

# The Role of Situational Context and Linguistic Context when Testing EFL Vocabulary Knowledge in a Language Teacher Education Program: A Preliminary Approach\*

El papel del contexto situacional y lingüístico al evaluar el conocimiento de vocabulario en inglés en un programa de formación del profesorado de idiomas; una primera aproximación

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## Abstract

This research aims to provide a preliminary approach on to what extent linguistic and situational contexts are conducive to successful vocabulary recognition in discrete-item testing in the context of a language teacher education program in Bogotá. This study resorted to the use of four different types of vocabulary tests administered during a one-semester period to two different classes. The data collected revealed that students had more success in a test of productive vocabulary (L2 to L1 translation) than in other types of tests, namely, productive vocabulary (L2 to L1 translation/multiple choice), L2 to L1 translation provided with linguistic context and cued situational context. The findings of this research suggest that the participating pre-service teachers had not reached the basic vocabulary knowledge of the English Language at the time of this study. It was also found that vocabulary items devoid of contextual cues are more accurately identified than those embedded within a linguistic context and a cued situational context.

*Key words:* vocabulary testing, breadth of vocabulary knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge, receptive vocabulary, productive vocabulary, situational context, linguistic context

## Resumen

El propósito principal de esta investigación, es comprender – en qué medida el contexto lingüístico y situacional propician el reconocimiento exitoso \_ en una prueba de vocabulario aislada en un programa de formación de docentes en idiomas en Bogotá. Para llevar a cabo este fin, se aplicaron en un semestre cuatro tipos de pruebas a dos grupos diferentes. La información recolectada demostró que los estudiantes obtuvieron mejores resultados en una prueba productiva de vocabulario (traducción de L1 a L2), pero en las pruebas de traducción de L1 a L2 / selección múltiple, traducción de L2 a L1 con contexto lingüístico y situacional y de reconocimiento de L2 con claves discursivas y visuales, los resultados fueron más bajos. Los hallazgos en esta investigación sugieren que al momento de ser efectuada, los docentes en formación no habían alcanzado el conocimiento de vocabulario básico en la lengua inglesa. También se encontró que las pruebas desprovistas de contexto fueron reconocidas más fácilmente que aquellas con uno lingüístico y situacional.

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*Palabras clave: pruebas de vocabulario, amplitud de conocimiento del vocabulario, la profundidad del conocimiento de vocabulario, vocabulario receptivo, vocabulario productivo, contexto situacional, contexto lingüístico.*

### Résumé

Au cours des dernières années, le nombre de personnes qui souhaitent apprendre l'Espagnol comme seconde langue/langue étrangère s'est élevé. Aussi, il est important d'étudier les difficultés que les étudiants peuvent avoir au cours de leurs études. Particulièrement, les étudiants dont leur langue maternelle est le Chinois mandarin font face à des problèmes spécifiques, puisque la langue Chinoise est une langue typologiquement différente de l'Espagnol, tel le cas de la concordance dans des phrases nominales. Dans cet article, je présente des données où les relations de concordance entre les éléments qui composent la phrase nominale ne sont pas établies. Les données recueillies, provenant de deux étudiants sinophones des cours d'Espagnol au niveau intermédiaire du Département de Langues Étrangères de l'Université de Sonora, consistent en des textes obtenus à partir d'exercices faits dans la classe, dans le livre ou préparés par l'enseignant responsable du groupe, ainsi que de l'observation d'images et de vidéos. On a trouvé que la structure de la phrase nominale des sinophones n'est pas différente du modèle attendu en Espagnol, mais parfois ils ne font pas les concordances en genre et nombre entre le noyau nominal et l'article ou l'adjectif.

Mots clés : phrase nominale, l'Espagnol comme seconde langue, concordance nominale, modalité écrite.

### Resumo

Nos últimos anos tem se elevado o número de pessoas que querem aprender espanhol como segunda língua/língua estrangeira. Por isso, é importante estudar as dificuldades que os estudantes não nativos de espanhol têm que afrontar no momento de envolver-se em dito processo. Especificamente, os estudantes falantes nativos de chinês mandarim enfrentam problemas particulares, posto que topologicamente, é uma língua diferente ao espanhol, como o da concordância nas frases nominais. No presente artigo apresento dados onde não se estabelecem as relações de concordância entre os elementos que conformam a frase nominal. Os dados recolhidos, de dois estudantes senão falantes dos cursos de espanhol do nível intermédio no Departamento de Línguas Estrangeiras da Universidade de Sonora consistem em textos que se obtiveram a partir de exercícios de aula, livro, ou elaborados pelo professor responsável do grupo, assim como da observação de imagens e vídeos. Encontrou-se que a estrutura da frase nominal dos senão falantes não é diferente do padrão esperado em espanhol, entretanto, em ocasiões não estabelecem as relações de concordância em gênero e número entre o núcleo nominal e o artigo, ou o adjetivo.

Palavras chaves: frase nominal, espanhol como segunda língua, concordância nominal, modalidade escrita.

## Introduction

### *The teaching of vocabulary in EFL*

Language teaching has traditionally focused on the teaching of the four skills, namely, speaking, reading, writing, listening and culture as posited by Krashen (1993). While there appears to be agreement regarding the presence of the five skills aforementioned, other scholars have argued that the teaching of other language components has been completely neglected from the language teaching arena one of these components being vocabulary. Regarding this, Coady (1997) has claimed that language educators have assumed that the teaching of vocabulary requires no major attention as it is believed to take place in learners mind by means of an unknown process devoid of explicit instruction. In response to the lack of explicit instruction affecting the teaching of vocabulary, Coady has attempted to put in

a nutshell the various approaches available to teach vocabulary for various purposes such as ESL, EFL, and ESP. (See Coady, 1997 for a detailed description of such approaches).

By the same token, Nation (2001) has explored the teaching of vocabulary thoroughly, and defines four major strands useful for vocabulary teaching. The first of these strands conceives vocabulary teaching as an activity taking place by means of providing students with meaning-focused activities in the receptive skills (i.e. listening, reading). Such exposure to vocabulary and information-oriented activities should lead learners eventually to vocabulary acquisition. Nation underscores the importance of learners being familiar with at least ninety per cent of the words provided during these activities so that learning can take place.



A second alternative for vocabulary teaching deals with the explicit instruction of vocabulary. This practice allows learners to receive direct instruction in vocabulary learning, and even strategies to learn such vocabulary Oxford and Scarcella (as cited in Coady, 1997). According to Nation (2001); Oxford and Scarcella (as cited in Coady, 1997) research suggests that learners have been able to boost the amount of words when they are provided with both explicit instruction and strategy teaching for vocabulary learning. A third strand for vocabulary teaching relates to the use of meaning-focused activities that allow learners to participate in activities which contribute to the development of the productive skills (i.e. speaking, writing) as learners are exposed to specific vocabulary forms that come to them as they negotiate meaning in the target language. Analogously, Thornbury (2007) proposes that vocabulary teaching should be accompanied by exposure to spoken and written language. In this way, Nation and Thornbury propose a communicative orientation for vocabulary teaching, nevertheless, Nation emphasizes that not all vocabulary can be taught, and that a great quantity of self-directed vocabulary learning activities should be the learner's responsibility. Schmitt (2005) states that learners can learn a great quantity of vocabulary by themselves, he also claims that teachers can help them in this process by teaching them learning strategies.

The final strand suggests that language learners should be engaged in activities in which they use previously learned vocabulary items in order to gain fluency, in words of Thornbury (2007) this is referred to as recycling. Schmitt (2005) also emphasizes this idea and he states that for vocabulary to be learned is necessary to recycle it. Nation supports the same idea by exemplifying that even a topic as basic as numbers may not be necessarily internalized in learners and that real-life situations such as that of buying stamps at a post office may be affected by the lack of fluency and automaticity in learners' knowledge. Thus, Nation suggests that language courses should aim at the inclusion of the four strands hereby summarized, although particular attention should be given to the fourth strand.

As reviewed above, the teaching of vocabulary is more complex than believed. This study was conducted under the assumption that teaching vocabulary represents an important component of language teaching. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to understand how well pre-service language teachers master basic vocabulary in EFL, and which type of vocabulary test represents more success in word recognition through the following research questions:

1. How solid is the knowledge of basic food vocabulary items in pre-service teachers when exposed to four different vocabulary tests?
2. Which type of vocabulary test facilitates more accurate word recognition?
3. Do words within a context become easier to recognize than words devoid of context?

## Literature Review

### *High frequency vs. Low frequency vocabulary*

Vocabulary is a concept best clarified by the distinction made between high frequency vocabulary and low frequency vocabulary. The former refers to those words whose communicative usage is consistent in both speaking and writing. According to Nation and Hwang (1995) a two thousand word lexicon is adequate for language learners even to venture into higher education in English. Nation states that high frequency words should be devoted significant amount of time to in the classroom, and subdivides these into two families; those words belonging to the first family account for more than eighty percent of words used in conversations, widely known texts such as newspaper, fiction books, and academic texts, whereas those belonging to the second family have a lower degree of appearance in these texts. This appearance does not usually rank higher than ten percent average in Nation's report.

It is noteworthy to mention that the boundary between high frequency and low frequency vocabulary



is rather arbitrary according to Nation (2001). Position, rank, range, nature of the corpus in which vocabulary lists are designed determine, and classify a word as high frequency or low frequency. Another characteristic of low frequency words is that proper names may easily fall under this category, although text genre and the intended meaning of each text may alter the frequency of a word. Further, particular interest in certain domains also influence whether a word is classified as frequent or not, that is to say, the high frequency words of some individuals may not be the high frequency words of others (i.e. doctors' language and teachers' language). Finally, classifying words as high frequency or low frequency also has to do with the life of a word, formality, dialectal differences, registers and foreign words. The distinction between high frequency words and low frequency words gains relevance in that language educators need to ensure that learners have learned high frequency words for obvious reasons; it could also be inferred that by learning high frequency words mobility and access in English as a lingua franca expedite general economic, scientific, and communicative needs worldwide.

### *Depth and Breadth of Vocabulary Knowledge*

An important dyad to distinguish vocabulary knowledge is depth and breadth. According to Meara (1989); Gyllstadt (in press); Read (1993) vocabulary depth relates to how well an individual knows a word, whereas vocabulary breadth refers to the number of words a person may know; such words are usually measured by standardized tests. Qian (2005) complements the notion of depth by expanding it to phonemic, morphemic, graphemic and semantic components. Qian states that these components are highly involved not only in vocabulary, but also in reading.

Similarly important, Qian (2005) explains that the more depth learners have, the more skillful they become when inferring the meaning of a word. For example, inexperienced learners tend to circumscribe word meaning inferences to morphological cues only,

whereas more experienced learners can infer word meaning from various strategies thus making their inferences closer to the original word meaning.

### *Receptive and Productive Vocabulary*

Before defining the terms above, it is important to acknowledge that alternative word coinages such as active vs. passive vocabulary (Meara, 1990), recognition, recall, comprehension (Read, 2000) are commonplace when referring to vocabulary studies. In this study, only Nation's distinction on receptive vs. productive vocabulary was adopted, because of Nation's testing samples which seemed practical, comprehensive and integrative of other available options when designing this study.

Nation and Read (1986); Nation (2001) distinguish between receptive and productive vocabulary. These authors define receptive vocabulary as the type of vocabulary requiring external stimuli to be activated and recognized; By contrast, productive vocabulary is linked to other lexical items. Thus, its recognition tends to count on how solid such connections are inside the learner's brain.

A more recent distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary is explained by Thornbury's (2007), although such distinction is referred to not as vocabulary per se, but as knowledge. Despite terms being different, it appears that the scholars cited here conceive both a strong and a weak distinction of vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that vocabulary knowledge is not a black or white matter; rather it is conceived to be a continuum (Read, 2000). Although it has been also argued that such continuum applies more to the passive dimension of vocabulary (Meara, 1990).

A final remark that needs to be considered in the receptive and productive vocabulary distinction is that receptive vocabulary will develop first in any first, second or third language; this type of vocabulary gains more relevance due to the fact that such vocabulary develops at a faster rate, and that in an individual's lifetime there are more probabilities of attaining more



receptive than productive vocabulary as evidenced in Henriksen's (1995) study.

### *Testing vocabulary*

According to Nation (2001), testing vocabulary needs to take place in the classroom so that language educators can quickly and practically diagnose if language learners have acquired important high frequency vocabulary words, and if further work on the teacher's behalf is needed to reinforce or revisit vocabulary items. Nation warns that testing vocabulary should not be conducted just for the sake of testing, rather it should be conducted in order to identify what decisions teachers need to make in class regarding vocabulary instruction. Testing vocabulary may sound frightening given the sharp and clear-cut notion associated with testing, however, the author states that partial knowledge of words is acceptable in vocabulary testing, although cognitive models accounting for SLA do not recognize solid knowledge to be partial.

Nation (2001) divides vocabulary testing into various types of tests. The most primitive vocabulary test relates to providing learners with the word in their mother language and asking them to translate such word into the target language. Nation states that this type of testing is mostly used in the productive skills. Similar to this type of testing, one can find in the author's work recognition vocabulary testing in which instead of a translation in the target language, several options and distracters are provided in order to evidence if test takers recognize specific vocabulary items. A third type of testing has to do with supplying words in complete isolation and requesting test-takers to match them with several options provided, an alternative to this type of testing is providing some linguistic context in which the test-taker is able to put the word in a minimal degree of context. The last two types of testing are referred to as 'isolated words matching' and 'minimal context matching' respectively, it must not be forgotten that these test also have similar versions, namely, 'minimal context matching' and 'minimal context supply'. As these

tests' names suggest, matching and supplying are the mechanism by which test-takers prove that they have the knowledge of certain vocabulary items. The final vocabulary test proposed by Nation is 'passage embedded, matching', this test basically presents test-takers with words within a paragraph or reading cloze style, test-takers are supposed to select one option just as they do with multiple-choice questions.

Before continuing the discussion on testing and vocabulary, it is important to clarify what context is. According to Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams (2011) context can be linguistic and situational. Linguistic context refers to information that was formerly written or spoken, and situational context is the general knowledge that a person has of the world. Yule (2010) mentions two types of context, linguistic and physical context. The former is defined as co-text, that is, a group of words partaking in a written text; such words affect what each individual believes the meaning of a word is. Finally, physical context refers to the place and time in which a sentence is located.

Continuing on the same vein, Thornbury (2007) points out the existence of similar vocabulary tests such as multiple choice, gap-fill, and C-test. The first of these tests can be presented within a sentence context or a more elaborated context usually taking the form of a full text. Nevertheless, the author notes that multiple choice for vocabulary testing has negative aspects. For instance, test-takers may choose an answer randomly; another negative aspect is multiple choice testing measures vocabulary recognition and not production; a final negative aspect is that distracters in multiple choice tests are not chosen on logical grounds.

The second type of vocabulary test is gap-fill, and it relates to the type of testing in which vocabulary recognition is gauged by means of recalling and producing words; the most common example of gap-fill tests is cloze tests which can be either selective or open. Unfortunately, cloze tests were originally created for testing reading, and even grammar testing.



Therefore, their vocabulary testing purposes have been questioned. Lastly, C-test are those tests in which incomplete words are provided

## Methodology

This study was conducted in a language teacher education program in Bogotá, Colombia. This ten-semester teacher education program aims at educating students in the teaching of Spanish, English and French. Among the several purposes of this program, one can highlight the social impact that graduates are expected to foster in the teaching of foreign languages and their mother language mostly at the public and private school level. Similarly to many local language education programs, students take courses with emphasis on research and linguistics; language courses are usually structured between eight and six hours per week during each semester period.

Two classes of intermediate and high intermediate English were asked to participate; class A consisted of 5 students, and class B consisted of 5 students. The total number of students participating in this study was 9. The researchers, who were also in charge of each of the participating classes, administered 4 different types of tests measuring similar vocabulary items. These tests were administered at different times throughout the time of this study without specific timetables. The vocabulary tests' content in this study was taken based on curriculum content and similarity between the topics of each of the two participating classes.

This study classifies as a cross-sectional non-longitudinal study that resorts to quantitative methods to analyze data. This study was initially planned to be an experiment examining a potential correlation between vocabulary acquisition triggered by the use of virtual communities online in the EFL classroom, but due to several curricular and logistical constraints beyond the control of the researchers, the initial idea had to be readapted, hence resulting in a pilot study that served to understand the complexity of testing vocabulary, and simultaneously a basis for future

studies examining vocabulary acquisition and the use of computer technology in EFL.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

Data was obtained by means of vocabulary recognition tests. Schmitt (2010) as well as Read (as cited in Schmitt, 2010) explain that vocabulary tests serve as measurement instruments for vocabulary research. While Schmitt's vs. Nation's (2011) tests hold significant differences, it was decided to use Nation's vocabulary tests due to their practicality. Another characteristic of this study is that it did not study vocabulary longitudinally due to curricular constraints and availability of the participants. Likewise, this study did not examine a concrete approach to teach vocabulary vs. its ultimate retention. This study simply evaluated vocabulary allegedly learned at previous instances of a language education program. There were a total of four tests used administered to the participants. These tests were adapted from Nation's (2001) examples on productive and receptive vocabulary tests. It is worth noting that these tests were adapted as explained elsewhere. Table 1 will overview the different types of questions used in each test.

The first test was Nation's productive vocabulary in which test-takers have to translate a word from L2 into L1. (See table 1). This test, however, was adapted to a multiple choice layout that provided distracters within the same semantic map. The second test provided a sentence in L2 in which test-takers had to translate into L1 an underlined word. Test number three provided a linguistic context in which again an underlined target word had to be translated into L1; the main difference between this test and test number two was that test number three attempted to provide a linguistic context which was to provide clues for test-takers to infer the meaning of the target word, and somehow to find help from each test item. Test number four was produced by the researchers in order to test the hypothesis that context and visual cues would facilitate vocabulary recognition. Succinctly put, tests one and two measured productive vocabulary;



**Table 1.** Vocabulary test as administered in this study

Test	Question samples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Productive vocabulary (Nation, 2001)  <b>L2 to L1 translation/multiple choice</b>                      + adapted semantic map similar to</li> </ul>	Oysters: a. camarón b. caviar c. ostras d. calamar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Productive vocabulary (Nation, 2001)  <b>L2 to L1 translation</b></li> </ul>	Oysters: _____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receptive Vocabulary (Nation, 2001)  <b>L2 to L1 translation + linguistic context</b></li> </ul>	<b>Oysters</b> are believed to be an aphrodisiac in certain countries: _____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary in context  <b>L2 Recognition hinted by both visual clues and discourse</b></li> </ul>	* Well you don't need to, but you can add some sea food such as _____ or _____ * 

\* This is an excerpt from the real test. This test consisted of a conversation in which certain vocabulary items were omitted as shown here.

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test number three measured receptive vocabulary, and test number four attempted to measure vocabulary in discourse context supported by visual clues.

The target vocabulary selected for analysis was obtained from the two classes' syllabi, and textbooks. The EFL classes selected for this study classify between level A2 and B1 of the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages. Both textbooks included the same fourteen vocabulary items, although these items were used and combined with more complexity in the B1 textbook. After careful analysis, the items in Table 2 were selected to be included in the four vocabulary tests administered.

**Table 2.** Vocabulary items evaluated in the four test.

Vocabulary	Abbreviation in analysis graphs
1. Raw vegetables	RV
2. Rye bread	RB
3. Burger	BG
4. Tuna	TN
5. Veal	VL
6. Lamb	LMB
7. Oysters	OST
8. Lobster	LBT
9. Shrimp	SMP
10. Octopus	OTP
11. Beans	BNS
12.	CBG
13.	LTS
14.	BLD
15.	BNS

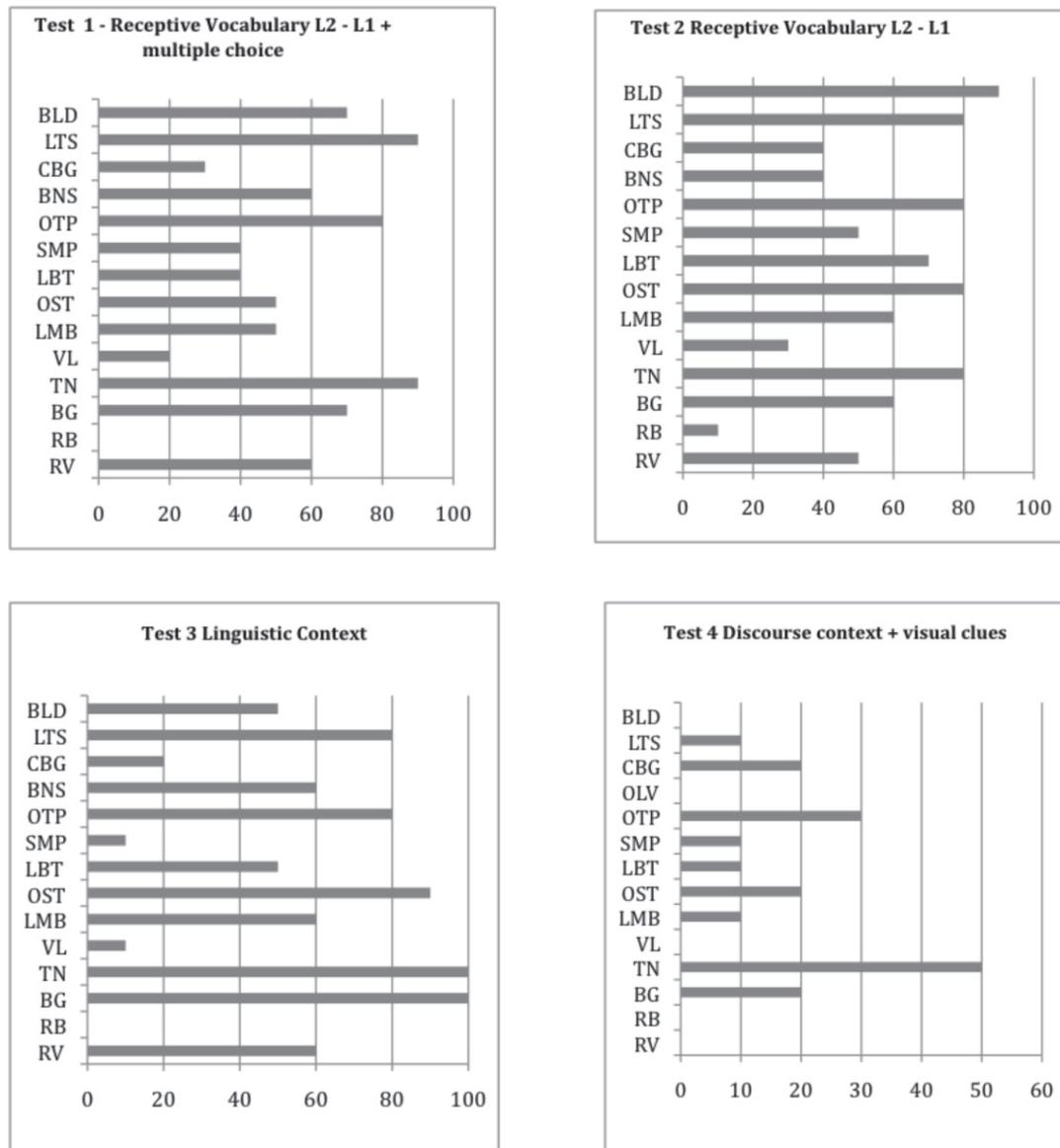


## Findings

Upon tests completion, a Data Matrix Diagram was used in order to quantify the most and less successful word items in each test. Figure 1 offers a

comparative glance of students' performance during the four tests administered during the time of this study.

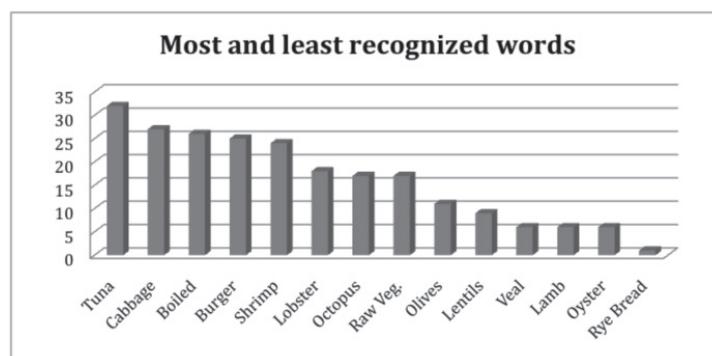
Figure 1. Overall tests results.



Likewise, Figure 2 shows in descending order which words tended to be most and less recognized by the participants.

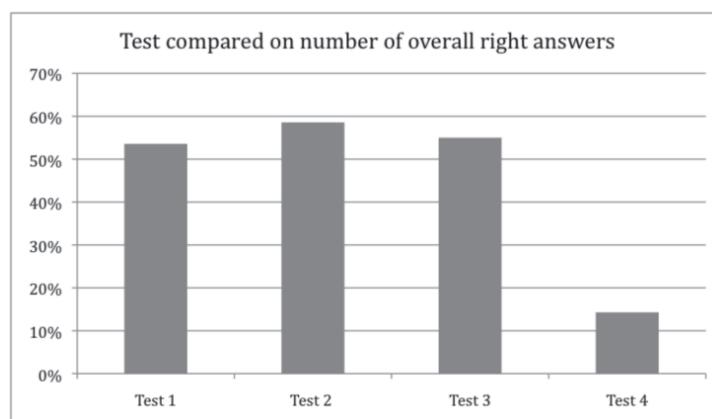


**Figure 2.** Comparative chart showing the most and less successful vocabulary items in the four vocabulary tests.



To conclude, Figure 3 offers a comparative glance at the success rate students showed in the four tests after a quantitative comparison.

**Figure 3.** Comparison of the success rate in the four tests.



Despite the fact that the target vocabulary appeared in all of the tests, it was found that test two facilitated slightly the recognition of the chosen vocabulary in that it showed a total amount of 82(58.57%)  $x=8.2$   $N=$  overall correct answers in all of the students' answers. By contrast, test four only showed 20 (14,28%)  $x=2.0$  total correct answers. Test one and three had similar score rates in that the number of correct answers per test was 75 (58,57%)  $x=7.5$  and 77 (55%)  $x=7.7$  respectively. To sum up, test number two was the most successful test, followed by tests 1 and 3 showing very close results, and test 4 being the least successful of all the 4 tests.

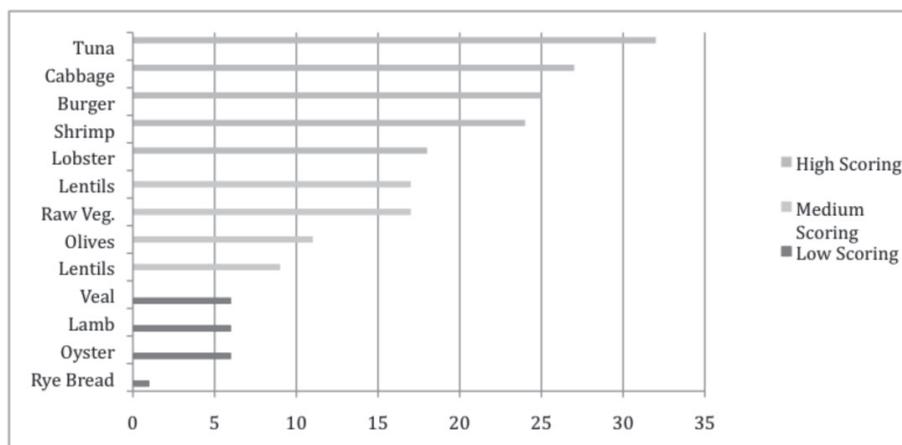
Bearing in mind the results obtained after administering four different vocabulary tests, one can answer question two of this study by stating that tests measuring productive vocabulary by means of L2 to L1 translation, and inhibiting words of any type of context (either linguistic or situational) are more likely to facilitate word recognition than test providing words within a situational context as done in test four of this study.

Regarding vocabulary items, all of the tests scores were organized by each of the 14 studied words; these words were grouped in descending order so as to be able to identify which words had

the highest number of correct answers, and which ones had the lowest number of correct answers. Once grouped, three categories were established in order to understand which words had a high, medium and low

rate of recognition in the four tests. Figure 4 illustrates the categorical triad established by the researchers in this study.

**Figure 4.** Vocabulary representing high, medium and low scoring.



The data obtained shows that the following three words were highly recognized in the tests: burger, tuna and cabbage. It is possible that students identified the first word easily as it is an Anglicism in Colombian Spanish; For inferring the meaning of the other words, the participants could have resorted to two strategies: their world knowledge or simply previous meaningful learning, that is, they employed the depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Waring's (1997) claims that learners score better receptively than productively did not really show a significant difference between the productive and receptive vocabulary tests used in this study (productive 53.57%, 58.57% vs. receptive 55%) However, since the participants in this study were pre-service language teachers, one would expect vocabulary scores to be relatively higher in both receptive and productive vocabulary scales.

The overall results obtained by the participants can be used to answer the first research question by stating that the basic vocabulary knowledge (See Council of Europe, 2001) evaluated did not demonstrate to be solid enough in that its recognition

was not congruent in the four tests administered. Taking into account the different three stages of the ACT model reviewed elsewhere in this document, it appears that the participants were either in the cognitive or associative stage of knowledge, but not in the autonomous stage of the ACT model, hence the claim that their vocabulary knowledge was not at a solid stage of learning. It is worth clarifying that the results of these four tests were not measured diachronically, only during a one-semester period, thus other unexplored factors could have played a significant variance. Further research could examine the behavior of the four different test used in this study in a longer period of time.

Leaving aside knowledge, other important characteristics need to be revisited. For example, in test 4 participants failed to identify the vocabulary they had identified in other tests. The researchers inferred that this test posed more difficulty as students had to pay closer attention to detail, read and observe carefully in order to understand the clues implicit in both the conversation and the use of visual aids available in the test. Regarding this, test 4 was designed on the



grounds that students would benefit better from more contextual items that helped them infer vocabulary meaning, not only at the sentence-level, but at the discourse-level as claimed by Bachman (1990) in which individual sociolinguistic encounters govern language use, but surprisingly enough, this test turned out to be the most unsuccessful among the four tests.

The response to the research question: Do words within a context become easier to recognize than words devoid of context? is addressed by stating that words devoid of context are more likely to be recognized than words within a simulated situational context supported by visual cues and embedded at the discourse level as shown in the quantitative analysis section of this study, and as observed based on the characteristic of test 4. Although further research needs to be conducted in order to validate this statement.

It is a commonly-held belief that additional material in testing can be used in order to enhance students' in-test performance (Weir, 2005), but this may not be necessarily true as in this study, test 4 (i.e. visually enhanced) did not prove to be a facilitating factor to enhance word recognition. It may be inferred that participants could have struggled with test 4 due to lack of experience in the task proposed, and the test' difficulty per se (See: Weir, 2005) hence resulting on a negative impact on performance. Support to this claim can be observed in the low results presented elsewhere in this document.

Another aspect that is of paramount importance is the type of context that was used in the first three tests (i.e. test 1, test 2, and test 3); this type of context was included in these tests at the sentence level. Nevertheless, test 4 included context at the discourse level which implied that participants could demonstrate their competences with the target language in a real (or in this case a simulated) communicative situation. The findings of this study revealed that participants performed better in test 3 than in test 4. One assertion that can be done based on the data is that sentences

do not entail careful reading. In a longer text like the dialogue used in test 4, one can observe that such test structure represented a higher demand for participants and thus a more detailed reading. There is a solid evidence supporting that reading has effects on test scores. (Weir, 2005). Therefore, to answer the question: How solid is the knowledge of basic food vocabulary items in pre-service teachers when exposed to four different vocabulary tests? With data from test 4, we consider that because participants did not have solid knowledge of basic vocabulary in English; their reading skills inevitably were affected by such absence of strong vocabulary knowledge.

More support to the claims above can be found in Chikamatzu's (2006) work. The author explains that reading skills are inevitably linked to word recognition skills; he goes on to say that these go hand in hand and the higher the better, but as observed in this study, vocabulary knowledge was reported to be very low throughout all the vocabulary tests. For instance, in test one the overall number of correct answers only reached 53%, in test two 58%, test three 55% and test four ranking the lowest at 14%. These overall results confirm Chikamatzu's claims in that participants' weak vocabulary knowledge may have affected their reading skills during this study.

## Discussion

In the previous section, it was stated that participants' knowledge of basic vocabulary of the English language appeared to be in its first stages in light of the ACT model. Additionally, Andersen, (1983) states that second language learners do not usually reach the autonomous stage. This seems to be contradictory considering the receptive and productive vocabulary stages of vocabulary knowledge introduced in the field, and it automatically opens a debate regarding the type of vocabulary knowledge preservice language teachers should reach, in language teacher education programs. Being vocabulary an often neglected component, it



is worth remembering Wikings claim (in Thornbury, 2007, p.111) that “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”

Thus, there is a general need to prioritize the development of reading skills in the EFL syllabi because by fostering reading, students get prepared for their professional life, and consequently an ample world of learning opportunities. In other words, through reading, pre-service teachers can learn vocabulary and have the possibility of knowing other cultures, other world views which may enrich them personally and professionally.

Another concern has to do with the quick methods individuals use to approach reading tasks. Bauerlein (2009) explains how young individuals tend to read selectively due to the effect of using current technologies; such reading usually skips important text parts. Bauerlein explains that this characteristic of reading affects the quality and efficiency expected from basic literacy skills such as reading. This again strengthens the need to evaluate what is being done in language teacher education programs bearing in mind the responsibility pre-service teachers have when educating others in the skills they are allegedly competent.

Lastly, the analysis of data suggests a possible relation between students’ social strata and their performance in vocabulary tests. In support of this idea, Nation (2001) states that “real world knowledge can play a vital part in guessing” (p.245). This summed to Castaño and Raidosa’s (2001) work, led the researchers to associate the syllogism students in the social strata aforementioned are more likely to access regular food items than exclusive food items (e.g. oysters, shrimp, and rye bread) because such items tend to be accessible mostly by upper social levels (See Castaño & Raidosa, 2011). Despite the suspected stratification of vocabulary, setting aside an element of paramount importance as vocabulary also sheds some light on the beliefs pre-service

teachers may hold about simply learning the most communicative items by neglecting the fact that pre-service language teachers need to possess a vast knowledge of vocabulary (among other areas) to demonstrate an appropriate competence in their second language when teaching it.

### *Limitations and Further research*

Future studies examining vocabulary recognition and acquisition would need to examine in depth the role of both situation and linguistic context vs. the absence of these in language testing settings. Initially, the researchers assumed that learners would profit better from vocabulary and language provided within a context, but the results show that the test that did not provide any context at all was actually the test that facilitated better vocabulary recognition. Further research resorting to the use of simulating real-life contexts by audiovisual means could examine if such means could better simulate a situational context that facilitates vocabulary production/retention. In fact, the researchers consider that despite the fact that test four attempted to provide vocabulary in context; such context was rather limited to words in context and visual aids, nevertheless, it was not possible to enhance vocabulary input and to examine a potential correlation between input enhancement and vocabulary production. Further studies could resort to multimedia environments to examine such correlation and even simulation by means of computer software as done by Vera and McNeil (2004), although their proposal and subsequent study did not aimed at studying vocabulary. A final consideration regarding context is that it may not be as relevant depending on the learning stage learners are in; Chikamatzu (2006) asserts that the role of context is not helpful when vocabulary has been fully internalized (p.73).

In addition to the concerns about the role of context, other aspects gain relevance. Students’ background and overall cultural capital may need to be considered in all language areas particularly in language education programs where students



are economically challenged. Pan, Rowe, Singer and Snow's (2005) research have examined how the learning of vocabulary differs among social classes in the U.S. context. Their research has shed some light on individuals' previous experiences during infancy and the impact of these experiences on vocabulary acquisition. Low vocabulary rates are associated with those individuals living in challenging conditions. Pan et al's research should serve as a basis to understand the limitations pre-service teachers bring to the classroom and address such limitations in a non-patronizing way by keeping balance between strategically-oriented instruction and high standards of quality in language instruction. A final remark, however, is that Pan et al's research aimed at understanding first language vocabulary acquisition during childhood, not during second language or foreign language instruction.

Another constraint of this study can be found methodologically. Schmitt (2010) suggests that vocabulary research should preferably be studied longitudinally. Future research could benefit from more institutional support and better structured control and experimental groups in order to study vocabulary acquisition with more reliable measures over larger time periods. Such research could benefit from Schmitt's claims that non-quantitative measures such interviews can reveal data affecting vocabulary acquisition/reacquisition; such data are usually unavailable through ordinary vocabulary tests.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a major limitation in this study is that it needs to be replicated in other language education programs locally. Most of the claims made here have been observed by the researchers in their experience teaching in various language teacher education programs at the time of this study, and based on the results presented. Further studies including subjects with similar socioeconomic characteristics of this study's participants could expand the different directions pointed in this document.

### *Implications for testing*

The use of context in language teaching and testing has been commonly associated with an

enhanced presentation of input that eventually helps learners perform better. However, based on the results, the use of context shed light on other problems behind this assumption, that is, learners' information processing competences in both L1 and L2. For example, in this study, the use of context (as done in test four) represented a significant obstacle for vocabulary recognition as it implied not only vocabulary recognition but also reading, inferencing, and associating. Therefore, common allegations against language not provided within a rich context may need to be reconsidered because as Chikamatzu (2006) puts it, solid vocabulary knowledge does not rely on contextual cues; this idea is also supported by the Anderson's (1983) ACT model considering the spontaneity and automatization of procedural knowledge. Briefly put, language teacher education programs may need to find a middle ground between contextualized and decontextualized information when testing vocabulary while recovering the importance of discrete item testing, even if such approach has been neglected during the last decade.

## **Conclusions**

This study has revealed that vocabulary instruction seems not to have been given enough attention in the language teacher education program where this study was conducted if one observes the poor vocabulary recognition rates throughout the study. This implies that more attention to vocabulary instruction should be given, particularly by more stringent means of testing that the language learning goals in language teacher education programs should be higher than in any other EFL learning context.

In this study, it was also found that for vocabulary recognition purposes, it appear that words in isolation tend to provide a more accurate picture of what students really know. Besides, this technique, which has been commonly labeled as traditionalist and outdated, in this study surprisingly demonstrated to be the most successful technique for vocabulary recognition.



A final concluding remark is related to the poor reading rates as observed in test four. This is a relevant finding given the fact that the participants are also pre-service teachers who will be teaching in the Colombian classrooms shortly. This finding stresses the need to better control foreign language knowledge in competence upon completion of undergraduate programs emphasizing the teaching of English and foreign languages. Current efforts by the Ministry of Education regarding accreditation of teacher education programs are a national initiative, but more efficient and widespread action is needed given the fact that there are many teacher education programs in foreign languages in Bogotá sending new language teachers to the local job market whose competences in foreign languages are not appropriately evaluated.

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