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Importance of Vocabulary Instruction as a Foundation of Language Proficiency: Evidence from Language Learners in Guangdong Province, China

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the association between the Importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency of secondary school students in Guangdong Province, China. Quantitative cross-sectional and correlational design was used for the investigation with the analysis carried out on the basis of synthesised data from 650 Grade 7-9 students studying in junior secondary public schools. The level of importance of vocabulary instruction was measured by means of 12-item five-point Likert scale, whereas language proficiency was determined through performance-based assessment encompassing listening, reading, writing, speaking and language use. Reliability and validity of vocabulary instruction scale were analysed through the calculation of Cronbach's alpha, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Pearson's product-moment correlation and simple linear regression were used for examining the hypothesised relationship. As a result of the analysis, a moderate, positive and statistically significant association between the Importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency was revealed ($r = .511$, $p < .001$). Moreover, it was found out that importance of vocabulary instruction positively and significantly predicted language proficiency through simple linear regression ($\beta = .511$, $p < .001$). The model explained 26.1% of the variation in the level of language proficiency ($R^2 = .261$). Therefore, the results of the study confirmed the hypothesis and proved that those students who had higher levels of perception of importance of vocabulary instruction were characterised by higher levels of English language proficiency. The study demonstrated the importance of systematic vocabulary instruction within English language activities. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design did not allow making any conclusions about causality.

Keywords: Vocabulary Instruction, Language Proficiency, secondary school students, English language learning, Vocabulary Knowledge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English vocabulary instruction represents an essential element in teaching English language due to the crucial nature of vocabulary that allows people to understand information and communicate meanings. In secondary schools, students face more advanced English materials and need to know more vocabulary and their correct uses. In-class vocabulary instruction could help students learn vocabulary by explaining word meanings, word forms, pronunciations, and examples of using the words. Learning vocabulary in meaningful contexts helps students understand how vocabulary is used in actual conversations rather than being just a separate thing to be memorised (Zeng et al., 2025). According to Wei and Li (2024), vocabulary instruction that pays attention to vocabulary form as well as uses meaningful language activities to work with vocabulary helps Chinese English learners to learn and retain vocabulary. These results prove the importance of vocabulary instruction from the perspective of educating children and teenagers. In this regard, vocabulary instruction becomes relevant to secondary school students in Guangdong Province due to their need to develop vocabulary in order to understand English materials and perform classroom activities. The way of vocabulary instruction used in schools could affect how much vocabulary students learn. Examining this issue would allow understanding the relationship between vocabulary instruction and language proficiency more deeply (Wei & Li, 2024).

English language proficiency means knowing English grammar and vocabulary enough to understand and communicate in English through various language skills. To read, write, speak and listen, people should know how to understand and use appropriate vocabulary. Poor knowledge of vocabulary could affect comprehending and producing any language activity even when people know basic grammatical structures. Therefore, vocabulary belongs to the linguistic knowledge that supports language proficiency. Results of Chinese learners have found considerable relationships between different aspects of vocabulary knowledge and English reading proficiency proving the relevance of vocabulary knowledge to language comprehension (Rahmawati et al., 2025). In productive language use, learners should find appropriate words and combine them in order to convey their thoughts properly. In secondary schools, there are specific academic challenges for English texts, tasks and exams that students should cope with. Having enough vocabulary could help students process those challenges and not having it could prevent students from communicating in English successfully. This way, language proficiency is related to the vocabulary knowledge and acquisition of vocabulary skills. This connection can be useful to explore the connection between vocabulary teaching and proficiency in English (Jaiyari, 2025).

Vocabulary instruction and language proficiency gain more relevance in a situation where the classroom practice makes it possible for the students to use the vocabulary acquired through instruction. It means that just knowing how to recognise vocabulary will not suffice for its usage. Sentence construction, contextualisation, and vocabulary recall can aid students in making use of their vocabulary knowledge. The combination of sentence writing activities alongside reading activities aided Chinese EFL students in the acquisition of their vocabulary (Taye & Lodebo, 2026). It means that it was obvious that instructional practices had an impact on the formation of vocabulary actively used by the students. In the case of secondary schools, it gains significance because of the need for active use of the English language in academic assignments and communication in class.

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2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The study of English language has gained its place in the educational system of China as the knowledge of English language becomes necessary for succeeding academically. The changes in the policy regarding the national curriculum include the growing necessity to teach the practical language competency together with the knowledge of language forms. Policy changes in mainland China between 2000-2021 reveal the progress in English education and new expectations towards the language competency of the learners (Zhang & Shi, 2023). Vocabulary becomes an important component of the process because of the necessity for the learners to possess the wide vocabulary as English language studies become more complicated at the secondary education level. The new edition of the English curriculum in the compulsory education highlights vocabulary teaching and practical language teaching (Mahamed, 2024). There is plenty of evidence in support of the statement that the integration of vocabulary teaching can be successful if word from teaching is combined with communication skills developing (Rashid et al., 2022). There are still some problems with vocabulary acquisition and development among the Chinese EFL learners, which means the necessity for proper teaching in classes (Li & Pei, 2024). It is necessary to find out whether the growing importance of vocabulary teaching correlates with the overall level of English language proficiency among the learners. The research of the secondary students of Guangdong province can give the answer.

3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The current study examines the connection between the importance of vocabulary teaching and English language proficiency of the secondary school students from Guangdong province in China. As it is already known, the process of vocabulary teaching is an important part of English language acquisition. In accordance with the present research, the proper knowledge of vocabulary is a prerequisite to understanding, idea expression and communication. The study focuses on the vocabulary teaching as applied to secondary schools and pays attention to vocabulary teaching methods including word meaning, word form, pronunciation, word usage and vocabulary exercises. Language proficiency of the students is evaluated according to their capability of understanding and using the English language in different activities, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. The main aim of the current research is the identification of the existence of the correlation between vocabulary teaching and language proficiency of the secondary school students from Guangdong province. The current study will focus on the process of language proficiency acquisition through vocabulary teaching. It is important to understand whether the connection between vocabulary teaching and language proficiency of the Guangdong secondary school students exists.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

- What is the relationship between the Importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency?

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary has entailed the learning of word meanings, provision of lists and preparation for vocabulary intensive tests. Such practices continue to be of importance inasmuch as they equip learners with the necessary lexical background to understand and pass assessments. However, it raises scepticism in the academia on the capacity of recognition-focused programs to meet the developmental needs of proficiency. The vocabulary should be looked at as a multidimensional construct. Both the breadth and the

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depth of vocabulary knowledge are predictive of reading comprehension and each plays a unique role in enabling the learners to infer and handle difficult texts (Zhou et al., 2025). This view is especially relevant as it dismisses the view of the learners as competent simply because of their capability of distinguishing numerous words. The development of vocabulary should be approached in such a way as to improve the depth and breadth of lexical knowledge (Teng et al., 2024). Likewise, Habók et al. (2026) found out that vocabulary knowledge accounted for a large portion of the variance in reading proficiency; the receptive depth was the most proximate, but the differential roles of diverse dimensions imply that the vocabulary is multidimensional and therefore cannot be regarded as a single characteristic. The utility of the vocabulary instruction goes beyond the quantity of the words but also involves depth, usage and retention of lexical knowledge (Habók et al., 2026). This problem is crucial in analysing the relationship between vocabulary and competency in the Chinese environment. Chinese learners are now expected not only to master receptive vocabulary but also productive, fluent usage of the words, collocations and their appropriate application in professional and educational settings. The recent findings contest the narrow view of proficiency as the capacity of performing well in a test or a measure of the breadth of the receptive vocabulary. According to Dong et al. (2020), the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary breadth and depth and reading comprehension over time among Chinese-speaking EFL learners in a cross-lagged panel analysis (Dong et al., 2020). On the other hand, Pan et al. 2022) found that the vocabulary knowledge had direct and indirect influence on the reading of Chinese undergraduates (Pan et al., 2022). Together, these viewpoints prove that the relationship between vocabulary and proficiency is complex, developmental and cannot be analysed in a moment or in one dimension. However, this condition presents another problem as far as designing instruction is concerned. Even though the programs acknowledge multiple lexical competencies, it fails to identify the time and ways through which certain aspects of vocabulary should be developed and tested. This implies that the congruence of the instructional focus, teaching techniques, learner strategies and proficiency goals become even more critical in successful vocabulary pedagogy (Amirzai, 2021).

It is evident from the available evidence that the difference between mere exposure to the vocabulary and making it a priority in education is very significant. True vocabulary focus is not only adding word lists or occasionally carrying out vocabulary tests. There should be a systematic connection between instructional focus, techniques, learner strategies, retention and communicative usage. For instance, Tong et al. (2023) uncovered the lack of sophistication and variety in the lexical richness of Chinese university students' writing and partially attribute this productive deficiency to the instruction which emphasised grammatical accuracy and high-frequency vocabulary rather than rich lexis that good writing requires. This is significant in that it meant that vocabulary could not be successfully produced without examining the connection between the instructional focus, techniques and the productive competence needed for competency (Tong et al., 2023). The study of productive vocabulary also exposed the effects of the receptive-productive gap, but the instructional techniques vary significantly in the extent to which they handle this gap. Having a large receptive vocabulary does not necessarily mean proficiency (Zeng et al., 2025). Such issues are especially relevant to China as the efficiency of language teaching is inseparable from the examination-based socio-cultural context in which instruction occurs. As suggested by ZHANG (2024), high stakes tests like the Gaokao emphasise particular information and recognition and promote rote memorisation, resulting in learners who have learned English for many years but cannot speak it fluently. Consequently, researchers are not always capable of transferring the findings from other environments to China without taking the institutional or cultural factors

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into account (ZHANG, 2024). This is an important contextual issue as the previous research had generally positioned discussions on the vocabulary intervention in a particular institution, program or learner group. Such studies provide significant evidence regarding certain relationships but are not capable of explaining the connection between different components within a particular local context.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **6.1 Research Design and Procedure**

A quantitative research design that combines both cross-sectional and correlational research designs was employed in conducting this study to establish the relationship between the significance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency among secondary school students in Guangdong Province, China. It is believed that quantitative research design would best suit this study based on the main aim of the study since it seeks to determine the relationship that exists between the two variables. The cross-sectional research design made it easy for the data to be collected from the sample population in a specified time while the correlational research design enabled the measurement of naturally occurring differences between vocabulary instruction and language proficiency. This study was conducted using 95% confidence level, with the level of significance being set at $p<0.05$.

- **6.2 Sampling**

The target population included students of English language lessons in junior secondary schools in Guangdong Province, China. More specifically, it covered students of grades 7, 8, and 9 since the knowledge of vocabulary is a crucial element in English language teaching in that period of education. The individual student of secondary school was both the sampling and analysis unit. The sampling frame consisted of eligible students of grade 7, 8, and 9 in the selected public junior secondary schools in Guangdong Province. The final sample size was set at 650 students. This sampling size coincided with the number of respondents provided in the initial proposal as a minimum quantity needed to fulfil the aims of the research. Multistage stratified cluster sampling technique was used. At the first stage, junior secondary schools were selected from Guangdong Province. At the second stage, stratification was performed by grades – grade 7, grade 8, and grade 9. At the third stage, classes were selected from schools participating in the research, and then eligible students were sampled from these classes. About 8-10 schools should be used to ensure representation of the population from various institutions. Eligible students were those who were: enrolled in grade 7, 8, or 9; taking English as a subject in the curriculum; enrolled in one of the selected public secondary schools in Guangdong Province; and able to complete the questionnaire and English language proficiency test.

- **6.3 Data and Measurement**

Quantitative primary data were gathered through the help of a structured questionnaire and test of English language proficiency. The original research proposal contains the use of survey questionnaires and the five-point Likert scale to gather quantitative data from the participants.

The data gathering tool had three major parts.

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6.3.1 Demographic and Educational Characteristics

The first part gathered information on the respondents' personal and educational information. The variables include:

- Gender;

- Grade level;

- Number of years studying English language; and

- Time allocated for studying English every week.

The information was useful for describing the sample and used as control variables in the hierarchical multiple regression.

6.3.2 Importance of Vocabulary Instruction

Importance of vocabulary Instruction was defined in operational terms as the degree to which students believed that vocabulary learning and teaching in a systematic way was important in relation to comprehending English and communicating in English effectively.

The importance of vocabulary Instruction project is conceived as the process of building up the vocabulary of students by making use of receptive skills, such as reading and listening, and productive skills, including writing and speaking.

The measure used for measuring the construct of importance of vocabulary instruction was the importance of vocabulary instruction Scale consisting of 12 items, which reflected the four components of the construct, namely:

Dimension	**No. of items**
Importance of vocabulary for English learning	3
Importance of systematic vocabulary teaching	3
Importance of vocabulary for comprehension and communication	3
Importance of vocabulary for overall English development	3
Total	**12**

The responses were collected by using the five-point Likert Scale, which were:

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree.

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IVI Composite Score was determined based on the 12 items, where high scores indicated strong perceptions of the importance of vocabulary instruction.

6.3.3 Language Proficiency

The operational definition for language proficiency is that which the learner demonstrates as ability to communicate using English language.

The definition is aligned with the proposal, which defines language proficiency based on listening, reading, writing, and speaking competencies, with vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and grammar being the key factors in measuring proficiency.

Language Proficiency was measured using an English proficiency test at school level, which involved five domains of:

Component	Measurement focus
Listening	Comprehension of spoken English
Reading	Comprehension of written English
Writing	Written expression and accuracy
Speaking	Oral expression and fluency
Language use	Vocabulary and grammatical competence

Scores on each of the sub-components were aggregated into one composite score called language proficiency score, where higher scores denoted higher English language proficiency.

Performance-based language proficiency score was chosen because this approach was designed not to test only perception of students for both independent and dependent variables.

6.4 Reliability and Measurement Validity

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was applied in order to measure the internal consistency of the importance of vocabulary instruction scale. The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 and above was considered as acceptable internal consistency.

Before testing the hypotheses, the measurement validity of the IVI construct was checked using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). In particular, the CFA was conducted to check if the 12 observed variables are indeed a good representation of the importance of vocabulary instruction concept.

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Before carrying out the factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were also considered. The proper KMO statistic together with the significant Bartlett's test indicated that the correlation among the survey questions was enough for conducting factor analysis. For CFA, the model adequacy test was performed using widely-used fit indices such as:

- Chi-square divided by degrees of freedom,

- Comparative Fit Index (CFI),

- Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI),

- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and

- Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

Factor loadings were also analysed in order to find out the contribution of each individual item towards the IVI construct.

6.5 Data Screening and Preliminary Analysis

Hypothesis testing was conducted after the data had been tested for missing data, coding errors, and possible outliers. The descriptive statistics of the important variables in the study were calculated. Normality was tested using the skewness and kurtosis tests, while linearity, independence, and homoscedasticity were tested using regression diagnostic tools.

6.6 Statistical Analysis

The primary analyses included Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation and simple linear regression.

6.6.1 Pearson Correlation

The direction, nature and level of significance of the correlation between IVI and LP were established using Pearson correlation. Establishing a positive and significant correlation would provide preliminary support for H_1.

6.6.2 Simple Linear Regression

Following this, simple linear regression was employed to check if Importance of Vocabulary Instruction could predict Language Proficiency.

This was formulated as follows:

$$LP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IVI + \varepsilon$$

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Where LP stood for Language Proficiency, IVI stood for Importance of Vocabulary Instruction, β_0 was the intercept, β_1 was the regression coefficient, and ε was the error term.

The results included the unstandardised coefficient (B), standardised beta coefficient (β), standard error, R^2, Adjusted R^2, F-statistics, t-statistics, p-value, and 95% Confidence Interval. H1 was said to be supported if there is a statistically significant positive regression coefficient for IVI ($p < .05$).

6.7 Statistical Software

Data screening, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and simple linear regression analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Data organisation before analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel, whereas confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS AMOS.

8. RESULTS

8.1 Data Screening and Descriptive Statistics

The final analysis had a sample size of 650. Missing values were not detected for the primary variables. Analysis of the standardised residuals showed only one case with a value greater than 3.00, but the largest Cook's distance was 0.033, showing no unusual observations. The observation was thus retained.

The mean IVI score was 3.65 (SD = 0.42), whereas the mean Language Proficiency score was 72.04 (SD = 8.77).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Importance of Vocabulary Instruction	650	3.65	0.42	-0.114	-0.099
Language Proficiency	650	72.04	8.77	-0.161	0.028

The skewness and kurtosis values were found to be within acceptable ranges, implying that the variables followed a nearly normal distribution.

8.2 Reliability and Measurement Validity

Internal reliability of the "Importance of Vocabulary Instruction" scale consisting of 12 items was measured using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha is equal to $\alpha = .849$.

Factor analysis suitability was assessed using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

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Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Result
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure	0.931
Bartlett's Approx. Chi-Square	1831.505
df	66
Sig.	< .001

The KMO of 0.931 indicated good sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also significant, χ^2 (66) = 1831.505, p < .001. Consequently, the findings indicated that the correlation matrix was appropriate for conducting factor analysis.

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis was then performed in order to validate the measurement model of the importance of vocabulary instruction construct.

Table 3. CFA Model Fit

Fit index	Result
χ^2	63.091
df	54
χ^2/df	1.168
CFI	0.995
TLI	0.994
RMSEA	0.016
SRMR	0.026

According to the output of the CFA, the measurement model was considered valid since the CFI and TLI were above .90 while the RMSEA and SRMR were very low compared to the traditional cut-off values.

8.3 Relationship between importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency

Product-moment correlation method of Pearson was employed to determine the relationship between the importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency.

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Table 4. Pearson Correlation

Variables	IVI	Language Proficiency
Importance of Vocabulary Instruction	1	.511*
Language Proficiency	.511*	1

Moderate correlation was found between importance of vocabulary instruction and language proficiency, $r = .511$, $p < .001$. This means that the more students thought that vocabulary instruction is important, the more likely they were to be proficient in the language.

8.4 Simple Linear Regression

Simple linear regression was used to determine if there was any predictive relationship between the importances of vocabulary instruction on language proficiency.

This linear regression was statistically significant, $F(1, 648) = 228.77$, $p < .001$, and accounted for about 26.1% of the variance in Language Proficiency ($R^2 = .261$, adjusted $R^2 = .260$).

Table 5. Simple Linear Regression Predicting Language Proficiency

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	32.662	2.620	—	12.465	< .001	[27.517, 37.807]
Importance of Vocabulary Instruction	**10.783**	**0.713**	**.511**	**15.125**	< .001	**[9.383, 12.18**

The Importance of Vocabulary Instruction served as an important positive predictor of Language Proficiency, where the coefficient B was 10.783 and β was .511, and t-value was 15.125 with the significance value $p < .001$. The positive coefficient shows that Importance of Vocabulary Instruction led to high Language Proficiency scores.

The regression equation was:

$$LP = 32.662 + 10.783(IVI)$$

8.5 Hypothesis Testing

"H_1: Importance of vocabulary instruction has a significant positive relationship with Language Proficiency among secondary school students in Guangdong Province, China."

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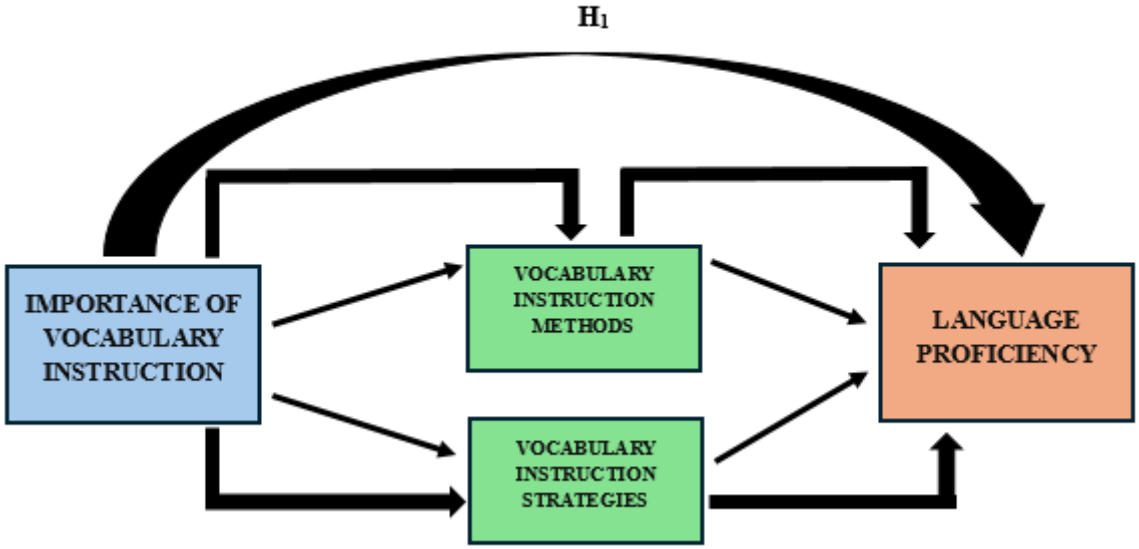
Pearson correlation revealed a significant relationship between IVI and LP ($r = .511$, $p < .001$). In addition to the above, the simple linear regression analysis found that IVI was a significant predictor of Language Proficiency ($\beta = .511$, $p < .001$), explaining 26.1% of the variance in the dependent variable.

9. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



10. DISCUSSION

The results showed that there was a positive relationship between the Importance of Vocabulary Instruction and Language Proficiency in secondary schools in Guangdong Province. The moderately high correlation coefficient ($r = .511$, $p < .001$) and regression effect ($\beta = .511$, $p < .001$) suggest that the students who were putting more importance on systematic vocabulary instruction had higher English proficiency. This regression analysis accounted for 26.1% of the total variance of language proficiency, which suggests that vocabulary instruction is an important, but certainly not the only determinant of students' linguistic skills. These results correspond to the theoretical rationale for this study as described– vocabulary knowledge allows learners to better comprehend and produce language via reading, writing, listening and speaking. In addition, these findings correspond to the research findings discussed in the literature review section, which emphasise the importance of vocabulary breadth, depth, retention and production for language understanding and proficiency. From the educational perspective, this means that giving systematic place to vocabulary instruction in secondary school English classes is appropriate, compared to learning vocabulary in isolation. Nonetheless, because of the cross-sectional nature of the study, these results do not imply causality, and other factors may be influencing language proficiency as well.

11. CONCLUSION

In this study, an attempt was made to test the relationship between Importance of Vocabulary Instruction and Language Proficiency in secondary school students in Guangdong Province of China. It was found that the

hypothesis in this regard was supported by the findings of the study and indicated that those students who were more focused on vocabulary instruction were more proficient in their English language skills. It was thus proven that the importance of vocabulary is not an extra thing but rather a very significant element in language acquisition, which is essential for language learners. Moreover, there are many practical implications for this study and teachers can find it useful to focus on the process of vocabulary teaching by integrating it into listening, speaking, reading and writing. The proportion of variance explained by vocabulary instruction suggests that language proficiency depends on many factors, including those beyond the realm of vocabulary-related perceptions. Thus, future research in this area should focus on different methods of vocabulary instruction and its impact on language proficiency in the particular regional contexts.

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