

# **Assessing Vocabulary in the Language Classroom**

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Vocabulary is an essential building block of language and it makes sense to be able to measure learners' knowledge and use of it (Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001). However, much less time is dedicated to the teaching and thereby testing of vocabulary than to that of the other language skills. Despite the inadequate attention paid to it in the field, assessing vocabulary should have the same priority as other skills in that the important cornerstones of testing (validity, reliability, practicality, washback, authenticity, transparency and security) need to be considered in designing and evaluating tests of lexical knowledge and use.

Vocabulary development is crucial both from a theoretical and practical standpoint. Experts in the field of vocabulary development are in agreement that vocabulary is central to the language learning process, and as such, it is generally recognized that a focus on strengthening vocabulary is necessary at every stage of a learner's language development. Folse (2003, 2004) as well as those who championed the lexical approach and lexical syllabus in the 1980s and 1990s (Lewis, 1993, 1997; Willis, 1990; Willis & Willis, 1989) point out that you can get by without the correct syntax or grammar, but not vocabulary. Folse (2003) goes on to state that without syntax, meaning is hindered; but without vocabulary meaning is impossible. From a practical standpoint, educators cite that lexical knowledge is important in the development of other language skills. According to Chastain (1988) the lack of needed vocabulary is the most common cause of students' inability to say what they want to say during communication activities. In addition, tests of vocabulary often provide a good guide to reading ability (Heaton, 1990).

In this paper, I will address certain assessment decisions that teachers need to make in the assessment of vocabulary, and then move on to issues in the assessment of lexical knowledge. Finally, a comprehensive review of testing formats will be described with recommendations on how to construct valid and reliable vocabulary assessments.

## Assessment Decisions

When considering vocabulary and how to test it, teachers often ask themselves the following questions:

- How should I test vocabulary?
- Which kind of vocabulary should I test?
- Which format(s) should I use?
- How many items should I include?
- How important is context?
- Are there any tools or resources that can help me?

Each of these questions is considered in turn below.

### How should I test vocabulary?

In response to this first question, quite simply deciding how we test vocabulary is related to how we teach it. However, most teachers today would not recommend that students simply memorize long lists of vocabulary. Instead they try to present vocabulary in context. The problematic question of context will be dealt with in more detail below.

When we test vocabulary we should avoid testing words in isolation. Another decision teachers have to make when assessing their students' vocabulary knowledge is whether to test it discretely or embedded in other skill areas. According to Read (2000), the discrete testing of vocabulary assesses a word as an independent construct. Testing vocabulary in an embedded way looks at vocabulary as part of a larger construct. More simply put, discrete vocabulary testing looks at assessing a student's knowledge at the word level whereas embedded vocabulary testing looks

at the students' use of vocabulary as it pertains to a text that the student has produced such as a written essay or spoken text.

## Which kind of vocabulary should I test?

Deciding which kind of vocabulary to test is another important decision that the language teacher has to make. It is important at the outset that you decide which words you expect your students to recognize (i.e., their *passive* or *receptive* vocabulary) and which words you expect them to use (i.e., their *active* or *productive* vocabulary) (Heaton, 1990). In general, research shows that learners can recognize more words than they can actually use. Most testers agree that there is a place for measuring both knowledge and use in second language assessment. Another dichotomy in the vocabulary literature is whether to test high frequency words or more specialized technical vocabulary. According to Nation (2001), high frequency words are so important that anything teachers and learners can do to make sure they are learned is worth doing. He goes on to state that teaching the 2,000 most frequent words of English is extremely useful particularly for students who want to go on to academic study (Nation & Hwang, 1995). Further rationale is provided by Cobb who states "if you know the first 2,000 [most frequently used English words] plus [the] 570 AWL words, then you know about 90% of the words you will meet in any academic text" (n.d., p. 16). These perspectives suggest a rationale for assessing both high frequency and technical vocabulary.

## Which format(s) should I use?

The decision on which format(s) to use will be key to successful vocabulary assessment. When selecting a format, the teacher must take three main issues into account. First, the idea of test validity needs to be taken into consideration. Content validity is the idea that we test what we teach, how we teach it. Therefore, when selecting test formats you should select only those that students have had experience with. Students should never have to encounter a new format in a testing situation. This would be a serious violation of test validity. Other cornerstones of testing, namely practicality and washback, should also be taken into consideration. From a practicality standpoint, you should select formats that are easy to mark and which give results that are easy to interpret. The formats that you choose should also have a positive washback effect on teaching and learning. Or as Nation (2001) puts it "answering the item should provide useful repetition of the vocabulary and perhaps even extend learners' knowledge" (p. 373).

## How many items should I include?

When deciding on the number of items to include, it is important to understand the concept of test reliability. Reliability refers to the degree of consistency of test scores. In general, the more items on a test, the more reliable it is considered to be. As far as vocabulary tests are concerned, Nation (2001) recommends a minimum of 30 items for a reliable vocabulary test. As far as an upper limit on the number of items on a vocabulary assessment, there is no suggested number put forward in the literature. However, the fatigue factor should be taken into account and teachers should use common sense when constructing vocabulary assessments. The number of items you include will also depend to a certain extent on the format you choose.

## How important is context?

According to Read (2000) an important dimension of vocabulary assessment is concerned with the role of context in a vocabulary test. Some formats are context-independent in that they present students with words in isolation and require them to select meanings for the words

without reference to any linguistic context (Read & Chapelle, 2001). In context-dependent vocabulary tests, in order to complete the task, students need to make use of contextual clues. Although it is generally accepted that context can provide students with much needed information about a word to help them understand it, noted scholars in the field of vocabulary (Folse, 2003; Laufer, 1997) point out the limitations of contextual clues. Folse (2003) argues that in EFL/ESL texts, we provide rich clues to facilitate language comprehension. However, in the real world they are rarely if ever present to the same degree. Laufer (1997) cautions against “the lexical plight in L2 reading” (p. 25) referring to words that are deceptively transparent. Deceptively transparent words are those where the contextual clues are misleading (i.e., words with deceptive morphology, idioms, false friends, polysemous words and synforms).

## Are there any tools or resources that can help me?

There are a number of tools and resources that can assist the language teacher in assessing vocabulary. For me the most valuable are found on Tom Cobb’s Compleat Lexical Tutor ([www.lextutor.ca](http://www.lextutor.ca)). This website is divided into three sections: Tutorial, Research, and Teachers.

In the Tutorial section, several self-access learning opportunities are provided for students. Using interactive tools on the website, students can test their vocabulary levels, compare their active and passive vocabulary, use new words, read and listen to a novel, and test their grammar with concordances. Another valuable aspect of the Tutorial section is the word lists that are found there. Many university teachers are probably already familiar with the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) or AWL as it is more commonly known. The AWL is a set of 570 high-frequency words that appear in academic texts. These are arranged in a set of 10 sublists, with words on Sublist 1 being the most frequently used, and those on Sublist 10 being the least frequent. More basic vocabulary lists are K1 and K2 lists, from the General Service List (West, 1953, as cited in Bauman & Culligan, 1995). K1 refers to the first 1,000 most frequently used words in English and K2 refers to the second 1,000 most frequently used words. These lists appear in various sections of the *Compleat Lexical Tutor*, most notably in *Vocabulary Profiler*, another very useful tool for language testers.

Stoplist (gaps etc dropped): None (total 0 tokens)

Note: in the output text, punctuation is eliminated, all figures (1, 20, etc) are replaced by the word *number*; contractions are replaced by constituent words (won't => will not); type-token ratio is calculated using said constituents; and in the 1k sub-analysis content + function words may sum to less than total (depending on user treatment of proper nouns and program decision to class numbers as 1k although not contained in 1k list).

|                                 | Families | Types | Tokens     | Percent       |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------|------------|---------------|
| <b>K1 Words (1 to 1000):</b>    | 76       | 81    | <b>109</b> | <b>79.99%</b> |
| Function:                       | ...      | ...   | (51)       | (36.96%)      |
| Content:                        | ...      | ...   | (58)       | (42.03%)      |
| > Anglo-Sax                     | ...      | ...   | (28)       | (20.29%)      |
| =Not Green-LatFr Cogn...        | ...      | ...   |            |               |
| <b>K2 Words (1001 to 2000):</b> | 4        | 4     | <b>4</b>   | <b>2.90%</b>  |
| > Anglo-Sax                     | ...      | ...   | (3)        | (2.17%)       |
| <b>AWL Words (academic):</b>    | 8        | 8     | <b>9</b>   | <b>6.52%</b>  |
| <b>Off-List Words:</b>          | 2        | 12    | <b>16</b>  | <b>11.59%</b> |
|                                 | 88+?     | 105   | 138        | 100%          |

  

|                                   |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| Words in text (tokens):           | 138  |
| Different words (types):          | 105  |
| Type-token ratio:                 | 0.76 |
| Tokens per type:                  | 1.31 |
| Lex density (content words/total) | 0.63 |

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*Pertaining to onlist only*

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| Tokens:                                    | 122    |
| Types:                                     | 93     |
| Families:                                  | 68     |
| Tokens per family:                         | 1.39   |
| Types per family:                          | 1.06   |
| Anglo-Sax Index:                           | 67.21% |
| (A-Sax tokens + Function / onlist tokens)  |        |
| Greco-LatFr-Cognate Index (green of above) | 32.79% |

For easy editing as MS Word table - [Edit/print-friendly table](#)

Page menu: [Tokens](#) [Types](#) [Families](#)

Integral text: all human societies have developed ways to determine the length of the year these systems calendars also dictated when the year should begin and how to divide the year into manageable units of time

Figure 1. Output of Vocabulary Profiler for a simple text.

*Vocabulary Profiler* is of interest to teachers in that it can be used to obtain a vocabulary profile of texts used in class and on tests. It is based on Laufer and Nation's Lexical Frequency Profiler (1995), and divides the words of texts into first and second thousand levels, academic words, and the remainder or 'off list' words. Figure 1 shows the output when a simple text is pasted into Vocabulary Profiler.

The output for this text shows that the percentage of K1-K2 words is about 79%, while the percentage of words from the AWL is 6.5%. Off-list words, which may include proper nouns, unusual words, specialist vocabulary, acronyms, abbreviations, and misspellings, comprise slightly fewer, contributing 11.59% to the total.

Teachers can also analyze their students writing with the *Vocabulary Profiler*. If, for example, teachers load a sample of their students' academic writing from the beginning of a course and compare it to a sample completed at the end they will hopefully see an increase in the percentage and types of AWL words.

The third section of this invaluable website, Teachers, allows instructors to input material to create customized vocabulary practice materials for their students. Among the offerings here are a Text-to-Speech (TTS) builder, three types of cloze builders, a Hypertext Builder, Multi-Concordance with Exercise Builder, Group Lex (a collaborative vocabulary exercise builder), and Dictator, a new addition to this section

## Steps in Developing a Vocabulary Assessment

The first step in assessing your student's vocabulary knowledge is deciding whether you want to test vocabulary discretely or assess it via writing or speaking samples. In this section, both discrete and embedded vocabulary assessment will be discussed, and examples of common formats along with their advantages and disadvantages will be presented.

### Discrete Vocabulary Tests

If you decide that you want to test vocabulary explicitly, the first thing you need to determine is whether you want to assess recognition or production. Common formats for assessing vocabulary recognition are multiple-choice questions (MCQs) and matching.

#### Multiple-Choice Question Formats

MCQs are one of the most common formats in professionally-developed language tests. They are widely used to assess learning at the recall and comprehension levels (Coombe, Folse, & Hubley, 2007). MCQs take many forms but their basic structure is stem and response options, which include the key or correct answer and the distractors or incorrect responses. The student must then identify the correct or best response choice. Students construct meaning through dependence on the context clues that are provided in the stem. Sometimes more than a one-sentence stem is needed for beginning level students.

There are four main advantages associated with MCQs. First of all, they are very reliable because, if written well, there is only one correct answer. Another advantage is they are quick and easy to mark and thereby deemed very practical from a teacher's perspective. Versatility is another advantage, as MCQs can be used to assess knowledge at various levels from beginning to advanced. A final advantage is that students from most parts of the world are familiar with the format.

The disadvantages associated with MCQs center around the range of knowledge they can assess. MCQs do not lend themselves to the testing of productive language skills or language as communication. The ability to test primarily recognition knowledge restricts what can be tested with this format (Coombe, Folse, & Huble, 2007).

**Item stems.** According to Read (2004), a number of guidelines must be followed in writing effective MCQ stems. First, the stem should provide as much context as possible. Read (2004) recommends a stem of one to two sentences or a context of between 10-20 words. The blanks in the stem should be of a uniform length. Grammatically, the stem should consist of one or two simple declarative sentences, without a subordinate clause (Read, 2004). When using two sentence contexts, the sentence which does not contain the blank should provide contextual clues as to the meaning of the word being tested. Most importantly, however, the stem should present the word in a 'natural, authentic' semantic and grammatical context.

**Distractors.** All distractors should be the same part of speech as the word being tested. The exception to this rule of course is if you are testing word forms. In general, they should come from the same frequency level as the word being tested (i.e., first 1,000, second 1,000 or AWL). The distractors selected should not be related to the tested word in terms of meaning or more simply put the distractors should not be ambiguous.

The MCQ format can be used to assess vocabulary knowledge in a variety of ways. These include: synonym recognition, definition, meaning in context, and odd man out.

**Synonym recognition (word in isolation or with context).**

The teacher was *furios* when she heard the students talking during the test.

- A. angry
- B. calm
- C. happy
- D. delighted

**Definition recognition (word level, minimal sentence context).**

She is someone I absolutely *adore*.

- A. give a round of applause to
- B. feel affection for
- C. am revolted by
- D. disapprove of

If something is *vague* it means it is \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. unclear
- B. abnormal
- C. precise
- D. specific

**Meaning in context (sentence and paragraph level).**

The townspeople were \_\_\_\_\_ by the typhoon that hit their coastline. Everyone had to move to a new area.

- A. minimized
- B. violated
- C. displaced
- D. rewarded

New Year is a time for making \_\_\_\_\_. Everyone thinks carefully about the lifestyle changes they want to make in the coming year.

- A. indications
- B. resolutions
- C. summaries
- D. obligations

Normally most kids love summer vacations. However, for me, the end of the school year is not a time to celebrate. I dread the dull, **humdrum** existence of sitting at home and doing the same things day after day. There is only so much television one can watch. I am counting the days till school begins in September.

The word **humdrum** in line two probably means \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. interesting
- B. exciting
- C. boring
- D. motivating

**Odd one out.**

*One of the four words or idioms is different from the other three. Circle the letter of your choice.*

- |                    |                  |              |               |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. a. construction | b. electrician   | c. decorator | d. surveyor   |
| 2. a. spouse       | b. partner       | c. fiancée   | d. marriage   |
| 3. a. outstanding  | b. unexceptional | c. excellent | d. remarkable |

**MCQ Item Writing Tips**

Teachers who want to use the MCQ format when they test vocabulary may find the following guidelines useful (Coombe, Folsie, & Hubley, 2007).

- The expected response to the question should be clear from the stem.
- Provide sufficient context in the stem.
- Standardize the number of response options (4 is considered best).
- Make sure one response option is the unambiguous correct or best answer.
- Try to provide a balanced number of nouns, verbs and adjectives selected as tested words.
- Write questions where all response options are approximately the same length and level of difficulty.
- Place the correct answer equally in the A, B, C and D positions.
- Avoid providing grammatical clues in the stem.
- Avoid using absurd distractors as they do not contribute to the test.

**Matching Formats**

Another common objective format used in vocabulary assessment is matching. Matching questions usually present the student with two columns of information. The student's task is to

find the matches between the two columns. Items in the left-hand column are called premises and the items in the right-hand column are called options. The advantage of this format over MCQs is that there are more distractors to choose from.

*Match useful expressions with context of use. Write the letter in the space provided.*

- |       |  |                      |
|-------|--|----------------------|
| _____ | 1. when you are introduced to someone new  | A. I'm sorry.        |
| _____ | 2. to apologize to someone                 | B. Stop it.          |
| _____ | 3. you don't know the answer to a question | C. Nice to meet you. |
| _____ | 4. when you are joking with someone        | D. I've got it.      |
|       |  | E. I'm just kidding. |
|       |  | F. I give up.        |

Here is an example of a format that combines matching and multiple choice.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1. My cousin is very _____. He has both a B.A. and an M.A.</p> <p>2. Mary is a/an _____ person. She is never angry or upset and she is easy to get along with.</p> <p>3. Ahmed has a lot of money, and his family is also very rich. Everybody in Dubai knows he is a very _____ person.</p> | <p>A. good-natured<br/>B. appropriate<br/>C. affluent<br/>D. widespread<br/>E. well-educated</p> |
|---|--|

## Matching Item Writing Tips

Matching item formats are very popular with teachers as they are generally easier to write than MCQs. If you decide to include them on your vocabulary tests, make sure you take these guidelines into consideration (Coombe, Hubley, & Folse, 2007).

- Include more options than premises.
- Number the options and letter the premises and have students write the letter of the correct answer in the blank provided.
- Make options shorter than premises.
- Relate options and premises to one central theme.

## Sentence Completion or Gap Fill Items

Sentence completion or gap fill items assess a student's production of vocabulary. These items require students to read the sentence and then write in the correct or best response. Sentence completion items encourage students to learn and know the tested word rather than just recognize it. Sentence completion items are easy to construct. Despite these advantages, however, testers point out a number of disadvantages associated with this item type. One disadvantage is that because these items require students to come up with the answer rather than just recognize it, responding to these items may take the student longer. Consequently this could reduce the possible number of items on a test. Issues having to do with scoring are probably the most serious disadvantage of sentence completion items. With these items you have to take into consideration that students will come up with words that are feasibly correct but not the ones you are trying to test. In this case you might write the first letter of the word in

the blank (Coombe, Folse, & Hubley, 2007).

Sentence completion items can be written in sentence or paragraph formats. Here is an example of each.

### **Sentence (definition and meaning in context).**

A \_\_\_\_\_ is a person who defends people in court.

Correct answer: *lawyer*

Oil is one very important \_\_\_\_\_ for most Arabian Gulf countries.

Correct answer: *resource*

Because of the snow the football game was \_\_\_\_\_ until the following week.

Correct answer: *postponed*

### **Paragraph.**

The African elephant has many interesting \_\_\_\_\_ (1). It is strong and very intelligent. Elephants are sensitive and can cry, play, and laugh. Elephants even have incredible memories. The young elephants learn by copying other elephants. The mothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins all take care of the young. The family or \_\_\_\_\_ (2) of elephants all protect the young from dangers like predators.

Correct answers: 1. *features*, 2. *herd*

You might also test vocabulary items by putting the first letter of the word you are looking for in the blank. Consider the following example:

The African elephant has many interesting f\_\_\_\_\_ (1). The mothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins all take care of the young. The family or h\_\_\_\_\_ (2) of elephants all protect the young from dangers like predators.

## **Translation**

Translation is another way to assess students' productive knowledge of vocabulary items. Of course, to monitor how effectively this is done, the teacher must have an adequate working knowledge of the students' L1.

*Translate the underlined word into your first language.*

His job is very demanding.

## **Embedded Vocabulary Assessment**

Testing vocabulary in an embedded way looks at vocabulary as part of a larger construct. Embedded vocabulary assessment looks at the students' use or quality of vocabulary as it pertains to a text that the student has written, read, listened to or spoken.

## Assessing Vocabulary in Reading Comprehension

One of the most common questions that teachers include on reading comprehension tests is assessing vocabulary in context. This can be done in a number of ways. Here are some common question types.

Which word in paragraph 3 means **danger**?

Which word in paragraph 6 means the same thing as **fun**?

Find the word(s) in the text that means the same thing as **hundreds of years**.

Find a word(s) in the text that describes the way the author was feeling.

What does the word **they** in paragraph 2 refer to?

What does the phrase “talking nonsense” (line 10) probably mean?

- A. discussing feelings about something
- B. speaking in a crazy way
- C. saying something that doesn't make sense
- D. stating an obvious fact

## Assessing Vocabulary in Writing

Most large-scale high-stakes exams today assess the quality of vocabulary found in a student's writing sample. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assesses what it refers to as 'Lexical Resource.' Raters also take vocabulary usage into consideration when marking Test of Written English (TWE) essays.

In one of the most widely used analytic scales for the marking of writing, Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981, p. 30) incorporate five scales in their ESL Composition Profile. The five scales in this very popular instrument include: content, organization, language use or grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. Their scale for assessing vocabulary can be found in Figure 2.

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| 20-18 | EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: sophisticated range; effective word/ idiom choice and usage; word form mastery; appropriate register |
| 17-14 | GOOD TO AVERAGE: adequate range; occasional errors of word/ idiom form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured               |
| 13-10 | FAIR TO POOR: limited range; frequent errors or word/idiom form, choice, usage; meaning confused or obscured                 |
| 9-7   | VERY POOR: essentially translation; little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, words forms OR not enough to evaluate    |

Figure 2. Vocabulary scale from ESL Composition Profile.

## Assessing Vocabulary in Speaking

Similar to writing assessment scales, several well-known instruments such as the TOEFL and the IELTS assess the quality and range of a student's vocabulary during speaking exams. In a very teacher-friendly scale of speaking assessment, Folse (2006) includes vocabulary as one of four categories upon which a student is assessed. In his vocabulary category, he looks for range, the correct and appropriate selection of words in speech and their impact on meaning.

# Recommendations for Classroom Vocabulary Assessment

## **Match vocabulary assessment procedures with instructional objectives.**

In simple terms, the way you assess vocabulary in the classroom should be reflective of how you teach it. For vocabulary assessment to be valid, it needs to match instruction using formats that students are familiar with.

## **Employ multiple measures.**

Vocabulary knowledge is multifaceted and no test can tap into all forms of vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001). In order to get a more in depth profile of your students' vocabulary knowledge, it is necessary to employ multiple measures of vocabulary assessment (Coombe & Hubley, 2003).

## **Make your assessments meaningful.**

The assessment of students' vocabulary development should be meaningful. Whenever possible try to assess students' vocabulary development authentically.

## **Be transparent.**

Provide students with the necessary information about how their vocabulary knowledge will be assessed. In class, practice common vocabulary testing formats so that students can develop a familiarity with the ways they can be tested.

## Conclusion

Although once viewed as an enabling skill of secondary importance to the four main language skills, vocabulary instruction has now come into its own. As such, it is crucial that this important language development skill is assessed validly and reliably. To accomplish this, several important issues need to be taken into account and decisions need to be made about how best to assess vocabulary in the classroom. Whatever decision is made, however, teachers must strive to make their vocabulary assessment principled, practical, varied and meaningful.

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