Abstract

It is commonly thought that the bigger a person's vocabulary size, the better his writing ability. This paper aims to investigate the effect of two types of vocabulary size, namely receptive and productive, on Chinese writing performance. The targets involved in this empirical study are 25 Secondary Three students from a secondary school in Singapore.

Results show that the average receptive vocabulary size of the students is 11,089, the largest being 16,603, the smallest being 7,572 and the median being 9,882. Through the use of correlation and regression functions of SPSS 19.0 statistical software, it is found that there is no correlation or cause-and-effect relationship between receptive vocabulary size and writing scores, indicating that
receptive vocabulary size has no direct effect on writing performance.

The average productive vocabulary size of the students is 5,752, the biggest being 7,332, the smallest being 4,591 and the median being 5,485. Students' productive vocabulary size is 25.3%-68.3% smaller than their receptive vocabulary size. This difference is larger than the 19%-50% stated by academics, which shows that the gap between students' productive and receptive vocabulary size is bigger than as revealed in previous studies. Through SPSS statistical analysis, it is observed that productive vocabulary size correlates moderately with writing scores and a cause-and-effect relationship exists between the two variables, indicating that productive vocabulary size has a direct effect on writing performance.

The average lexical richness of students' essays is 5.62, the highest being 6.67, the lowest being
4.559, and the median being 5.66. It is found that lexical richness is moderately correlated with writing scores and a cause-and-effect relationship exists between the two variables, indicating that lexical richness has a positive effect on writing performance. The strength of correlation in this case, however, is slightly weaker than that between productive vocabulary size and writing scores.

Finally, with regard to the findings, the writer suggests two ways to improve writing performance. Firstly, teachers should make a clear distinction between receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary and aid students in transforming the former into the latter. Secondly, teachers should assist students in reducing word repetition so as to increase the lexical richness of their essays.