VOCABULARY ASSESSMENT METHODS

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Abstract: *Several research studies have proven a direct relationship between the amount of words known by a foreign language student and his/her language proficiency. Therefore, knowing the amount of words that our students are acquainted with would help teachers to predict their general ability in the foreign language. The aim of this study is to determine the vocabulary size of a group final year students in a High School in Murcia. The instrument used to measure students' vocabulary size was Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test. This test has been validated on successive occasions. A total number of 49 students sat the exam in the case of the first test containing the 1000 and 2000 levels; and 38 sat the second test. The results obtained were poorer than expected.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary size, vocabulary teaching, reading comprehension.*

RESUMEN Numerosas investigaciones han probado la existencia de una relación directa entre la cantidad de palabras que conoce el estudiante de idiomas y su fluidez en los mismos. Es por esto que conocer la cantidad de palabras que nuestros estudiantes conocen en la lengua que están estudiando nos ayudaría a poder predecir sus habilidades generales en el idioma. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar la cantidad de vocabulario que conocen un grupo de estudiantes de último año de bachillerato en un instituto de Murcia. El instrumento usado para medir el vocabulario que los estudiantes conocen es el examen de niveles desarrollado por Nation. Este test ha sido validado en varias ocasiones. Un total de 49 estudiantes hicieron el examen de los niveles 1000 y 2000 y 38 hicieron el segundo examen. Los resultados obtenidos están por debajo de lo que se esperaba. PALABRAS CLAVES: vocabulario, enseñanza de vocabulario, comprensión lectora.

I. CONTEXTUALIZATION Despite the fact that Spanish students spend at least eight years of their lives studying English as a compulsory subject within the Spanish school system, there is a striking difference between native speakers and non-native speakers in terms of the amount of lexis they have acquired during this period. Most students will never realise that their skills in the foreign language are too poor to perform well in most communicative contexts. Only those who devote their lives to the study of the language or those who use English as a necessary tool in their working environment will become aware of the fact that despite so many years of study the knowledge acquired is not sufficient to enable them to function as efficient language users. The Spanish education system and the royal decrees that regulate education at this level establish certain objectives that students have to reach by the end of Bachillerato (the final two years of Secondary Education in Spain). These objectives include the critical understanding and

interpretation of oral texts, written texts and visuals used in common communicative situations and by the mass media. Students are also supposed to read different texts in the foreign language as a source of information, knowledge or enjoyment and leisure both comprehensively and at the same time in an autonomous way. Even the university authorities who prepare the university entrance exam assume that most students should have reached a level at which they are able to use the language autonomously at this point of their academic experience. This means that teachers and textbooks should provide students with the necessary tools to reach the objectives planned. However, it seems that most students do not reach such standards and that there is no general concern about the nature of either the input provided within classrooms or the level actually achieved by students. Many different reasons may account for this situation and vocabulary deficiency could be one of them. 1. Aims

The aim of this research project is to assess the receptive vocabulary of Bachillerato 2nd Form students at the end of the academic year and to study the nature of the vocabulary included in a textbook designed to be used in Bachillerato 2nd Form, so as to determine whether there is or is not a correlation between the vocabulary they know and that which they are supposed to know. 2. The role of Vocabulary in Foreign Language Learning There are many studies that reinforce the key role of vocabulary size on reading and writing skills, especially on native speakers. Laufer (1998: 256) in an analysis of the vocabulary of Israeli students, established that a good vocabulary size was important for reading comprehension and for fluency in speech. Goulden et al. (1990: 342) claimed that "measures of vocabulary size -particularly the size of academic vocabulary- are important indicators of the ability of second language learners to achieve academic success". Anderson and Freebody (1981), cited in Read (2000: 76), found out that there was a high correlation between a good performance in a vocabulary test and reading comprehension. On reflection, even if we knew all the grammatical rules of English we would never be able to use them without a knowledge of words. Vocabulary is the basic tool for shaping and transmitting meaning. A learner may learn that the first person pronoun in English is 'I', but if he does not know the denotation of this function word, he will never be capable of using it in real language usage. On the contrary, a learner who wants to buy something in a shop will probably be able to do it even if he only knows some words, such as bread, even if he is unable to build a sentence or even if he ignores the pragmatical issues that are involved in a commercial exchange. The reason why we teach English is to provide our students with the resources to understand and transmit ideas in another language. Thus, vocabulary should keep a central role in language learning. The fact that vocabulary keeps a central role in the learning of a foreign language makes it necessary to select meticulously the words that are to be taught and included in the input that our students are going to be exposed to. It needs to be taken into account that unlike native speakers, foreign language learners only have a limited exposure to the language and this language should include the most frequent forms. Studying the most frequent words allows our students to have more possibilities to use the

vocabulary they have learnt in real life situations and gives them higher text coverage. We can find the figures explaining this idea in Nation and Waring (1977) cited in Schmitt and McCarthy (1997: 9) as shown in the following table. Assessing Vocabulary Testing vocabulary is not very different to testing 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 perspectives. When we refer to vocabulary assessment we may mean different things. The assessment that teachers carry on in classes (to test whether students have learnt the words included in a particular unit) needs to be distinguished from the type of assessment that is done in an academic inquiry. Within the second type there are many diverse branches of vocabulary research. A very significant one was set within the context of native speakers and from that, other researchers started to wonder about the type of vocabulary used in foreign language contexts. Within the latter branch many studies have been related to the skill of reading. Their major concern was the effect of the type of vocabulary included in texts on learners' comprehension ability. There has also been a vast amount of research studies devoted to different techniques used for vocabulary learning, such as rote learning or the keyword method. The main objective of research studies such as the ones by Atkitson (1975), M.J. Lawson and D. Hogben (1998), Nuria Segarra and Mathew Alba (2006) has been to discover the most effective way to present vocabulary to students. The research project presented here belongs to a very different branch of research. We are not concerned about how students learn words but on which words they know at a very particular stage and which words are included in the input they are exposed to. Therefore, our research analyses the vocabulary students know at a particular moment in their learning path. One of the most important issues to bear in mind when assessing vocabulary is the goal of our test. The definition of the construct will determine the type of test which should be used. Laufer et al. (2004: 203) state "tests of lexical knowledge often focus on one sub-knowledge for example, comprehension of meaning, production of meaning, vocabulary use or word associations". In this particular project we shall be measuring "breath of knowledge, namely the number of words for which a person knows at least some of the significant aspects of meaning" as defined by Anderson and Freebody (1981) cited in Read (2000: 81). A very popular way of measuring vocabulary size is Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test. This test presents decontextualized words and expects students to match them with one of a similar meaning. Words are arranged into different frequency levels and distractors have been included.

According to Read (2000:120) the assumption behind this test is that "words that occur more frequently in the language are more likely to be known by learners than less frequent words". Schmitt (1993) developed new improved versions of the original test and this test may now deserve international recognition as a means of measuring the breath of vocabulary knowledge. II. OTHER RESEARCH STUDIES ON THE ISSUE

There are many studies that were basically concerned with determining the words that native speakers know. These research studies were the basis for the development of

others in a foreign language context. According to Read (2000: 74) "a great deal of the research has been done by experts on reading". He states that there is a well documented connection between good vocabulary knowledge and the ability to read. Anderson and Freebody (1981:78-80) cited in Read (2000:74) claimed that one of the most important findings in L1 reading was the correlation that existed between tests of vocabulary and reading comprehension. Years of research on native speakers' vocabulary and the development of many tests based on dictionary word lists facilitated the work of those carrying out research in a foreign language context. One of the most important researchers in this area of study is Nation. He has considerable experience in the assessment of vocabulary size, both in its receptive and productive dimensions. Since this study is concerned with receptive vocabulary, we will considerably rely on his work. There is not much agreement as far as figures are concerned. This lack of consensus is caused by differences in the understanding of what a word is as a construct. In fact this is one of the most complex, and at the same time most important elements to be taken into account when assessing vocabulary size. Nation developed the so called Vocabulary Levels Test, a tool that allows researchers to establish if learners know the form and meaning of the most frequent words. This test has been validated by many other researchers. Read (2000) in his book 'Assessing Vocabulary' also makes an exhaustive analysis and description of the theoretical and practical points which must be taken into account. One way of interpreting research done in this area of study is to divide it into two main groups. On the one hand we find scholars that are mainly concerned with the development and validation of tools to measure vocabulary size. On the other, we find those who use the developed tools to measure the vocabulary of particular groups of students. We must start by commenting on those concerned with the creation and validation of different tests. Schmitt et al. (2001) used a range of analysing techniques to validate two new versions of the Vocabulary Levels Test, which has been widely used as a diagnostic test in its original form.

It is not the main goal of this research project to offer a complete definition of what vocabulary is. Nevertheless the theoretical foundations behind this research study must be mentioned to foster understanding. Thus, in this particular section we shall explain how the concept of vocabulary has been understood for the elaboration of this research and the concrete aspects of this construct that have been taken into account and measured. The vocabulary construct is most often understood as being made up of several subknowledges or abilities. This perspective on vocabulary learning helps the researcher to focus on particular aspects in order to measure and test each one of them. The most widely spread distinction is that of receptive and productive vocabulary; both concepts are very often used with those of passive and active vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary is defined in Nation (2001:24) 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. The Vocabulary Levels Test Although it has been a recurrent feature of this paper, as yet the Vocabulary Levels Test has

not been fully explained. The Vocabulary Levels Tests has been widely used to delimit the vocabulary size of students of very different levels: "an instrument... designed to measure learners' vocabulary size as a trait without reference to any particular context of use" (Read and Chapelle 2001) cited in (Pérez, 2005:551). The basic assumption behind the elaboration of this test is that the performance in the test will be indicative of the general status of the students' skills. This test has been quite successful because it has proved to be a quick, reliable and effective tool for measuring the type and amount of vocabulary that students know. All these advantages should not blind us and make us think that the results obtained give us a complete picture of the learners' vocabulary. In fact, this test accounts for a very marginal aspect of the whole construct of vocabulary. This test is one that measures exclusively receptive vocabulary and not the depth of vocabulary knowledge. In fact, it focuses on the recognition of written words and the association with their meanings. Another assumption that lies in the foundations of this study is that those words which are more frequent in the English language have a smaller learning burden while those which are less frequent are more difficult for students because they are not very often in contact with them.

Once we have analysed the foundations of this test it is necessary to explain its structure. The test consists of 30 words per level to which 3 distractors per question have been included. Words are presented in groups of 6 words that are to be matched to 3 definitions. Students are expected to be able to distinguish which words are the ones to be matched and which ones are the ones to be ignored. After reading many different research studies in which this test has been applied, none of them mentioned the time that students are supposed to be given for the completion of each level. Therefore, we assume that half a minute per word is adequate. As far as the correction of the test is concerned each correct matching is to be given one mark and according to Read (2001:119) a student who scores at least 16 on a particular level is considered to know more or less all the words in that level.

REFERENCES

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3 Vocabulary assessment