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Milton, J. (2013). Measuring the contribution of vocabulary knowledge to proficiency in the four skills. *Eurosla Monographs Series 2*, 57-78. <http://www.eurosla.org/monographs/EM02/Milton.pdf>

How vocabulary knowledge contributes to proficiency in the four skills

What this research was about and why it is important

Recently developed methods for describing and testing vocabulary knowledge have made it possible to measure the contribution of vocabulary knowledge to language development. In doing so, conclusions were drawn about the importance of vocabulary knowledge to language learning and its relationship to language proficiency overall. As such it provided guidance for best practice in teaching and learning foreign languages.

What the researcher did

In this narrative review, the author selected to review research designed to investigate the way vocabulary knowledge and performance inter-relate, looking in particular at the relationship between word knowledge and proficiency in the four skills of: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In measuring word knowledge, also investigated were the three dimensions of word knowledge, which are **breadth/size** (the number of words a learner knows regardless of the form they are known in or how well they are known), **depth** (how well or how completely these words are known eg. spelling, pronunciation, usages) and **fluency** (the automaticity with which the words a person knows can be recognised, processed or accessed for use).

What the researcher found

- A large body of research evidence supports the idea that vocabulary knowledge and performance in a foreign language are linked.
- Specifically, vocabulary size can explain up to 50% of the variance in performance across all four skills.
- Knowledge of the most frequent 2000 words in particular, is an important feature in successful communication in a foreign language.
- From measuring the other dimensions of word knowledge, these also contribute to performance as much as size.
- Vocabulary development meshes very closely with other features of language such as grammatical development.

Things to consider

- Given that vocabulary is crucial to the development of language performance overall, the task the learner faces, therefore, is principally one of learning the vocabulary of the foreign language.
- Vocabulary should be built explicitly into the development of any good languages curriculum. This could be in the form of indicating particular words to be learned, or by specifying the number of words to learn as a means of setting appropriate targets and monitoring progress.
- The more sophisticated the measure of vocabulary knowledge, the more likely they are to explain variance in performance in the four skills, up to the level of around 50%. Beyond that point, other aspects will need to be factored in to explain improvement, such as grammatical knowledge or the learner's ability to apply their knowledge when listening, reading, speaking or writing. The extent to which these other factors impact on language proficiency is an area for further research.

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