

# Learners' Self-assessment of Lexical Knowledge

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## *Abstract*

*The article is devoted to the issues connected with students' lexical abilities and the way learners self-evaluate their vocabulary knowledge. The results of research conducted with groups of college-level students are exemplified and analysed.*

Vocabulary is the cornerstone of language. No messages can be successfully conveyed unless appropriate words are chosen to express desired meanings. Learning a foreign language is a process which irrevocably requires the acquisition of words embedded in proper grammatical structures. New words are the elements by which language learners frequently assess their progress in the process of foreign language learning. The issues of learners' lexical abilities as well as their self-evaluation of the lexical store shall be addressed in the short discussion to follow.

## **1. Lexical knowledge**

Lexical knowledge is a complex issue paramount to overall foreign language proficiency. It entails the ability to recognise as well as apply lexical items appropriately to situation and context of use. A lexical item, also referred to as a lexeme is understood to represent "basic abstract unit of the lexicon on the level of language which may be realised in different grammatical forms such as the lexeme *write* in *writes, wrote, written*. A lexeme may also be a part of another lexeme, e.g. *writer, ghostwriter*, etc. In its broader sense, 'lexeme' is also used synonymously for 'word' to denote a lexical unit or element of the vocabulary" (Bussmann 1996: 273). This interpretation is synonymous with the description of the category provided in more detail by Burkhanov (1998). In his opinion, lexical item is a basic category in both lexicology and lexical semantics (1). Different interpretations of the notion 'lexical item' emerge resulting from a variety of approaches to the structure of the lexicon. Contemporary theoretical and applied-linguistic publications employ this term in three senses:

First of all, 'lexical item' is interpreted as lexeme i.e. the term denoting a linguistic sign, being a symbolic unit of language which constitutes the unit of key importance in lexicographic and linguistic semantics description. This interpretation of the notion in question takes into consideration all morphological word forms of a particular one-word lexical item and all related senses (Kempson 1980; Burkhanov 1998).

Secondly, within lexical-semantic research, a lexeme is "a family of lexical units" where a lexical unit is treated as "the union of a single sense with a lexical form" (Cruse 1986: 76).

Hence, we can conclude that any given lexical item may be taken to mean a single sense of a polysemous lexeme, which is equated with the meaning of a monosemous lexeme.

Finally, the term 'lexical item' is sometimes used as a common category that encompasses not only monosemous lexemes and individual senses of polysemous lexemes, but also idioms and collocations (see Cruse 1986; Burkhanov 1998: 126). It follows logically, then, that lexical items may be subdivided into one-word lexical items, i.e. lexemes, and multiple-word lexical items (2).

Irrespective of the interpretation of the term ‘lexical unit’, language users as well as language learners need to be acquainted with various features combined into word knowledge, in other words what knowing a word entails. According to Harmer (1991), familiarity with a particular vocabulary item involves the familiarity with its various aspects, as depicted in Figure 1 below:

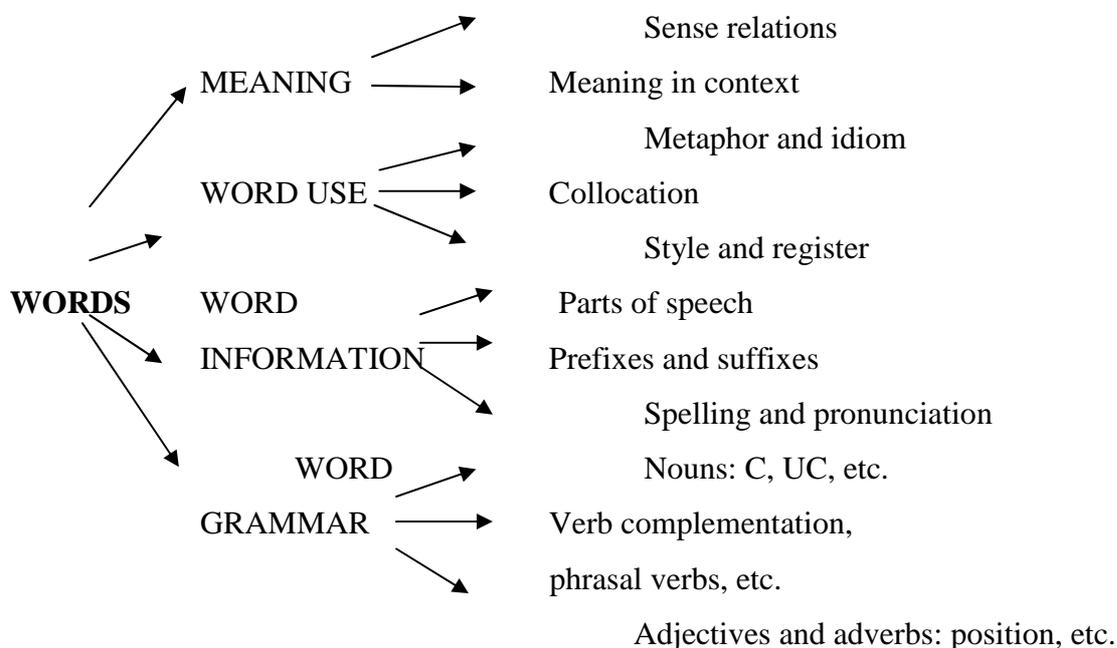


Figure 1 Knowing a word (Harmer, 1991: 158)

As it has been pointed out before, language proficiency inevitably entails receptive or productive (3) word knowledge. Thus, any language user has to be aware of a number of features, or ‘word-knowledge’ components, listed by Robinson (1993) and illustrated by Figure 2 below. Apart from the characteristics mentioned with reference to aspects of word knowledge, the following receptive (R) and productive (P) components should be enumerated, since they refer to the problem of retrieval of vocabulary form memory (based on Robinson 1993: 232):

Form:	spoken	(R) How does an item sound? (P) How is an item pronounced?
	written	(R) What is an item’s graphic form? (P) How is an item spelled?
Position:	sentence type	(R) In what sentence types is an item used? (P) In what sentence types are we to use an item?
	collocations	(R) What words (contexts) are expected after an item? (P) What words to use with an item?
Functions:	frequency	(R) How frequent is an item? (P) How often should an item be used?
	appropriateness of use	(R) In what contexts and situations is an item expected? (P) How to use an item?

Meaning:	concept	(R) What does an item mean? (P) What item to use to express this meaning?
	associations	(R) What other items are associated with the given item? (P) What other items can be used instead of this item?

*Figure 2 Components of 'word knowledge' (Robinson, 1993)*

All the above specified features (4) make up the complex set of data required for lexical proficiency. However, language users frequently are not aware of some of the features and thus erroneously assess their own vocabulary store. This issue was brought to my attention when comparing teachers' evaluation with learners' self-evaluation of learners' lexical abilities. In order to assess the latter a test (the details of which will be specified further on) focusing on graded vocabulary application was designed and administered among students at advanced level. Obviously, language is not a collection of randomly selected or combined lexemes. Individual items form lexical phrases, idioms and collocations. Therefore the test tasks were based first on recognition of lexical items and then gradually relied more on learners' productive skills.

It needs to be stressed here that "some of the more amusing errors a learner can make in a foreign language arise from a lack of awareness of the appropriacy of items" (Gairns and Redman 1986: 20). Therefore, it can be easily concluded that the ability to use language properly in accordance with the style and register of a given situation is linked with the vocabulary resource of a learner, since in order to be able to function properly in a number of varied contexts, every language user must possess rich vocabulary. Piasecka (1992: 86) points out that in foreign language learning "the process of lexical development is dynamic as, with growing language proficiency, more and more information about properties of words is gathered and integrated into existing networks. Thus the word forms and use are gradually acquired until they become complete." Burton and Humphries (1992: 65) assert that the larger the vocabulary, the better the language performance, as a large lexical resource allows to express ideas "precisely, vividly and without repeating yourself in composition", and what logically follows, "a good personal stock of words coupled with the ability to use them effectively gives confidence and commands respect." Various experts agree that the proper choice and use of adequate vocabulary can significantly make up for deficiencies in inappropriate application of grammar or it can altogether "cancel out structural inaccuracy" (Harmer 1991: 153). Advanced level learners seem to pose little difficulty when teaching vocabulary is concerned as they are already equipped with a wide range of active lexicon. Yet, they are not always well acquainted with phrasal verb forms or idiomatic expressions as these lexical items are far more complex and not as straightforward in meaning. Other difficulties in lexical acquisition are posed by word collocations, affective meaning, range of use, semantic relations, style and register. All those aspects contribute to the difficulty of not only recognising and understanding but also properly selecting and applying a particular lexeme in an utterance or discourse. Hence, it becomes apparent that advanced learners are in need of explicit lexical knowledge.

## **2. Evaluation and self-evaluation**

Evaluation of students' development is an integral element of the process of foreign language instruction. Teachers need to be aware of the progress learners make and for this purpose various forms of evaluation are applied, ranging from informal assessment made during a practice activity to formal test conditions. Richards *et al.* (1992: 130) define evaluation as "the systematic gathering of information for purposes of decision making." Kohonen (1988: 18) points out that "in a broad sense, evaluation can be understood as a continuum ranging

from informal classroom observation to formally administered standardised tests. Its purpose is to produce samples of learner language, yielding empirical data for making various inferences and instructional and educational decisions.” The results of assessment made by teachers in foreign language classroom not only influence the way students are graded but also help to motivate them to further work or they sometimes discourage language learners from making effort. Either way, learners always have some preconception about their own abilities which however, does not always overlap with the instructor’s evaluation. Jakobovits (1970: 64) notes that “it is an interesting psychological observation [...] that the individual engaged in the study of a FL has some very definite ideas about the progress he believes he is making” and this form of self-assessment is a crucial feature of a learner’s confidence-building process. Considerable significance of self-evaluation is stressed by Komorowska (1987) who believes that there is a strong relation between a learner’s self-evaluation and his/her school success. She notices that students who evaluate themselves positively tend to receive better results at school. This inevitably adds to the self-awareness of own progress and knowledge. In line with this argument Ellis (1985: 122) notes that good language learners “possess sufficient analytic skills to perceive, categorise, and store the linguistic features of the L2 and also to monitor errors.” Similarly, Oxford (1989) points out that such learners control their own learning process through the application of metacognitive strategies, such as, among others, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring.

A detailed analysis of the issues pertaining to evaluation and self-evaluation are beyond the scope of the present discussion and as they deserve a research project of their own they shall not be considered in-depth here.

### **3. Research design, implementation and analysis**

It has been pointed out before that the way teachers assess students’ abilities and the manner the former is viewed by learners’ themselves are not always concurrent. To be able to confront instructors’ evaluation and students’ self-evaluation a test was designed and administered. Additionally, questionnaires for both learners and teachers were designed to allow both groups to express their opinions about the issues relating to assessment and self-assessment. Learners were first asked to complete a questionnaire devoted to their preferred ways of learning vocabulary as well as techniques used for self-evaluation of their own progress and performance. The following step was test completion followed by a request to self-evaluate their performance and provide any comment appropriate for the responses they specified. Teachers, however, were requested to specify ways of evaluating learners’ lexical knowledge.

The test constructed to measure students’ lexical abilities was composed of a series of graded activities aimed at exposing learners’ knowledge of active vocabulary of general upper-intermediate and advanced English. It was built of five task types gradually requiring more productive vocabulary use. The tasks employed in the test ranged from recognition of vocabulary through gapped sentence completion, cloze test, cued story construction to composition writing. Simultaneously, with more productive vocabulary use, students’ independence in the choice of vocabulary rose, i.e. they could gradually use more vocabulary of their own selection and were less constrained by sentence content and structure.

The results obtained by students on test completion and grading by teachers were less positive than the students themselves tended to think. The number of correct responses in guided exercises and satisfactory compositions is low, with overall results poorer than had been expected. Additionally, the comments provided by a third of the students revealed that they felt the test was rather difficult which resulted in the lack of ability to provide adequate vocabulary at the required level of advancement. Most students assessed recognition tasks one

as the easiest to tackle, while controlled vocabulary use in two tasks posed greatest problems to test takers. While a third of all students claimed they disliked the cued story, nearly the same number suggested they found this task interesting and stimulating. The final task, i.e. composition, according to students' opinions turned to be varied, included interesting topics to select from and could suit different tastes. 25% of learners included in the project stated the whole test was interesting, it let them practise their lexical abilities in varied ways and was considerably different from typical classroom tests. It has to be pointed out here, that those students who scored lowest tended to criticise both the test construction and types of activities it included.

On the analysis of learners' opinions and comments including self-evaluation a certain pattern can be observed. Those learners who most severely criticised the test, as too difficult thus not matching students' level of advancement, tended to claim they know their English is quite good and it is the test tasks that are inappropriate, not learners' responses to them. These learners all expected to be given positive marks that, in fact, they did not deserve and so failed.

Another, much larger group, including twice as many students (30 learners), expected to be failed for they believed their vocabulary was not extensive enough or sufficient to complete the tasks, which were, again, considered quite difficult. Those learners appear to have estimated their abilities correctly for they, too were not given positive marks as their score amounted to numbers below the established limit.

A group similar in size to the one described first showed a reverse tendency. Students, who did not expect to have done too well, passed the test. They evaluated themselves too harshly, which implies that inadequate evaluation was applied where there was in fact no need to underestimate and undervalue oneself. By far the least numerous group of learners was composed of learners who applied appropriate, positive self-evaluation. Only about 10 learners estimated their performance appropriately to the results produced, on calculating points for all five test tasks. These respondents, however, also implied that language activities they were occupied with proved demanding and challenging.

Taking into consideration learners' self-evaluation, a larger number represents the group which suggested appropriate, i.e. either negative or positive, self-assessment that was later on confirmed by the teacher in the form of test results. The group of learners who did not provide evaluation corresponding to their final score turned out to be substantially smaller than the previously described one. What these results imply is that learners are quite capable of evaluating their work and progress in terms of success or failure. Unfortunately, it cannot be taken for granted since appropriate self-evaluation suggested by some learners proved they did not expect good results for they completed some tasks only and omitted those that turned out to be highly problematic for most learners (namely Tasks two and three).

Such outcome is not conclusive, yet it seems that learners still feel dependent on their teachers for evaluation, they are not used to and trained to evaluate themselves and some, though not all, blame own failures on inappropriacy of test tasks or unfamiliar task formats rather than themselves and one's own poor language performance. More conscientious learners do admit they need more practice and that they do not devote ample, sufficient time to acquiring and, more importantly, revising vocabulary, which clearly suggests they take responsibility for their own learning and tend to be autonomous. Learner autonomy, then, appears to be neglected or not properly attended to by the former group. These students appear unable to approach language learning independently from external factors such as teacher or textbook and whatever goes wrong tends to be blamed on these rather than oneself. In conclusion, self-evaluation, defined as "checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against a standard after it has been completed" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990: 119) appears to be or to have been infrequently, or perhaps rarely, utilised by such learners. They

may not be too self-centred in the sense that reflects their self-monitoring and responsibility for own learning and language acquisition.

Notes:

1 Lexical semantics is understood here as “a branch of linguistic semantics dealing with the study of lexical meaning including both paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations” (Uberman 2006: 17)

2 Compare Nattinger (1988) who notes the following types of lexical items: polywords, phrasal constraints, deictic locutions, sentence builders, situational utterances, verbatim texts.

3 An extensive definition, presented in Hrehovčik and Uberman (2003: 140), reads: “Various sources [...] frequently differentiate between ‘active’ or ‘productive’ and ‘passive’ or ‘receptive’ vocabulary. **Active (productive) vocabulary** refers to language items which can be recalled and used appropriately by learners in speech and writing, this range includes words which students will need to understand as well as use themselves. It is of paramount importance for students to both know the contexts in which the lexical items can occur, their possible and impossible collocations (words it can and cannot co-occur with) and “more details of the connotational meaning of the word” (Lewis and Hill 1992: 99). **Passive (receptive) vocabulary**, as opposed to its active counterpart, describes language items which can only be recognised and understood in the context of reading and listening material; words which teachers want students to understand (e.g. when reading a text), but which they will not need to use themselves. If a student has a passive knowledge of a certain item, its meaning will be recognised when it occurs in context.”

4 For a detailed discussion of how lexical knowledge is organised see Uberman (2006).

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