

Predicting Vocabulary Comprehension: A Case Study

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Rebut / Received: 11-6-09

Acceptat / Accepted: 20-7-09 (provisional); 12-4-11 (final)

Resum. Intuir la comprensió del vocabulari: un estudi de cas. El paper de la comprensió de vocabulari durant el procés de lectura pot passar desapercbut en el cinquè o sisè semestre d'espanyol com a segona llengua en universitats dels EUA. Els materials didàctics no faciliten la tasca d'ensenyament de vocabulari ja que les sofisticades lectures i la manca de tractament didàctic del vocabulari donen al professor la percepció optimista que els alumnes dominen més vocabulari del que realment coneixen. Per consegüent, la destresa del professor per anticipar els mots que causaran problemes de comprensió esdevé una valuosa eina didàctica. Aquest estudi es va portar a terme en una universitat dels EUA. L'estudi presenta dades d'una classe d'espanyol de cinquè o sisè semestre. Els resultats mostren que, en anticipar els mots que els alumnes havien de cercar mentre llegien, el professor va exhibir un 37% de precisió.

Paraules clau: intuïció, predicció, lectura, vocabulari.

Abstract. Predicting vocabulary comprehension: A case study. The role of vocabulary comprehension in the reading process may be easily overlooked in fifth/sixth semester college Spanish courses taught in the USA. The teaching materials available for these courses may be deceiving in that the types of readings and the absence of systematic pedagogical treatment of the vocabulary may create the impression that students master more vocabulary than they actually do. Therefore, instructors' ability to predict what vocabulary will cause a comprehension breakdown becomes valuable. This case study presents data from a class that was either a fifth/sixth semester Spanish class taught at a university in the USA. The data show that the instructor was 37% accurate in predicting what words would have to be looked up by the students when they were given the task of reading a passage.

Keywords: intuition, prediction, reading, vocabulary.

1. Introduction

1.1. Intuitive prediction as a tool

Instructors routinely manage different aspects of their teaching by resorting to estimates that do not involve systematic data collection and statistical analysis. These estimates are performed by means of intuition resulting from observation, experience, and familiarity with the research in the field (Cullen and Shaw 2000). Instructors often resort to intuitive prediction when they estimate how long it will take to complete a test or other types of in-class tasks, when they gauge the optimal material presentation pace in order for most students to follow the ideas, and when they make decisions on the sequencing of the material by estimating its difficulty or ease (Westermarck and Crichlow 1983). In this respect, language instructors behave like other experts in other fields, as they make use of knowledge gained by experience and apply it to solve problems (Hogarth 2001).

In the field of foreign language (L2) teaching, instructors engage in routine estimation of material difficulty when they provide oral or reading input in the target language or when the objective of the task is to elicit oral or written output. These predictions are seldom examined against more objective instances of systematic data collection that may corroborate the accuracy of such estimations.

A pivotal L2 skill in fifth- and sixth-semester Spanish is reading comprehension as this is the last or nearly the last language-focused class students take in Spanish programs at US colleges and universities prior to moving on to content courses in culture, literature, and other subjects. According to standard academic labeling in the US, a fifth-semester foreign language college class is an advanced class, however this labeling bears no correspondence with the description of “advanced” as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)¹ proficiency scale. Saved extreme cases of underperforming or overperforming students, most students reaching the fifth-semester class have a proficiency level of intermediate-low or intermediate-mid. Fifth-semester teaching materials offer little assistance for instructors to gauge the vocabulary difficulty of the readings included in a textbook, therefore the instructor has to make estimations of how challenging a reading piece may be.

These estimations may easily overlook the role of vocabulary comprehension in the L2 reading process when students reach fifth- and sixth-semester college courses. One reason for this miscalculation may be that the teaching materials available for these courses are often deceiving in that the sophistication of the readings and the absence of systematic pedagogical treatment of the vocabulary may create the impression that students in these

1. ACTFL's description of “advanced” is equivalent to the C1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and ACTFL's “intermediate” corresponds to CEFR's B1.

courses master more vocabulary than they actually do. Therefore, instructors' ability to predict what vocabulary may cause a comprehension breakdown becomes valuable.

1.2. The role of vocabulary teaching

Vocabulary teaching plays a central role in first-year Spanish courses and this centrality is reflected in the college textbooks published in the USA, which include some 44 new words per chapter. However, vocabulary teaching begins to be neglected in second-year Spanish courses and it is systematically overlooked in subsequent years. As Coady (1997) points out, instructors may be under the impression that vocabulary can be learned incidentally by being exposed to the language while other aspects of the language such as morphological and syntactic structures require explicit discussion in class. Moreover, Spanish textbooks do not assist instructors to incorporate vocabulary in their teaching. These textbooks may include vocabulary lists, but minimal or no pedagogical treatment of the vocabulary items they present. In addition, the lists are disproportionately small for the amount of reading input included. As vocabulary becomes more abstract past first-year Spanish, instructors can no longer resort to the show-and-tell technique that is so useful when presenting vocabulary that has physical referents, and it becomes impracticable for instructors to generate the amount of material necessary to supplement the textbook and provide vocabulary instruction that may assist learners to speed up their vocabulary acquisition. While it is true that incidental vocabulary learning will occur when students read or listen to other speakers under certain conditions (Pulido 2004), vocabulary instruction could compensate for the lack of abundant input, as in formal L2 learning the classroom often represents the only environment in which systematic exposure to the target language and culture takes place.

1.3. Theoretical background

Unknown words may impact the reading process by sidetracking readers whose reading flow gets interrupted by undecipherable words. This sidetracking proves most disruptive when the reading is abandoned in order to look up a word. The available research has shown that there is a correlation between vocabulary knowledge and ability to comprehend a text (Van Gelderen *et al.* 2004). For reading comprehension to take place, there has to be a certain level of automation in lower order reading processing such as letter recognition and word identification (Segalowitz 2000, Gough and Tunmer 1986). This automation is necessary so that the reader's attention resources can be freed up for higher order reading processes (Alderson 1984).

The importance of vocabulary in the communication process is evidenced by the fact that students rate the vocabulary knowledge as one of the most useful for their participation in communication events (Folse 2004). Krashen (1989), cited in Folse (2004, p. 124), reminds us that learners who visit the target-language country carry with them dictionaries, not grammars. This confirms what Wilkins (1972, p. 111) stated in the following terms: “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

While the literature on reading strategies does offer useful and necessary pedagogical techniques to deal with new vocabulary during the reading process (Nuttall 2005, Oxford 1990), there is compelling research that suggests that reading strategies are not always effective to infer meaning of unknown words (Nassaji 2006). His research suggests that vocabulary depth contributed more to successful inferencing than how frequently a specific strategy was used. Along these lines, Cowie (1988) cautions that a lexical knowledge-base is a necessary foundation to creative manipulation of any communicative situation.

With regards to instructors’ intuition as a means to anticipate vocabulary that may be unknown to a group of students, this intuition has to take into account the reading passage as a whole and the role of word frequency, salience, keyness, collocation, and semantic and phonetic distance between L1 and L2 (Sinclair and Renouf 1988, Scott and Tribble 2006). While language instructors are not systematically trained to assess word learnability or chances that learners may have been exposed to certain expressions at different learning stages, it is plausible that instructors may intuitively acquire this ability, as other professionals acquire knowledge on the job (Harteis and Gruber 2008). Intuition is thus understood in the present work “as a form of expertise, acquired through experience” (Hogarth 2001, p. 99).

2. Case study

2.1. Research questions

- a) How accurate is instructors’ ability to predict what vocabulary in a reading passage will be unfamiliar to a specific group of students?
- b) How do instructors decide whether a vocabulary item in a reading passage will be unfamiliar to a specific group of students?

2.2. Research questions’ relevance to language instruction and material development

The ability to predict what vocabulary may present difficulties is crucial in order to design pre-listening and pre-reading activities that assist students with the text to be listened to or to be read. Examining instructors’ ability to predict difficult vocabulary

items may also foster reflection on other domains of vocabulary learning, such as estimating how difficult it is to learn a specific item. Nation (2001, p. 23-24) labels this aspect of learning as *learning burden*, which is the result of learning a word's spelling, pronunciation, derivations, syntactic properties, co-occurring neighboring words (collocations), frequency, appropriateness, meanings and shades of meaning (Nation 1990).

3. Method

3.1. Subjects

The data was collected from a group of fourteen students (n=14) enrolled in a fifth- or sixth-semester Spanish class taught at an American university. The class was taught by an instructor with fifteen years of experience teaching Spanish as a second language, and whose first language is Spanish. The instructor's role in this study was to compose a list of expressions from the passage that he anticipated would have to be looked up by the students, to collect the vocabulary lists composed by the students, and to administer a vocabulary quiz. This class focused on expository reading and writing, and oral skills were developed around tasks, such as discussion of current issues and oral presentations about social or cultural topics. Only a select number of grammar topics were explicitly taught in class. The language proficiency of the students ranged from intermediate-low to intermediate-mid level on the ACTFL scale. This assessment was based on writing samples and oral presentations.

3.2. Materials

The reading source for the vocabulary data collection was an expository text of 739 words about Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (see Appendix 1). This text is a reading included in the textbook (Kiddle *et al.* 2002, p. 218-222) used in the course. The data came from four sources: 1) the students' reports on the vocabulary that they had to look up; 2) a vocabulary quiz (see Appendix 2); 3) the instructor's list of vocabulary that he anticipated would be looked up by the students; and 4) the instructor's notes describing the rationale for the inclusion of the selected words or expressions.

3.3. Procedures

The students were asked to read the passage at home and answer the corresponding reading comprehension questions included in the textbook. The reading comprehension questions were discussed in class but there was no vocabulary discussion. Subsequently, they were asked to make a list of the words they could not guess from the context, look

them up in the dictionary and compose a bilingual list. These tasks were assigned for homework and the students were told that they would be quizzed on the vocabulary from this passage at a later day.

The instructor, for his part, read the passage, before looking at the bilingual lists composed by the students, and tried to guess what words would be likely to appear in the list of at least one student. As the instructor was composing his list, he took notes describing why he made his selections.

The instructor made a list of the words reported by the students as being looked up in the dictionary. The number of students reporting a given word was also noted. Finally the students were quizzed on the words that the instructor included in his list but were not reported as being looked up.

3.4. Analysis

The analysis consisted of three parts: 1) the observation of frequencies in order to gain insight on how accurately the instructor was able to anticipate the vocabulary items that were unknown (see Tables 1 and 2); 2) a qualitative analysis to determine why some words were looked up more frequently than others; and 3) a qualitative analysis of the instructor's notes describing the reason for each of his word selections.

4. Results and discussion

The instructor's notes, taken while he was trying to anticipate what words would appear on the students' lists, indicate that he considered the following criteria:

1. False- vs. true-cognates.
2. Estimated likelihood that a fifth-/sixth-semester student would have been exposed to a specific word or expression frequently enough to recognize its form and meaning.
3. Contextual support favorable to word guessing.

Out of the 739 words that make up the passage, the group reported to have looked up 48 words (see Table 1). Twenty-four words were looked up by at least one student (see Table 1), six by two students, three by three students, five by four students, four by five students, two by six students, one by seven, and three by nine students. Eighteen of these words were in the list that the instructor had anticipated the students would look up. The instructor's list also included six additional items that were not reported by the students as being looked up (see Table 2). The quiz (see Appendix 2) on these six words revealed that these words had been underreported (see Table 3). Four (29%) students did not provide the correct translation for *se hizo (famoso)*, five (36%) did not for *retratos*, three (21%) for *a primera vista*, two (14%) for *además*, seven (50%) for *alcanzó*, and eight (57%) for *en cambio*.

TABLE 1. WORDS LOOKED UP AND PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS (N=14) THAT LOOKED THEM UP

	A**	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Group Percentage / (Number of Students)*	64% (9)	50% (7)	43% (6)	36% (5)	29% (4)	21% (3)	14% (2)	7% (1)
# of words (total=48) looked up by the group (N=14)	3	1	2	4	5	3	6	24
words looked up by one or more students	astucia *** trazar cotidiano/a	asomarse	cortesano vencedor	hábil mendigo monja sombra	bufones sutil insinuada intrigas lascivas	lanzas orgullo precursor	fondo gestos piedad mediante menina vencido	apariencias borrachos corte delgada desnudo dirigida disfrutaba enanos encargo entregar evita evocar llenar monarca ni siquiera obra olvidar papa pecho pensamientos por eso ser humano sujeito voluptuosa

* The data do not indicate whether or not a given student performed the look-up of just one word or several of them.

** Capital letters at the beginning of each column are used to name each column, they do not make reference to different groups or individuals.

*** Boldfaced words represent 18 of the words that the instructor included in his list and were looked up by at least one student.

TABLE 2. WORDS INCLUDED IN THE INSTRUCTOR'S LIST

% / (number) of words in the instructor's list that were not looked up	% / (number) of words looked up that were included in the instructor's list	% / (number) of words looked up and not included in the instructor's list
25% (6 out of 24)	37% (18 out of 48)*	63% (30 out of 48)**
se hizo (famoso) retratos a primera vista además alcanzó en cambio	asomarse astucia disfrutaba enanos evita fondo insinuada mendigos meninas monja ni siquiera obra orgullo ser humano sujeto trazar vencedor vencido	apariencias borrachos bufones corte cortesano cotidiano/a delgada desnudo dirigida encargo entregar evocar gestos hábil intrigas lanzas lascivas llenar mediante monarca olvidar papa pecho pensamientos piedad por eso precursor sombra sutil voluptuosa

* See boldfaced words in table 1.

** See non-boldfaced words in table 1.

TABLE 3. QUIZ ON THE WORDS IN THE INSTRUCTOR'S LIST
THAT WERE NOT REPORTED AS BEING LOOKED UP

	<i>se hizo</i> (<i>famoso</i>)	<i>retratos</i>	<i>a primera</i> <i>vista</i>	<i>además</i>	<i>alcanzó</i>	<i>en cambio</i>
% / (number) of students (<i>N</i> =14) who mistranslated	29% (4)	36% (5)	21% (3)	14% (2)	50% (7)	57% (8)

Most of the expressions in the students' lists happened to be one-word expressions. This outcome raises a question that was not anticipated in the present study. It was not possible to determine whether the reason for there not being multi-word expressions on the lists was that students were familiar with them or that they inferred their meaning from context or that they had not yet become aware that there are lexicalized multi-word expressions. Two examples of these multi-word expressions are *a primera vista* (see line 8 in Appendix 1), and *en cambio* (lines 19-20S), whose meaning was unknown to several students as it was revealed on the quiz.

A second look at *astucia*, which the instructor assumed the students would relate to *astute/astuteness*, reveals that instructors may overestimate the students' knowledge of learned words in English. In this regard, instructors' first language, if it happens to be Spanish, may influence their ability to guess whether or not an English learned word is likely to be known by college students in their sophomore year. Many learned words have Latin roots in English that have corresponding Spanish cognates, however these cognates may not necessarily be learned words in this language. For instance, the Spanish word *cotidiano* has the same Latin root as the English word *quotidian* and both relate to the notion of 'daily', but while the Spanish word is fairly common and used in casual speech, *quotidian* is a learned word as its occurrence in casual speech is non-existent and seldom used in texts of general interest.

The data revealed that, in using translation as a technique to observe students' vocabulary knowledge, the researcher has to be cautious. An example of the limitations that this technique may present is the translation of *corte* (line 2). When the students translate it as *court*, which may mean both 'legal court' and 'royal court' one cannot be sure whether the semantic representation they have in mind is that of a 'legal court', a semantic interpretation possible in some Spanish varieties, or that of a 'royal court'.

5. Conclusion

While the exploratory nature of this study does not allow for any generalizations applicable to a sizable population, we can draw some conclusions that may be used as the basis for further studies and cautious assessment of vocabulary development at various interlanguage stages.

If translation is used to gain insight on students' vocabulary knowledge, the translation of some items should be complemented with other tasks that can unambiguously convey the semantic representation that students make of polysemic items such as *court*. One such task could consist of having students use the English word in a sentence written in English.

Instructors need to change students' ingrained misconception that meaning lies only on single-word units. A first step could be to enhance the reading passage to draw students' attention to those polyword segments (Nattinger 1988).

It is likely that instructors overestimate their students' vocabulary knowledge and ability to use the context to compensate for their lack of knowledge. At the same time, gaps in vocabulary comprehension may vary within the same group, which is an additional challenge to the task of estimating vocabulary comprehension. Digitizing some of the reading excerpts and transforming them in interactive texts that may guide readers through the reading comprehension process (Godev 2009) may prove useful not only for readers but also for instructors, as they may refine their intuition in the process of developing these materials.

The fact that the instructor was able to guess not only 37% of the words that students reported as being looked up but also six words that were not reported may suggest that intuitive assessment of vocabulary difficulty is a useful, if imperfect, strategy to make decisions regarding the appropriateness of a reading passage for a given language level. The experience of fifteen years teaching Spanish as a second language may have contributed to the instructor's ability to identify difficult words. Future research should investigate the role of classroom experience in instructors' ability to guess what words or expressions in a reading passage are likely to be unfamiliar to students in different courses. This research may provide some direction regarding training for novice instructors.

Another aspect to intuitive prediction of vocabulary difficulty is how intuitive prediction can be refined via training, so that training may endow a novice instructor with the intuition of seasoned instructors and encourage further reflection on how learners interact with vocabulary. Hogarth's (2001) research suggests that training intuition is possible and it is domain specific. He has proposed a framework for developing intuition that could be used as a point of departure to train intuitive prediction of vocabulary difficulty.

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Appendix 1. Reading passage

Diego Velázquez, español (1599-1660): su vida y obra

(NOTE: The original text as read by the students is accompanied by photos of the painter as well as photos of the paintings referred to in the passage)

- Velázquez nació en Sevilla en 1599 y empezó a pintar a la edad de once años. Se casó cuando tenía 18 años con la hija de su maestro y poco después se fue a Madrid a la Corte del rey Felipe IV. Pronto [se hizo]* famoso por sus maravillosos [retratos] del monarca y su familia. Era pintor oficial pero también era [cortesano] y por eso no [disfrutaba] de mucho tiempo para pintar. No participaba mucho en las intrigas de la Corte. Pasó su vida pintando y sirviendo al rey hasta su muerte por enfermedad a la edad de 61 años. Su mujer se murió seis días más tarde.
- [A primera vista] las [obras] de Velázquez parecen convencionales. Pero la persona que las observa con cuidado descubre que casi todas contienen un secreto: un mensaje sutil y original. [Además] mediante la manipulación de luz y sombra, Velázquez [alcanzó] a representar las figuras sin necesidad de [trazarlas] con líneas. Por eso, se le considera un precursor del impresionismo. Siglos después de su muerte, Manet y otros pintores impresionistas hicieron viajes especiales de Francia a Madrid para estudiar su obra. Vamos a examinar algunos de sus cuadros para buscar sus mensajes secretos.
- Hoy día, con la facilidad de la fotografía, nos olvidamos de la importancia que tenía la pintura en el pasado como modo de conservar los recuerdos de momentos históricos. El enorme cuadro *La rendición de Breda* fue pintado para conmemorar la victoria militar española de 1625 contra los holandeses. Pero, ¡Qué sorpresa! El cuadro no es típico de las pinturas militares porque [evita] la violencia, la guerra y el [orgullo] nacional. [En cambio], evoca un sentido de tranquilidad y compasión humana. La fuerza militar está simbolizada por una fila de lanzas, y la destrucción de la ciudad solamente está [insinuada]. La atención del observador está dirigida a las relaciones humanas entre el [vencedor] y el [vencido]: entre el general español y el general holandés que le entrega la llave de la ciudad de Breda. La obra celebra las cualidades de reconciliación, generosidad y cortesía, y los soldados menores están representados como individuos, preocupados con sus propios pensamientos.
- A Velázquez le interesaba el [ser humano] en toda su variedad. Pintaba a reyes y princesas, pero también a pobres, [mendigos], borrachos y a la gente con impedimentos físicos o mentales, que se empleaban en la Corte como bufones o compañeros para los niños reales.
- Es importante recordar que un buen retrato no es simplemente una copia de apariencias externas; exige imaginación e intuición porque el artista observa a su [sujeto] durante horas para escoger la expresión, la postura y los gestos más apropiados. El papa Inocencio X era uno de los hombres más poderosos del mundo y también uno de los más feos. Velázquez revela sin piiedad la [astucia] y crueldad de su carácter. En el retrato de don Sebastián

- 35 de Morra aparece uno de los [enanos] (personas muy pequeñas) que entretenían en la Corte. Lo que sorprende es la mirada irónica y triste, llena de inteligencia. Una de las pinturas principales de Velázquez es la fascinante y misteriosa *Venus del espejo*, el primer desnudo no religioso de la pintura española. No se sabe mucho del cuadro. El cuadro es una vista íntima de la diosa del amor romana. Venus, acompañada de su hijo
- 40 Cupido. Seguramente se trataba de un encargo privado porque el Santo Oficio de la Inquisición no habría permitido el uso del cuerpo desnudo, [ni siquiera] para un tema mitológico. Velázquez ha representado a la bella mujer como delgada, modesta y con dignidad, en contraste con las figuras voluptuosas y lascivas que se veían en la pintura italiana de aquellos tiempos.
- 45 Sin duda alguna, la obra maestra de Velázquez es *Las Meninas*, en la cual el pintor alcanzó a hacer presente un ambiente particular por la hábil manipulación de luz y sombra. El cuadro representa una escena de la vida cotidiana de la gran Corte. Velázquez mismo (con una cruz en el pecho) está presente, en un cuarto grande, pintado. La joven princesa acaba de entrar, acompañada de sus [meninas] (damas de honor), una dama enana que sirve
- 50 de compañera y un niño. También hay una [monja], un guardia y un perro. Todas son figuras típicas pero cada una parece individual. Un hombre noble [se asoma] a la puerta en el fondo. Pero, ¿a quién está pintando el Velázquez representado en el cuadro? Pues, a los reyes, por supuesto. ¿Y dónde están los reyes? La respuesta está en el cuadro. Mírelo bien, porque su composición es una de las más originales e ingeniosas de toda la historia
- 55 del arte.

[739 words, proper names excluded]

*The passage used for the quiz did not show the underlining and square brackets, this marking is shown here for the convenience of the reader. Underlined words were reported by the students as looked up, square-bracketed [words] are words in instructor's list, and underlined and square-bracketed [words] are words in instructor's list that were also reported by students as looked up.

Appendix 2. Vocabulary quiz

The segments below come from the selection on Diego Velázquez that you have already read at home and that accompanies this quiz. Please provide an English translation or explanation of the meaning of the boldfaced expressions. The bracketed information at the beginning of each segment on this quiz indicates the passage line number where you can locate the segment in the attached passage.

[L3-4] Pronto (1) **se hizo** famoso por sus maravillosos (2) **retratos** del (3) **monarca** y de su familia.

[L4] Era pintor oficial pero también era cortesano y por eso no (4) **disfrutaba** de mucho tiempo para pintar.

[L8] (5) **A primera vista** las (6) **obras** de Velázquez parecen convencionales.

[L10] (7) **Además**, mediante la manipulación de luz y sombra, Velázquez (8) **alcanzó** a representar a las figuras sin necesidad de trazarlas.

[L18-23] El cuadro no es típico de las pinturas militares porque (9) **evita** la violencia, la guerra y el (10) **orgullo** nacional. (11) **En cambio**, evoca un sentido de tranquilidad y compasión humana. La fuerza militar está simbolizada por una fila de lanzas, y la destrucción de la ciudad está solamente (12) **insinuada**. La atención del observador está (13) **dirigida** a las relaciones humanas entre el (14) **vencedor** y el (15) **vencido**.

1. se hizo: _____
2. retratos: _____
3. monarca: _____
4. disfrutaba: _____
5. A primera vista: _____
6. obras: _____
7. Además: _____
8. alcanzó: _____
9. evita: _____
10. orgullo: _____
11. En cambio: _____
12. insinuaba: _____
13. dirigida: _____
14. vencedor: _____
15. vencido: _____