

LEXICAL ERRORS IN YOUNG EFL LEARNERS: HOW DO THEY RELATE TO PROFICIENCY MEASURES?¹

MARÍA PILAR AGUSTÍN LLACH
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

Abstract: *The present paper examines the relationship between the frequency of lexical errors and the proficiency level of the learners. The role of vocabulary as an indicator of proficiency level is a generally acknowledged fact. In the sense that lexical errors are a manifestation of lack of lexical knowledge, it seems reasonable to think that they will relate negatively to level of proficiency. Second language competence was measured by a cloze test and a reading comprehension test. Results revealed that with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.1265$, scores in the cloze test did not relate to the frequency of lexical errors. On the contrary, reading comprehension scores did correlate to lexical errors, $r = 0.2863$ (significant at $p < 0.5$). These results led us to the conclusion that the cloze and the reading may measure different competencies, with the former measuring discrete-point language knowledge, and the latter more general linguistic competence. According to this, lexical errors were found to be a measure of language proficiency and can thus be used as objective criteria to determine linguistic competence and quality of language production.*

Key Words: lexical errors, language proficiency, quality of language production, cloze test, reading comprehension test.

Resumen: *En este artículo investigamos la relación entre la frecuencia de aparición de errores léxicos y el nivel de competencia de los aprendices. En la literatura se reconoce generalmente el papel que el vocabulario desempeña como indicador del nivel de competencia. Considerando que los errores léxicos son manifestación de falta de competencia léxica, parece lógico suponer que éstos se relacionarán negativamente con el nivel de competencia. El nivel de competencia en la lengua extranjera se midió con una prueba de rellenar huecos y con otra prueba de comprensión lectora. Los resultados de la investigación revelaron que, con un coeficiente de correlación de $r = 0.1265$, la puntuación obtenida en la prueba de rellenar huecos no se correlaciona con la frecuencia de aparición de errores léxicos. Por el contrario, la puntuación obtenida en la prueba de comprensión lectora interactúa de forma significativa con los errores léxicos, con $r = 0.2863$ (con un nivel de significación $p < 0.5$). Estos resultados nos llevan a la conclusión de que la prueba de rellenar huecos y la de comprensión lectora puede que estén midiendo diferentes competencias. La primera prueba mediría un conocimiento lingüístico discreto y puntual, mientras que la segunda mediría la competencia lingüística en términos generales. Según esto, en nuestro estudio los errores léxicos resultan ser medida del nivel en la lengua extranjera y pueden así considerarse criterios objetivos que determinan la competencia lingüística y la calidad de la producción lingüística.*

Palabras clave: errores léxicos, nivel de competencia en la lengua extranjera, calidad de la producción lingüística, prueba de rellenar huecos, prueba de comprensión lectora.

1. Introduction

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Lexical errors are an inevitable part of the process of second language vocabulary acquisition, and as such they are evidence of that process. Researchers have made use of the lexical errors produced by second language (L2) learners to establish assessment criteria of second language competence and lexical knowledge (C. ENGBER 1995). Previously, different authors had proved the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and L2 proficiency (M. VERHALLEN AND R. SCHOONEN 1993, 1998, L MORRIS AND T. COBB 2004). To measure proficiency in the target language researchers use a variety of tasks, among them the most popular are the cloze procedure and the reading comprehension test (C. MUÑOZ 2001, J. CENOZ 2003).

2. Lexical errors in the educational context

2.1 Lexical errors as general quality predictors

The severity of lexical errors as perceived by students and as assessed by judges is closely linked to the treatment of lexical errors as indicators of academic success and as important evaluation criteria setters. Lexical errors serve to evaluate the proficiency, lexical and general, of the learners in the different language skills, and to measure the quality of their written and oral production, e.g. scores of written compositions are based on the percentage of lexical errors (vs. effectively and well-used vocabulary) contained in that writing, among other lexical measures (frequency, originality, variation) (C. ENGBER 1995, B. LAUFER AND P. NATION 1995, P. MEARA ET AL. 2000). This has to do with vocabulary being the basic element in linguistic and academic development. Although the relationship between lexical errors and quality of composition has been dimly proved (C. ENGBER 1995), there is common agreement to consider lexical errors as quality predictors and evidence of lack of lexical knowledge and low general language proficiency. Usually, the quality of interlanguage performance is assessed in terms of its communicability, so that if learner's production communicates well, it will be positively evaluated so far as quality is concerned. In order to be communicatively effective, that discourse cannot contain many lexical errors, since they clearly obscure meaning.

For foreign language oral texts, density of errors, especially of lexical errors, also proved to be highly linked to evaluation of general linguistic performance. In their experiment, ALBRECHTSEN, D., HENRIKSEN, B., AND FAERCH, C. (1980) determined that English Second Language (ESL) conversation extracts with a high density of lexical errors, i.e. with many lexical errors (objective measure), obtained negative evaluations (subjective measure given by native speaker judges) as regards their linguistic deployment. This statement provides further evidence of the correlational relationship between lexical errors and discourse quality (see also C. VALERO GARCÉS ET AL. 2003: 14).

2.2 Lexical errors as criteria of writing quality

Turning now to written discourse, lexical errors are thought to be important composition assessment criteria and quality predictors. Research has proved their influence on writing evaluation to some extent, although results are still too scarce to be conclusive (C. ENGBER 1995). It is difficult to establish objective measures of writing quality and evaluation criteria. Compositions are also one of the most difficult L2 tasks to assess, since subjectivity is here present at its highest. Teachers rely on their own intuition of what to mark as bad (or good) writing. Lexical errors play an important part in this decision, but also more personal aspects like the agreement on the ideas expounded, the liking of the topic, or his very relationship to the learner, whether they "like" him/her or not can also influence the score. Different authors and teachers use different assessment rates and criteria, and there are, definitely, many of them (cf. D. CRUSAN 2002; S. JARVIS ET AL. 2003).

D. CRUSAN (2002) found out that most American universities evaluate their students writing skills by means of indirect measures, above all multiple choice tests. B. LAUFER AND P.

NATION (1995) also comment on how several lexical measures affect the judgements of quality in writing. This disparity of evaluation criteria, together with the fact that writing assessment has an important impact on placement decisions and final grades in composition classes do not benefit the language learner, who is left in the outmost ignorance of what to base his practice of writing skills on.

The more lexical errors a composition displays, the lower the score it will get. This belief is very much related to the notion of communicability. Writings, above all, but also other language tasks are assessed according to their communicative value, that is whether learners manage to transmit their message². If a message has many lexical errors it has a poor communicative value, since lexical errors are known communication disturbers. Thus, this message scores poorly.

The relationship is, we consider, meaningful enough to allow us to make predictions of quality of compositions. This has important consequences for planners of writing courses. These findings are also relevant for evaluation, since thanks to the stated relationship, teachers can count on objective evaluation criteria based on the percentage of lexical errors. Teaching can also benefit from the results of this study by providing learners with wordlists of problematic lexical items and the lexical errors they are affected by. Practising exercises will account for a reduction of the number of lexical errors, and thus, for an improvement of the quality of student's written tasks.

In concluding, the main importance of the research are the implications the findings would have on teachers. If the correlation between lexical error types and quality of composition is finally proved, the teacher is provided with objective criteria for evaluation and with clues about what to concentrate the teaching on, namely, on the most important, most destructive lexical error types, those that cause most problems for their frequency and for their consequences to communication. For learners the findings are important, since they know what they have to pay more attention to when writing. Second language writing courses can be developed taken these (and other such) findings into account.

3. Measures of L2 proficiency

Linguistic competence in the second language is measured in several ways, e.g. dictations, grammatical judgement tests, vocabulary multiple choice tests, compositions, fluency tests (D. LARSEN-FREEMAN AND M. LONG 1991). Two of the most popular instruments used to account for the proficiency level of the learners in the L2 are the cloze test and the reading comprehension test. These measurement tools are used either in isolation or in combination as part of a larger battery of tests (cf. C. MUÑOZ 2001, J. CENOZ 2003).

The cloze procedure is a usually employed method to test the level of subjects, because it is thought to meet the requirements of "naturalness" for language tests (C. MUÑOZ 2000: 169). That is, it reflects real language use, and it addresses different areas of language, and consequently of linguistic competence. It is also frequently chosen as a test in large-scale studies due to its economical administration and correction (C. MUÑOZ 2000: 170).

The level of reading comprehension is often considered as an indicator of general proficiency in the language. In fact, learners of different proficiency levels also display variable reading skills and perform in a different way in their reading comprehension (F. MECARTTY 1998, V. CODINA AND E. USÓ 2000). Consistently, it is reasonable to believe that a reading comprehension test will serve as an indicator of the learning stage and proficiency level at which learners find themselves. Furthermore, A. PHATIKI (2003: 650) even claims that reading success depends, among some other factors, on the proficiency level of the readers, especially at advanced stages, where it becomes a determining factor (C. BRANTMEIER 2004).

Considering the findings of previous research regarding vocabulary level, lexical error production and proficiency level, in the present study we intend to examine the relationship

² Cf. H. JACOBS et al. 1981, C. ENGBER 1995 for assessments based on the communicative value of compositions.

between lexical errors, one kind of measure of vocabulary level, and proficiency in the L2 as measured by the results in a cloze test and a reading comprehension test.

With this purpose in mind, we set out to investigate the following research questions:

1. Do lexical errors correlate to cloze scores?
2. Do lexical errors correlate to reading comprehension scores?

4. Methodology

4.1 Subjects

A total of 79 subjects participated in the study. These were Spanish natives from a school in Logroño (La Rioja, Spain). Subjects were enrolled in the three 4th grade classes of a religious (catholic) state-supported private school and were therefore, 9 to 10 years old. Their proficiency in English is low and they can be ascribed to the beginner level. Of the total of participants 4 had to be discarded for not having attended class the day some of the tests were administered

As regards the variable sex it should be noted that male subjects totalled 49, (62.02 %), meanwhile the other 30 (37.97 %) were female participants. In general, it can be concluded that male subjects overweigh in number female participants. See table 1 for a summary of the distribution of the participants into sex groups.

| | Nº subjects |
|-----------------|--------------|
| Male learners | 49 (62.02 %) |
| Female learners | 30 (37.97 %) |
| Total | 79 (100 %) |

Table 1. Distribution of subjects into sex groups

4.2 Materials

4.2.1 Compositions

A written composition was used for the study as the elicitation procedure to obtain real language from the subjects. Participants were allotted a total of 30 minutes to complete the composition task. No minimum length or time constraints were placed on students, although they were encouraged to write as much as they could.

The composition task consisted in writing a letter to a prospect English host family where the learner introduced him/herself and talked about his/her family, home town, school, hobbies, main interests, and any other thing about their life and liking they may have deemed interesting for the host family to know. This composition topic was selected because

- a) it imposed little or no constraints as to the type of language and content to be used by the informants. On the contrary, the free character of the present writing task allowed students to deploy as much linguistic knowledge in English as possible. Differences between learners in English language proficiency were ruled out, since the topic did not especially direct the learner either to the use of specific grammatical structures, or of particular lexical items.
- b) With this topic, it was also guaranteed that the subjects would have something to write about, and differences in the resulting essays as regards content and length due to different subject knowledge were ruled out. It is reasonable to expect that a familiar topic related to the learner's experience is chosen, if the writing task "is intended to elicit a fluent sample of writing under test conditions without advance preparation" (J. READ 2000: 198).
- c) Finally, this composition topic was selected because it was employed to elicit data for a national project within which this study is framed. This allows for comparison with subjects from other schools, permitting thus further research.

The instructions of the composition task were given in Spanish.

4.2.2. Level tests

Participants in the study were asked to complete two proficiency level tests: a cloze procedure and a reading comprehension test. Subjects were allotted 10 minutes to complete each of the two proficiency test.

4.2.2.1 Cloze Procedure

The cloze procedure was of the multiple choice type, also called "multiple-choice cloze" (J. READ 2000: 102), where each deleted word is incorporated into a multiple choice item, and test takers had to choose between three options the correct one, the one that fills in the blank in the text. The number of multiple choice items totalled 8 within a total number of words of 110. This indicates that on average one word is deleted every 14 words.

The cloze procedure is thought by many to be an integrative measure of overall language proficiency, and a highly effective way of testing learners' general second language knowledge (J. READ 2000, and J. OLLER 1973 in J. ALDERSON 1979, among many others). Furthermore, this competence testing instrument is especially adequate for the low level subjects being dealt with in this study, for two main reasons. First, it does not require writing ability on part of the test-takers, and second the multiple choice format reduces the range of possibilities for each blank, which makes it easier to respond (J. READ 2000: 111). The multiple choice cloze can be also marked more objectively, because the range of responses the learners could give is limited and controlled. In addition, this type of cloze procedure is considered more "learner-friendly" for providing learners with possible answers and by making it easier to complete (J. READ 2000).

A model of the cloze test that subjects had to complete appears in Appendix A. Here instructions were also in Spanish.

4.2.2.2 Reading comprehension test

A reading comprehension test was employed to evaluate the learners' proficiency level in the foreign language: English. It consisted of a total of 7 multiple choice questions, where subjects had to choose which of the three options is the correct one, the one that fits with the information provided in the text. The main advantage of using a reading passage to evaluate language knowledge is the presence of context (J. READ 2000). Language appears and is assessed in context within a communicative situation. The reading passage used here included 190 words, and comprehension questions consisted in circling the appropriate end for the sentence provided or the correct answer. The answers for the 7 questions were easily deduced from the information in the text, where these appeared implicitly stated. Reading comprehension tests are generally included in proficiency test, e.g. TOEFL, and Cambridge Proficiency Exam, since they are commonly believed to be indicators of overall language proficiency. In both proficiency level tests, the cloze and reading, participants were provided with a real example from the text showing how to implement the activity.

These measures of proficiency were part of a larger battery of tests used for two combined Spanish national projects from University of La Rioja and University of the Basque Country. These proficiency level tests were drawn from the Cambridge KET course book, *Key English Test 1* what attest their validity and reliability as measures of overall language knowledge. Moreover, the answering format chosen, i.e. the multiple choice is a very popular and valid instrument in language testing. Its main advantage over other testing formats is the easiness and convenience of its administration and the objective and well-established procedures for analysing and scoring it. Correcting multiple choice tests takes little time and mental effort for the research, since it is a rather mechanical act.

A model of the reading comprehension test that subjects had to implement appears in Appendix B. The instructions for the reading comprehension test are in Spanish.

4.3 Procedures

Subjects had to respond to the data elicitation tasks by following the steps collected in the instructions and completing the activities, i.e. writing a letter, reading the cloze text or the reading passage and circling the correct answer. They were handed the task sheets and had to write on them using a blue ink pen. No other limitations than time constraints were imposed on them, basically for composition tasks i.e. participants had no space limitations, and no linguistics limitations.

Compositions were assessed for lexical errors. Lexical errors were identified and counted. The two proficiency tests were marked by the researcher. Thanks to the multiple choice format of both tests, scoring proceeded easily and quickly. Each correct answer was given one point, the maximum punctuation was then 8 points for the cloze test, and 7 for the reading comprehension test. The resulting scores for the cloze and reading tests are presented as two separate measures which reflect the general language proficiency level of the participants. These measures of English competence will be used to set the level of proficiency of the informants.

Subjects were told they were going to participate in an experiment conducted by the University of La Rioja and their responses would be very useful, because they would help researchers find out more about how EFL vocabulary is learned. Data were collected in the Spring 2004 in Logroño, Spain.

4.4 Analysis

After data were collected, compositions were typed into a computer readable form. As a preliminary step, compositions were read at least twice and scrutinised for lexical errors. Lexical errors were spotted within the larger context in which they were immersed. Repeated lexical errors were not counted, so that if a learner produces, let's say five times the same lexical errors it will be only counted once, e.g. a subject wrote: *My birday is in June. My father's birday is in February. My mother's birday is in November. My sister's birday is in October.* Here, only one single lexical error, i.e. *birday* was counted and not four. Every deviation of the lexical norm was considered a lexical error. Thus, any word containing a malformation, not being English or not applying to native-like use was considered unacceptable.

A count of lexical errors was then implemented, so that percentages of lexical errors could be obtained. The two proficiency measures used in the present study were also analysed and marked as explained above. Two correlation tests (Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient) were used here to find out the correlation between scores in the cloze procedure test and percentage of lexical errors, on the one hand; and between reading comprehension scores and percentage of lexical errors, on the other hand.

5. Results

5.1 Proficiency scores

The cloze and the reading comprehension tests were assessed and as summarized in Table 2, results reveal that subjects scored poorly in both tests, what attests their beginner level. The scores for the reading comprehension test were even lower than those of the cloze test. As expressed in percentages, the mean of correct answers for both tests stayed below half and cloze scores more than doubled the scores in the reading comprehension. In order to proceed with the correlation test between tests' scores and lexical errors, measures were tallied so that results would be more reliable. Raw cloze and reading scores were converted into percentages of right answers, in order to allow for comparison with the reading comprehension test.

| Subjects' scores | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| No. of participants | 75 |
| Mean score cloze* | 41.16 % |
| Mean score reading* | 19.23 % |

Note

* Percentage of right responses

Table 2. Subjects and scores of the level tests

5.2 Cloze test scores and lexical errors

Research question 1 asked whether there was any relationship between the score obtained in the language proficiency cloze test and the production of lexical errors. This relationship was thought to be in form of correlation, so that the higher the scores obtained in the cloze test, the fewer the lexical errors for that subject. With this consideration in mind, we set out to perform a Pearson product-moment correlation test that would reveal us the degree of the relationship between the cloze scores and the percentage of lexical errors produced by each participant.

A directional correlation test was implemented between cloze scores, measured in percentages of correct answers, and words between one lexical error and the next as produced in the composition task. Absolute production of lexical errors was not considered for analysis of correlation, since it is not regarded as a reliable measure, because of the effect that differences in essay length have on absolute lexical error counts. The result obtained was rather disappointing, since $r = 0.1265^3$ meant that there was no significant correlation between cloze scores and production of lexical errors. From this result, it could be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the marks in the cloze test for a particular subject, and the lexical errors he/she committed in a composition writing task.

From results of this correlation test it follows that the frequency of lexical errors produced by Spanish beginner young learners in written compositions is independent from the scores obtained in a cloze test aimed at determining the general second language proficiency of the learners. Table 3 presents this result.

5.2 Reading comprehension test and lexical errors

The second research question asked whether there was any relationship between the level of proficiency of the subjects as measured by a reading comprehension test and the frequency of the lexical errors they produced in a composition writing task. So, similarly as for the first research question, a Pearson product-moment correlation test was performed between frequency of lexical errors and results of the reading comprehension test. Here again, reading scores were tallied and converted into percentages of correct answers. The results of the correlation test are very interesting, since, with $r = 0.2863$, they reveal a significant correlation between reading scores and frequency of lexical errors at the significance level $p < .05$. This means that the better the results of the reading comprehension test for a particular subject, the less frequent lexical errors would be in that subject's compositions. See Table 3 for a comparative summary of results of the correlation between frequency of lexical errors and scores of a reading comprehension and a cloze test.

| | Value | d.f. | significance |
|--|--------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Cloze scores/ frequency of lexical errors | $r = 0.1265$ | 65 | non-significant |
| Reading scores/ frequency of lexical errors | $r = 0.2863$ | 65 | $p < .05$ |

Table 3. Correlation coefficients for proficiency scores and lexical errors

³ The correlation coefficient is positive, because the better the results in the cloze test, the more words appear between a lexical error and the next one, i.e. the less frequent are lexical errors.

The answer to the question of the relationship between lexical errors and different proficiency measures is, therefore somehow controversial. On the one hand, there seems to be no relationship (no significant correlation) between frequency of lexical errors and performance in a general second language proficiency test, as manifested in cloze scores. However, on the other hand, a significant correlation was found between frequency of lexical errors and reading comprehension proficiency.

Results reveal that somehow the cloze procedure and the reading comprehension tests have proved to be different measures of second language proficiency, in general and of second language vocabulary, in particular. The former is independent from frequency of lexical errors, whereas the latter has a positive directional correlation with production of lexical errors. The higher the level of reading comprehension proficiency, the fewer or less frequent lexical errors.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 Is there any relationship between overall language proficiency, as measured by a cloze and a reading comprehension test, and absolute frequency of lexical errors?

It is an issue of special relevance finding out the relationship between the production of lexical errors and overall language proficiency in the second language. Here, we have investigated whether there is any relationship between general language competence, measured as the percentage of correct answers obtained in a cloze procedure test and a reading comprehension test, and absolute production of lexical errors for each particular subject. Regarding the findings that revealed vocabulary as an important predictor of academic performance and language competence (e.g. M. VERHALLEN AND R. SCHOONEN 1993, 1998, B. LAUFER AND P. NATION 1995, L MORRIS AND T. COBB 2004), it was reasonable to assume that lack of vocabulary competence, i.e. lexical errors, would also play a crucial role in determining writing quality and in predicting language proficiency.

Bearing in mind the results yielded by previous investigations where lexical errors proved to play a determinant role in the assessment of writing quality and overall holistic composition rating (see C. ENGBER 1995), it was expected that the scores of the cloze and the reading tests would also correlate with frequency of lexical errors. However, results turned out to be more complex. Meanwhile, the expected correlation was found for the reading test, the results of the directional correlational test showed that there is no correlational relationship between the scores obtained in a cloze procedure test and the number of lexical errors.

Although interpretation of the data is not easy, we may dare to speculate, with J. ALDERSON (1979), that the cloze and the reading comprehension tests measure, in fact, different competences or abilities. Traditionally, the cloze procedure has been widely employed as an instrument for testing language competence (R. CARTER 1988: 161). And although it has been used, among others, as a measure of readability, and as a procedure to develop vocabulary, it generally has tested "a student's ability to insert the grammatically correct item" (R. CARTER 1990: 445). In this sense, the cloze procedure is rather a measure not so much of the overall language proficiency and global skills, like reading comprehension as of "discrete-points" of grammar and vocabulary. This interpretation is in line with J. ALDERSON (1979), who found out that cloze tests related rather to measures of core proficiency than to "higher order tests like reading comprehension" (p. 225). His findings point to a context-bound cloze test appropriate to test, basically, very concrete instances of language (grammatical or lexical).

Reading comprehension tests, on the other hand, seem more wont to measure global skills and overall language proficiency quite independently from context (J. ALDERSON 1979). Considering this, and in view of the results that established a correlation between the number of lexical errors produced by each particular learner and the percentage of correct answers of that very learner in the reading comprehension test, it can be concluded that the production of lexical errors is dependent on the general competence of the learner in the second language, as revealed by a reading comprehension test. This interpretation may imply that the lower the language competence of a learner, the more lexical errors would he/she be expected to commit.

However, the findings of precedent studies with subjects of higher linguistic competence have shown that lexical errors are also commonplace in their production (see, for example, B. WARREN 1992, R. ZIMMERMANN 1986, M. ZUGHOUL 1991, S. AMBROSO 2000). In fact, the general belief that lexical errors are typical of advanced learners has led research to concentrate on the lexical production of advanced learners neglecting beginners' production of lexical errors. This frequent appearance of lexical errors in the interlanguage of advanced learners sheds some light to the interpretation of the present result pointing to a qualitative change rather than to a drastic reduction of lexical errors as experience with the target language increases. In other words, advanced learners will still commit lexical errors, but, predictably, of other type than beginner learners, although the frequency of appearance of these errors may not vary considerably with language proficiency.

This result that correlates reading comprehension with lexical error production is in consonance with the findings of C. ENGBER (1995) that related lexical errors, among other measures of lexical richness, with the quality of written composition. These findings shed light into the relationship between literacy skills (reading and writing) and lexical errors, and further support the findings of previous studies that highlighted the relationship between vocabulary and literacy skills (see, for instance, J. MUNCIE 2002, S. LEE 2003). This has important consequences for teaching practices, as will be explained below.

In sum, this result evidences the directional negative relationship between lexical errors, and general language proficiency. According to this, we can conclude that the presence of lexical errors can serve as a predictor of the overall (level of) competence of the learner in the second language. This finding is of extreme importance for L2 acquisition research, and it has highly relevant implications for research and teaching.

In conclusion, the cloze procedure and the reading comprehension tests have proved to be different measures of second language proficiency, in general and of second language vocabulary, in particular. The former is independent from frequency of lexical errors, whereas the latter has a positive directional correlation with production of lexical errors. As reading comprehension proficiency increases the frequency of lexical errors will change, and probably the presence of lexical errors will also decrease.

6.2. Pedagogical implications

The findings presented in this study corroborate partially the results of previous research that relate measures of lexical richness, particularly lexical error production, and overall language proficiency (see C. ENGBER 1995). Frequency of lexical errors correlates highly with scores in a reading comprehension test. This gives an idea of the importance of vocabulary in the writing process. It is essential that teachers stress the relevant and influential role of vocabulary in general language proficiency assessment and in writing quality. Furthermore, vocabulary has been proved to be an integral measure of academic success (see e.g. M. VERHALLEN AND R. SCHOONEN 1993, 1998). It is reasonable to think, therefore, that expanding the vocabulary of the learners will bring forth an improvement in their general language competence and in their school performance. I. LEKI AND J. CARSON (1994) found out that learners themselves demand more vocabulary and writing practice.

This result has also important consequences for evaluation practices. The selection of tests has to base on the aspect of the language that wants to be tested. Vocabulary can be tested according to lexical error production in a free productive test of the composition type. But also the responses to a series of reading comprehension questions seem a good measure of passive vocabulary knowledge. The efficacy of cloze tests to measure vocabulary knowledge depends very much on the design of the test and, especially, on the gaps to fill in, as J. ALDERSON (1979) pointed out.

6.3. Conclusion

The present research intended to investigate the relationship between frequency of lexical errors and level of proficiency. Overall language proficiency was measured with a cloze test and a reading comprehension test. Analysis of the data has demonstrated that, considering the fact that a reading comprehension test, and the subsequent comprehension questions, is a more accurate measure of general language competence than a cloze test, which is more dependent on the design, as J. ALDERSON (1979) has shown, lexical errors do, in fact, correlate with general competence in English. According to this, lexical errors can be said to be a measure of language proficiency and can thus be used as objective criteria to determine the linguistic competence of a particular learner and also the quality of language production.

Further research on lexical errors and level of proficiency of learners should concentrate on the evolution of this relationship as second language competence increases. Trying to answer the question of what particular lexical error types relate most to level proficiency and stating the nature of the relationship between several types of lexical errors and L2 competence should centre future research interests.

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