

*“Vocabulary instruction is most effective, and is most likely to influence students’ comprehension, when it is rich, deep, and extended” (McKeown and Beck).*

**Rezumat:** Prezentul articol abordează ideea structurii și constituirii vocabularului limbii engleze în acord cu cerințele curriculumului actual și ale pieței muncii. Luând în considerație faptul că competența comunicativă este una dintre cerințele de bază în acest caz, ea impune tinerilor specialiști cu studii superioare atât să recunoască și să poată aplica un vocabular suficient în engleză pentru a putea comunica, cât și abilități lexicale și de lectură pentru a putea înțelege diferite semnificații ale unităților limbii în vorbirea orală și scrisă. Unul dintre scopurile de bază ale acestui articol este prezentarea cuantificativă a vocabularului englez al absolvenților Facultății de Limbi și Literaturi Străine a Universității de Stat „Alec Russo” din Bălți.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** cuantificarea vocabularului, predare/învățare, studii superioare, profesioniști.

**Abstract:** The present article focuses on the English vocabulary building and acquisition as stated by the national curriculum and required by the current labour market. Given the fact that the communicative competence is in high demand on the labour market, this necessity requires young specialists with higher education training to possess sufficient productive and receptive vocabularies in English, and enough lexical and reading skills to be able to understand various meanings displayed in print and oral speech. Therefore, one of the major goals of the present article is to study the measures of the vocabulary size of the graduate students of A. Russo State University of Balti, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures.

**Key-words:** vocabulary size, training, higher education, professionals.

One of the most current and challenging issues in TEFL is closely connected with the second language vocabulary building and acquisition seen as the most significant part of a well-rounded education. The relevance of having a good vocabulary is constantly displayed in academic and work environments, as proficiency and adequacy of vocabulary are crucial for English language students for successful achievements in society. Therefore the present article aims at exploring the lexical dimension or the vocabulary size of the graduate students of Alec Russo State University of Bălți, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures.

My special interest in this topic has been motivated by several reasons:

- Estimating students’ vocabulary size gives the possibility to English language teachers to realize when to switch to comprehension-based rather than production-oriented instruction;
- it also allows English language teachers to compare the difference rate between active and passive vocabularies.

There has recently been a growing body of research in applied linguistics focusing on different attitudes towards vocabulary acquisition and the role it plays in developing word banks of “sight” and/or “hard” words<sup>62</sup> from various reading materials students encounter during the whole period of their studies. Thus, one of the major tasks in the present article is to highlight the mutual relationship that exists between the vocabulary size and achievements in reading.

Traditionally, reading is considered as the most essential part of the majority of language programs at all the levels. It helps students with word schemata, vocabulary building, content knowledge and familiarity with syntactic patterns, text genre knowledge and reading rates<sup>63</sup>. Most of the vocabulary that students acquire comes from an extensive reading background and academic ability, which, in turn, allows them to understand and memorize quite a sufficient amount of new words for fluent language use.

Taking into account that vocabulary is considered a priority in language teaching, it should be assessed by teachers in some way to monitor the students’ progress in vocabulary growth. This current necessity is strictly dictated by the market requirements which demand from young specialists with higher education training to possess sufficient productive and receptive vocabularies, and enough lexical and reading competence to be able to grasp various word meanings displayed in print and oral speech. Moreover, these specialists should be able to develop these skills in their future students as well.

From a pedagogical perspective, it is significant to be aware of how many words second language students know and how quickly they expand their target vocabularies so that they are able to read, produce and understand target discourse quite correctly. Therefore, this approach should not be regarded as a mechanical quantitative concern with the vocabulary knowledge due to the fact that second language acquisition researchers such as J. S. P. Nation, P. Meara, B. Laufer, J. Read, T. Cobb and J. Richard have underlined the importance of the vocabulary size for fluent language use. Moreover, these experts have demonstrated that the students’ competence in using a language is directly dependent on the amount of words they know, especially in the early stages of learning a second language. In view of the importance of the vocabulary size, P. Meara argues: “All other things being equal, learners with big vocabularies are more proficient in a wide range of language skills than learners with smaller vocabularies, and there is some evidence to support the view that vocabulary skills make a significant contribution to almost all aspects of L2 proficiency”<sup>64</sup>.

This idea enjoys support among leading language experts who have concluded that measures of the vocabulary size are powerful predictors of reading comprehension and of other indices of linguistic competence.

Nowadays applied language researchers have demonstrated the relevance of having a large vocabulary in order to cover and make sense of 95 % of lexical items in a text<sup>65</sup>. B. Laufer advocates the idea that lack of such a lexicon leads to poor text comprehension and the students are incapable of transferring their reading skills from their L1 to L2<sup>66</sup>. J. S. P. Nation argues that a threshold of 95% of a student’s lexicon constitutes a “standard of minimally acceptable comprehension”<sup>67</sup>.

It is always difficult at the beginning to establish precisely how wide the students’ basic working vocabulary in the first year of their studies is, though subsequent testing and reading experiences in different subjects give teachers certain ideas about the breadth or size and depth or quality of their students’ vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, it is possible to estimate and count the approximate number of words which they acquire in a steady manner every academic year while studying a second language.

Based on the analysis of students’ vocabulary encountered in academic texts beginning with the first year of their studies till they graduate, we have obtained the following results displayed in the table below. Word counting statistics, enquiry and observation are among the research methods applied to determine more exact numbers:

Year of study	Vocabulary size of L2 students with the previous knowledge of English			Vocabulary size of L2 students without the previous knowledge of English		
	words	Word-combinations	Total	Words	Word-combinations	Total
I	1026	144	1170	2150	310	2460
II	1147	463	1610	1055	348	1403
III	2022	984	3006	1487	295	1782
	<b>Total: 6770</b>			<b>Total: 5940</b>		

<sup>62</sup>[http://www.prel.org/products/re\\_/ES0419.htm](http://www.prel.org/products/re_/ES0419.htm)

<sup>63</sup>Lems, K., Miller, L. et al. *Teaching Reading to English Language Learners*. New York: The Guildford Press, 2010. P. 39.

<sup>64</sup><http://www.lotpublications.nl/pu>

<sup>65</sup>Hedgcock, J., Ferris, D. *Teaching Readers of English*. Rutledge: Taylor and Francis, 2009. P. 298.

<sup>66</sup>Laufer, B. and Nation, I.S.P. *Vocabulary Size and Use: Lexical Richness in L2 Written Production* // “Applied Linguistics”, vol. 16, 1995, P. 309.

<sup>67</sup>Nation, I.S.P. *Learning Vocabulary in another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. P. 147.

It should be mentioned that the number of words included in the table are approximate as they constitute the average amount of the vocabulary size of top second language students who have been under research. This vocabulary includes only the lists of words and word combinations that the students have come across while working with their basic textbooks in English (*Practical Course of English*, first year (2000); *Practical Course of English*, second year (1999); *Practical Course of English*, third year (2000) by V. D. Arakin), home reading and individual reading. In their turn, students have been divided into two groups: those who knew English before the university and those who had some elementary or no knowledge of English at all. The final year has been excluded from this research as the students under consideration are currently in the fourth year of their studies.

As is seen, the results revealed in the above table are rather controversial. Thus, the vocabulary size rates attested in the first year of study are distinct due to the students' different approaches to language learning. It is of interest to note that contrary to all the expected results, there is a tendency for second language students without the previous knowledge of English to deal with twice as much vocabulary than those with the previous knowledge of English when they are placed in equal language learning environments and conditions. The actual differences in the quantity of words are approximately 1290.

The reason for such a discrepancy might actually be easily explained by the fact that students without the previous knowledge of English are more motivated to acquire new vocabulary to conform to the up-to-date syllabus and curricula, whereas learners with the previous knowledge of English are still using their existing vocabulary.

Most vocabulary researchers assume that knowing 2000 words is enough to communicate daily. It is true in a way, though such a limited individual lexicon does not work well in specific professional domains which demand a good mastery of high-frequency vocabulary and of the specialized vocabulary required for the domain in question. The results for the first year show that our students have already developed certain lexical competence and they are able to apply it in everyday situations.

Surprisingly, this tendency becomes somehow less obvious in the second year of their studies. Both groups of informants seem to have leveled the number of new words. However, students with the previous knowledge of English have registered a higher vocabulary size at that level. The vocabulary gap is 207.

A similar tendency is typical of the third year students whose vocabulary size grows together with their academic ability to understand many lexical items from the context of the reading assignments. Students with the previous knowledge of English are again more successful and resourceful. The difference is 1224 words.

It has been interesting to find out that the students' vocabulary size approximately doubles in the second and the third year of their studies as they become more aware of the current necessity of having a large vocabulary. Therefore, students increase their vocabularies either through incidental learning or intentional explicit instruction<sup>68</sup>.

There is a general assumption among second language acquisition researchers that students who are able to make morphemic and contextual analysis of words have the potential to enlarge their vocabulary breadth and depth to a bigger extent. For example, W. Nagy and R. Anderson (1984) believe that "for every word a child learns, we estimate that there are an average of one to three additional related words that should also be understandable to the child"<sup>69</sup>. Thus, the numbers shown in the table are not the definitive ones. Students are far more capable of establishing the meaning of new lexical items from the given contexts.

Another curious observation is connected with the idea that the number of words that the students acquire increases each year. It might be accounted by the fact that students start reading complex authentic literature in the target languages which they need to make sense of. According to P. Meara, the minimum language threshold for reading for pleasure ranges from 3000-5000 words<sup>70</sup>. Do our students achieve this threshold? Sometimes they do, especially, taking into account that the final year has not been included into the present study.

With reference to word-counts, P. Nation believes that knowing a word implies knowing automatically its word families<sup>71</sup>. According to the researcher, second language students can expand their vocabularies far beyond the level of 11,000 word families through reading combined with other vocabulary learning strategies. Jan H. Hulstijn<sup>72</sup> holds the same view, emphasizing the idea that foreign students who read university texts need to have 10,000 to 11,000 word families at their disposal.

This view on vocabulary acquisition may raise some important questions. First and foremost, what kind of vocabulary should the teachers instruct? How should the teachers cultivate word knowledge? How can extensive reading facilitate vocabulary acquisition and integrate it into literacy development? Drawing on the existing textbooks in the second through the twelfth grades that are used for learning English as a second language in our schools, one might conclude that an average school-leaver should know a little social and survival language (not much attention is given to this aspect of vocabulary), and a little more literary or popular scientific language (most of the textbooks heavily rely on literary texts and provide word building exercises to reinforce learners' hard vocabulary).

When comparing the vocabularies of an average undergraduate, who majors in English as a second language, with that of a graduate student, it is obvious that the difference is huge. Graduate students possess a bigger productive and active lexicon which is directly connected with their reading success, that is, they are familiar with such words and word families that are typical of family, weather, housing, shopping, choosing a career, education, medicine, movie industry, theater, arts, meals, holiday-making, sightseeing, travelling, books, sports and games, courts and trials and newspaper language; they make use of a certain amount of social and survival language and some of their existing collocations; and finally, they are aware of the differences between formal versus informal registers.

As is seen, the focus in training higher education professionals, that is, future teachers, is still on literary and popular scientific language because teachers are trying to fulfill all the three major functions of language learning required by the national curriculum, and namely: to learn the language, learn about some areas of human knowledge through the language and learn about the language. Some more attention is given to the development of the academic language when students write their term and graduation papers.

However, such an approach to vocabulary learning, and namely, the vital attention given to the development of the students' vocabulary knowledge and their lexical competence, challenges current teachers, curriculum planners, program developers, organizers of staff development plans, especially taking into account that the number of practical hours provided for learning English as a second language at the university level has recently been reduced.

As for some other solutions concerning the organization of the teaching process, teachers can apply a variety of methods to increase literacy and vocabulary building potential to ease vocabulary learning in a second language.

Summing up the main points touched upon in the present article, it is possible to conclude the following:

- It goes uncontested that vocabulary development is a fundamental goal for students in the early stages of a second language acquisition.
- Increasing vocabulary breadth and depth should be among the first priorities in learning a second language.

<sup>68</sup>[http://www.prel.org/products/re\\_/ES0419.htm](http://www.prel.org/products/re_/ES0419.htm)

<sup>69</sup>Nagy, W. and Anderson, R. *How Many Words Are There in Printed School English?* // "Reading Research Quarterly", vol. 19, No.3, 1984, P. 304.

<sup>70</sup><http://www.lotpublications.nl/pu>

<sup>71</sup>Nation, I.S.P. *Learning Vocabulary in another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. P. 47.

<sup>72</sup>Hulstijn, Jan; Hollander, Merel; Greidanus, Tine. *Incidental Vocabulary Learning by Advanced Foreign Language Students: The Influence of Marginal Glosses, Dictionary Use, and Reoccurrence of Unknown Words* // "The Modern Language Journal", vol. 80, No 3, 1996, P. 327.

- Knowing students' vocabulary size gets a window into how the word building process works and provides ideas and resources for classroom instruction.
- There is a long established relationship between learning new words and the students' reading experiences, as the development of vocabulary contributes to their reading success.
- A rich and extensive vocabulary determines the students' ability to comprehend written and oral texts and it leads to the development and maintenance of both lexical and reading skills.
- Developing future teachers' lexical competence draws more on literary and popular scientific rather than academic vocabularies, and less on social and survival lexicons.
- A strong vocabulary is a key to success.

In close, it is necessary to underline the idea that the focus on vocabulary acquisition should not be solely a quantitative one, as proficiency in a second language is not only conditioned by the vocabulary size. Second language students should be able to use their individual lexicons in various communicative situations and rely on some specific knowledge and accessibility of these words.

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