

DEVELOPING AND VALIDATING VOCABULARY TESTS FOR ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

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The study aimed to develop and validate vocabulary tests that meet the special lexical needs of English majors at a Hungarian university. The theoretical framework integrates findings of recent research on reading comprehension, vocabulary testing and corpus linguistics. A wealth of studies support the prevalence of word knowledge over syntax in text comprehension (Boyd Zimmerman, 1997; Laufer, 1997; Nation, 1993), a major task for participants. Although there is no consensus on the minimal vocabulary size necessary for academic studies (Zechmeister et al. 1993; Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Laufer 1992), vocabulary range versus depth (Zareva, 2005) has been shown to be predictive of achievement in reading, writing, language proficiency and general academic success (Doró, 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Morris & Cobb, 2003). As words common in academic texts behave differently across disciplines, learners and testers need to focus on discipline-specific vocabulary items in higher education.

The research questions aimed to explore what words are common and thus invaluable for students to know in readings in English Studies, what test format best fits the purposes of filtering students with inadequate vocabulary knowledge and how the developed test items work. It was assumed that besides a good knowledge of general low-frequency and academic words, being familiar with specific lexis rare in general English texts but frequent in English Studies highly increases students' potential in academic text comprehension. Consequently, these words should ideally form the basis of vocabulary testing.

In a quantitative research design the data collection instrument, based on criteria of practicality, objectivity, suitability for computerized item analysis and ease of scoring and administration, was a discrete point, receptive vocabulary size test. The innovative feature lies in the item-selection procedure: items were chosen from a representative specialized corpus of texts used in our English Studies programme compiled for this study, instead of adopting general-purpose tests of academic word knowledge.

Participants were over 500 English majors (Hungarian L1) in their first and second academic year. In data handling participants were coded for ethical reasons. Data collection took four years on eight test occasions, as the milestone proficiency test it was part of in the curriculum is officially administered twice a year.

The initial two test versions were revised and tested in two subsequent years after a thorough analysis of descriptive statistics, item characteristics, facility values, discrimination indices and IRT data on each test occasion in order to eliminate weak items. As a result, two validated and reliable 30-item parallel tests are reported in this paper (Cronbach's $\alpha_1=.828$; $\alpha_2=.851$), which are made available for other Hungarian institutions running English Studies programmes for the purposes of filtering students with inadequate lexical knowledge.