

6. If possible, find some photos to ……………………..your project better.

7. Many old people don't …………………… of the way the young talk to each other.

8. I don't usually ………………..with my partner as we have different tastes on everything.

9. After being questioned, the murderer ………… that he had killed the old lady for money.

10. I have to ………………. your offer because I have nowhere to go.

**Q2/ Read the Passage Carefully then Answer the Questions:**
Many of us experience strange**coincidences** at some time in our lives. For example, we might meet people we know in the most underlined places. Perhaps when we are on holiday, we suddenly see our neighbour on the beach. In fact, this type of coincidence is quite common, but there are some coincidences which are really incredible.
In the nineteenth century king Umberto I of Italy went to a small restaurant in Monza for dinner. The king noticed that he and the owner of the restaurant looked exactly like each other. They began talking and discovered some amazing coincidences. They were both born in the same town on the same day, 14$^{th}$ March 1844, and they both had wives called Margherita. Also Umberto became king on the same day that the restaurant owner opened his restaurant. However, there was one last unfortuate coincidence. On 29$^{th}$ July 1900, the restaurant owner died in a shooting accident. While someone was telling king Umberto I about this, a man shot and killed the king.
A/ What is Coincidence? Could you explain it in your opinion?
B/ Give the meaning of the underliend words. ( choose 5 )
C/ Use the underlined words in different sentences. ( choose 5 )
D/ Write the form of each underlined words. ( choose 5 )

## هەڵسەنگاندنی توانای بەدەست هێنانیدانە وشە لە لایەن قوتابیان \لە سەر ئاستی کۆلێژ

أميرة محمد عبدالله      شانۆ عبدالرحیم احمد

بەشی زمانی ئینگلیزی – کۆلێژی پەروەردەی بنەڕەتی زانکۆی سەلاحەددین

هەولێر

### پوختە

بەدەست هێنانی دانە وشە و ئەو رۆڵەی کە لە لای قوتابی کۆلێژ دەی گێریت لە رووی وەرگرتن و پێشخستن و بە دەست هێنانی گرنگییەکی کەمی پێدراوە لە پرۆسەی فێربوونی زماندا, بۆیە لێرەدا قوتابی لەم بارەوە تووشی ئاستەنگ دەبێتەوە لە تێگەیشتن و بەکار هێنانی دانە وشەدا. بە تایبەتی کاتێک , کە ئاشنایەتی لەگەڵر دانە وشەدا لاوازە یان هەر نییە لە رووی مانا و بەکار هێنانیانەوە. بێگومان ئەو قوتابیانەی کەمتر دەخوێننەوە کەمتر وشەی نوێ وەردەگرن. لە کاتێکدا ئەو قوتابیانەی کە زۆر دەخوێننەوە ئاسانتر دانە وشە دەناسننەوە. ئەمەش وا دەکات, کە بتوانن زمانی فێربوونیان بەرەوە پێش ببەن.

ئامانجی ئەم لێکۆڵینەوە چەندێتیە بریتیە لە هەڵسانگاندنی , نەک بە تەنها بەدەست هێنانی دانە وشە لە لایەنقوتابیان, بەڵکو دەرخستنی ئەو ئاستەنگیانە شە کە روو بە رووی قوتابی دەبنەوە لە بەدەستهێنانی دانە وشەدا.

بۆ بەدەست هێنانی ئامانجەکانی ئەم لێکۆڵینەوە, تاقیکردنەوەیەک ئامادە کراوە بۆ کۆکردنەوەی زانیاری دیاری کراو. بۆ ئەم مەبەستەش (٥٠) قوتابی بە شێوەیەکی هەرەمەکیانە وەرگیراون لە قۆناغی (سێ) بەشی ئینگلیزی , کۆلێژی پەروەردەی بنەڕەتی لە زانکۆی سەلاحەدین – هەولێر بۆ ساڵی خوێندنی (٢٠١٨/٢٠١٧). ئەم لێکۆڵینەوەیە هەوڵ دەدات وەڵامی ژمارەیەک پرسیار بداتەوە سەبارەت بە ئاستی بەدەست هێنانی دانە وشە لە لایەن قوتابیان, وە ئەو ئاستەنگانەی کە قوتابی بەرەو رووی دەبێتەوە لە کاتی بەدەست هێنانی دانە وشەدا .

**ووشە سەرەکییەکان:** هەڵسەنکاندنی دانە وشە، جۆرەکانی دانە وشە، گرنگ دانە وشە.

## تقیم تحصیل الطلاب في المفردات في مستوى الكلیة

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قسم اللغة الانكليزية- كلية التربية الاساس / جامعة صلاح الدين - أربيل

### ملخص

تحضى تحصیل المفردات ودورها الفعال اهتمامًا قلیلا من قبل طلاب الجامعات بسبب فك التشفیر والترویج والنجاز فى عملیة تعلم اللغة. و بالتالي, فإن الطلاب الذين يعانون من مستوى مفردات غیركافیة یجدون صعوبة في فهم واستخدام المفردات ، خاصةً عندما لا يكونون على درایة بالمفردات منحیث معناها واستخدامها. علاوة على ذلك ، یكتسب الطلاب الذین یقرؤون أقل عددًا قلیل من الكلمات الجدیدة, في حین أن الطلاب الذین یقرؤون أكثر سیكون لدیهم ادراك أفضل بالمفردات ؛ وبالتالي, سیكونون قادرین على تحسین تعلمهم للغة.

لا ینحصرالهدف من البحث الكمي الحالي فقط في تقییم إنجازات الطلاب في المفردات ، ولكنه یحاول أیضا عرض الصعوبات التی یواجهها الطلاب أثناء تحقیق مفرداتهم أیضًا.

للحصول على أهداف البحث ، تم تصمیم اختبار و التي تستخدم كأداة رئیسیة لجمع البیانات المطلوبة لهذا الغرض, تم اختیار 50 طالباً بشكل عشوائي في كلیة التربیة الأساسیة / قسم اللغة الإنجلیزیة بجامعة صلاح الدین في أربیل للعام الدراسي (2017-2018). كانت العینة طلابٌ ناشئین حیثالتحقوا مؤخرا بقسم اللغة الانكلیزیة. علاوة على ذلك ، یعد هذا البحث محاولة للإجابة على عدد منالأسئلة حول المفردات في عملیة التعلم: الصعوبات التي یواجهونها لتحقیق مفرداتهم ، وتحدید مستواهم في تحصیل المفردات.

**مصطلحات اساسیة:** تقییم المفردات ، أنواع المفردات ، أهمیة المفردات.