ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN VOCABULARY OF 6TH GRADERS

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The level of foreign language vocabulary influences the general language proficiency and students' school success mostly at the beginning of their learning process (*Schoonen* and *Verhallen*, 2008). However, the comparative assessment of the vocabulary of two languages is not usual in investigations. Therefore, the aims of this research were to develop and validate diagnostic tests to assess 6th graders' word knowledge in English and German, and to examine the differences in students' vocabulary.

Word knowledge is the ability to establish the link between word form and meaning (*Laufer* et al., 2004). The breadth and depth of vocabulary is assessed mostly in context (*Milton*, 2008). In the present study the size of vocabulary and the link between word form and meaning were assessed with visual input to activate students' mental lexicon. English and German vocabulary was selected on the basis of word frequency lists (*Kilgarriff*, 1997; *Davies* and *Gardner*, 2010; *Tschirner*, 2008) and of the levels A1 and A2 of the CEFR. The assessment is based on 216 words with identical word meaning, CEFR-level and similar word frequency rank. Each task contained a picture and four words. Students had to decide whether the given word fitted the picture. Three test versions were developed in both languages; each of them consisted of 18 tasks. They were structurally and empirically equivalent. 127 6th graders comprised the English and 93 students the German sub-samples. The reliability figures (Cronbach's alphas) range between 0.70 and 0.92. Results showed that performances on the three test versions were 12–13% higher in English than in German ($p<0.001$). In case of 62 words, significant differences were found (at 24 words $p<0.001$) between the English and German tests: the achievements in English were higher except three words. Average performance was at word level A1 78% in English and 65% in German, while at word level A2 61% and 48%, respectively (in both cases $p<0.001$). The differences between the words of high and low frequency were not significant either in the case of English, or in the case of German. In terms of word frequency, English learners showed 12–13% better performance than learners of German ($p<0.001$). As for word class, achievements of English were, in case of nouns, 12%, in case of verbs, 9%, and in case of all other words, 14% higher than those of the German words (in all cases $p<0.001$). The picture-based vocabulary test provides a reliable and efficient method of assessing students' word knowledge. It has been established that there were significant and characteristic differences between English and German learners' vocabulary. As this study is embedded in a large project to assess students' first and foreign language skills, in this framework it is also possible to diagnose the causes of these differences in vocabulary achievements.