Second Language Vocabulary Assessment
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Given its long history in language education, vocabulary testing may simply be taken for granted in many contexts as an essential tool for measuring progress and achievement in the classroom. Vocabulary tests can also have a role in placing incoming students at the appropriate level in a language teaching programme and in providing diagnostic information on the adequacy of learners' vocabulary knowledge. At the school level, the tests are typically teacher-made, published in the coursebook, or taken from some other source. Even with such ready-made tests, there is scope for action research in schools to ensure that the test is well written, has an appropriate level of difficulty and has a positive motivating effect on the learners.

In order to consider vocabulary assessment more broadly, it is useful to adopt Read's (2000) distinction between discrete and embedded measures. A conventional vocabulary test is **discrete** in that it simply measures whether learners can link the forms of a set of L2 words and their meanings, with little if any context provided. Among the most influential tests of this kind are the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Webb, Sasao & Balance, 2017), which uses a word—definition matching format, and the Vocabulary Size Test (VST) (Beglar, 2010), consisting of multiple-choice items. Both these tests have generated a significant amount of research, focusing on issues such as the value of using bilingual versions of the test tailored for learners with particular first languages, and the effect of guessing behaviour on test scores.

There are three dimensions of vocabulary knowledge that have not received much attention in the design of discrete vocabulary tests until recently. The first is the measurement of aspects of word knowledge other than the basic meaning. These include: multiple and extended meanings, grammatical functioning, associations and collocations with other words, and style or register. These aspects are collectively known as "depth" of knowledge. In a recent review of the research, Schmitt (2014) found some evidence that depth represents a distinct dimension of knowledge, but he noted a lack of validated tests to measure it as a single construct. However, it is becoming standard practice in research on vocabulary learning to measure the outcomes by means of multiple post-tests, each targeting one aspect of word knowledge. The second neglected dimension is comprehension of words in their spoken form, ie, listening vocabulary tests. And the third is speed of access: measuring reaction times to discrete vocabulary items on a computer-based test. In a series of studies, Harrington (2018) has shown that speed of response adds to the predictive power of a vocabulary test designed as a measure of learners' language proficiency.

Read's other approach to the topic, **embedded** vocabulary assessment, refers to the role of lexical measures in more communicatively oriented tests. Thus, in a reading comprehension test, some test items may assess understanding of words and phrases in the context of the reading passage. In speaking and writing tasks, the test-takers' use of vocabulary is often assessed, either by means of an analytic rating scale, or by applying statistics to measure diversity, sophistication and appropriateness, taking into account all the words in the learners' output. These lexical statistics play a prominent role in the automated scoring of speaking and/or writing tasks in

international tests like the Pearson Test of English and the Test of English as a Foreign Language.

References

Beglar, D. (2010). A Rasch-based validation of the Vocabulary Size Test. *Language Testing*, 27(1), 101-118.

Harrington, M. (2018). *Lexical facility*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Read, J. (2000). *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, N. (2014). Size and depth of vocabulary knowledge: What the research shows. *Language Learning* 64(4), 913-951.

Webb, S., Sasao, Y., & Balance, O. (2017). The updated Vocabulary Levels Test: Developing and validating two new forms of the VLT. ITL - *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 168(1), 34-70.

The Research Questions

1. Is a particular published test useful for its intended purpose in a local school setting?
2. To what extent does guessing behaviour play a role in vocabulary tests with selected-response items, and how can its effects be minimized?
3. What are the different aspects of vocabulary knowledge that learners can acquire from participating in a vocabulary learning study?
4. What are suitable measures of particular aspects of vocabulary knowledge, such as derived forms, extended meanings, collocations and appropriate usage?
5. How can word association techniques be used effectively to evaluate learners' vocabulary knowledge?
6. How does learners' knowledge of spoken vocabulary compare with their written vocabulary knowledge?
7. What are some effective means of measuring knowledge of multi-word units, such as phrasal verbs, collocations, formulaic expressions and idioms?
8. How can we measure learners' ability to activate their receptive knowledge of words for productive use?
9. How can lexical statistics contribute to the assessment of speaking and writing tasks?
10. To what extent can measurement of learners' reaction times contribute to the ability of a vocabulary test to predict communicative performance?

Suggested Resources

Read, J. (2000). *Assessing Vocabulary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is the first and most comprehensive book on the topic. It introduced the distinction between discrete and embedded assessment of vocabulary and explored the design issues related to each of these approaches. It also takes a critical perspective on some key concepts related to vocabulary assessment. There is a review of research to that time on the use of vocabulary tests for various purposes in language teaching and second language acquisition research. The book

includes case studies of several influential vocabulary tests, along with a discussion of the published evidence for their validity. It is still an essential reference for anyone undertaking research on vocabulary assessment or engaged in the development of vocabulary tests.

Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching Vocabulary: A Vocabulary Research Manual*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This is an invaluable resource for anyone whose research focuses on second language vocabulary knowledge and ability, written by one of the most productive researchers in the field. Its coverage is much broader than just assessment but it includes a substantial chapter on measurement. A very useful section for novice researchers is one on "prominent knowledge gaps in the field of vocabulary studies". The Resources section at the end provides a wealth of practical information about tests, corpora, statistical tools, bibliographies and websites. A little frustratingly for a reference work, the book lacks an index, but this is partly compensated for by a reasonably detailed table of contents and a "quick checklist" of questions the reader may be seeking answers to.

Nation, I.S.P., & Webb, S. (2011). *Researching and Analyzing Vocabulary*. Boston: Heinle ELT.

This book, by two other very prominent researchers in the field, covers much of the same ground as Schmitt's volume. It is organised into a series of chapters which each deals with one of the major topics in L2 vocabulary research, under the categories of deliberate vocabulary learning, incidental vocabulary learning and corpus-based research. The chapters include critiques of published studies and suggestions for future research. The longest section of the book comprises four chapters on testing vocabulary knowledge, which give detailed advice on the issues faced by researchers in selecting or designing appropriate assessment tools.

Meara, P. & Miralpeix, I. (2016). *Tools for Researching Vocabulary*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

For many years Paul Meara directed a successful doctoral programme and research group on vocabulary acquisition at Swansea University. His approach to L2 vocabulary studies is more psycholinguistic in its orientation than that of other scholars in the field and it has also involved the development of multiple computer-based measurement tools, drawing on Meara's interest in programming. The current versions of many of these programs are freely available on his website: www.lognostics.co.uk . This book, co-authored with Imma Miralpeix, is partly a manual on how to use the tools, but it also provides background on the research issue that each tool was designed to address, as well as a published research study in which the tool was employed. Since it is intended for use by students and other beginning researchers, the book includes practical advice and stimulating suggestions for small-scale studies that can be carried out with these tools.

Webb, S. (Ed.) (2020). The Routledge Handbook of Vocabulary Studies. London: Routledge.

Stuart Webb has assembled this impressive volume, which covers all aspects of research and professional practice in the study of second language vocabulary. It includes a survey chapter on key issues in designing discrete vocabulary tests, as well as a set of six chapters discussing how to measure particular components of vocabulary ability:

About the Contributor

John Read is Professor Emeritus in the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His PhD is from the University of New Mexico. He previously taught at Victoria University of Wellington, the SEAMEO Regional Language Centre in Singapore, the University of Texas-El Paso, and Indiana University. Throughout his career he has specialized in language testing and assessment, with a focus on vocabulary assessment and testing English for academic and professional purposes. His major publications are *Assessing Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 2000), *Assessing English Proficiency for University Study* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and *Post-admission Language Assessment of University Students* (edited) (Springer, 2016). He was co-editor of *Language Testing* (2002-06) and served as President of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA) in 2011-12.