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BOOK REVIEW

AGNIESZKA LEŃKO-SZYMAŃSKA
DEFINING AND ASSESSING LEXICAL PROFICIENCY
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This review is based on the first edition of the volume by Agnieszka Leńko-Szymańska entitled *Defining and Assessing Lexical Proficiency* published by the University of Warsaw, but then later on re-published by Routledge (2020) under the same title (ISBN 9780367337926). The book has a double purpose. On the one hand, it offers a thorough analysis of lexical proficiency leading the author to formulate a definition of this concept for educational purposes and its operationalization for research purposes. On the other hand, the author proposes a critical assessment of how lexical proficiency can be assessed in the context of foreign language instruction.

The book consists of seven chapters, almost four hundred referenced sources and one appendix. It starts with the *Introduction*, in which the author justifies her choice of the topic emphasising the importance of understanding of what lexical proficiency stands for and how it can be assessed. She presents the main aims and a brief outline of the individual chapters. This section gives the reader a coherent overview of the book and clearly specified objectives. The first chapter of the book entitled *Lexical competence and lexical proficiency* consists of a present-ation of fundamental terminology and an overview of definitions and models of competence and lexical proficiency (for example, what it means to know a word,

or the mental lexicon and its characteristics: width, depth, structure, lexical access). Here the reader will find a description of two models: the modular frame of mind and a holistic cognitive model embracing breadth, depth and lexical use. Quite complicated theories are described in a clear and intelligible way - at the same time demonstrating potentially risky conceptualisation of lexical competence. Unfortunately for the completeness of the discussion, the author offers a very sketchy discussion of mental lexicon and ignores important contributions made to the development of the construct by other scholars (among them Singleton 1999, Gabryś-Barker 2005). Also, the concept of lexical access is not given enough attention and is based on the old model of Meara (1997) and does not make references to more recent findings (e.g. Szubko-Sitarek 2015). What is important here is that the author draws attention to the interconnectedness of two models based on individual lexical items and phraseological units such as collocations. Unfortunately, the author has ignored some significant studies in this area (Biskup 1992, Wolter 2011, Leńko-Szymańska 2014). In the second chapter, *Lexical assessment methods*, the author concentrates on the approaches to lexical assessment by means of vocabulary tests widely used in the context of foreign language instruction on the one hand and and on those used in researching lexical competence on the other. Some cursory comments are given on certain characteristics of a so-called good language test and ignoring others (e.g. content validity, face validity, practicality). The author presents her critical assessment of selected and commonly used tests with a lexical component in education (KET, PET, FCE, CAE i CPE) and in research   (among them *Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test* – EVST, computerised Paul Meara tests *X-Lex*). She also points out the merits of oral vocabulary tests and written performance-based ones to assess lexical quality. The overview of the selected tests is coherent and gives a picture of how lexical competence has been assessed to this point. The third chapter entitled *Performance-based assessment of lexical proficiency* is a very interesting text focusing on the description of vocabulary assessment criteria used by evaluators in the context of so-called performance--based assessment, that is, tests based on longer oral and/or written texts. This discussion is illustrated with the descriptors used in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (*CEFR*), which aims at standardising European assessment of language proficiency. After diachronic-perspective comments on testing, Leńko-Szymańska moves on to the description and assessment of holistic and analytical scales in relation to different types of tests. (e.g. Cambridge tests) and focuses on the lexical components in these tests. She also presents critical views on these tests, descriptors and scales used for research purposes. What I find particularly interesting here is the critical discussion of the pragmatic aspects of testing, such as the influence of the type of testing task or evaluators' (subjective) approach to assessment. The author puts emphasis on the dangers resulting from lack of a theoretical basis for the tests as well as possible

subjectivity and the intuitive character of individual evaluator's assessments. In chapter four S*tatistical measures of lexical proficiency*, the author offers a thorough overview of the statistical methods used in lexical research as a reaction to the deficiency of tests using scales, descriptors and evaluators' comments. This overview starts with older statistical measures (e.g. Linnarud 1986) and moves on to updated ones in measuring fluency, lexical efficiency (Gajek 2006), accuracy (Housen, Kuiken 2009), complexity (Graesser, McNamara, Louwrse, Cai 2004), diversity/variation (McCarthy, Jarvis 2010) and lexical sophistication (Lindqvis *et al*. 2013). Of great interest here are the lesser-known methods used in computer-based lexical assessment such as Col-Metrix (based on COBUILD Corpus) or the MCR Pscycholingusitc Database. What is also worth emphasising is that Leńko-Szymańska sees the importance of researching collocational competence in language use, offering an overview of testing these phraseological units early on by means of learner corpora (Lorenz 1999, Nesselhauf 2005) and using more modern tools such as *Mutual Information* (Durrant, Schmitt 2009) or *CollGram* (Bestgen, Granger 2014). This chapter can be an important source for all researchers, but especially for teachers.

The theoretical considerations presented in chapters one to four are illustrated by a set of selected studies in chapter 5 *Lexical measures applied to L2 learner production – review of literature*, which constitutes a very thorough and coherently presented body of comments on these studies, which are grouped thematically around the focus of their objectives: level of lexical competence, statistical tools used or analytical studies of lexical competence. The author is importantly aware of changes in trends as to what is researched and how it is being researched, pointing out that at the moment it is not only assessment of the present state of lexical competence but also prediction of the lexical development of an individual that are the object of research attention. The overview offered takes a critical stance on these tests - as the author sees deficiencies in theoretical bases and the way indicators are used as visible flows.

Leńko-Szymańska's book not only demonstrates her knowledge in the field and her ability to assess different aspects of lexical competence in critical discussion; it also presents her own mixed-methods study in chapter 6. *The study*. The main aim of the study was to assess and compare the texts writtten by EFL learners at different levels of language competence and native speakers of English with reference to the indicators of lexical proficiency discussed above. The study consists of ten stages described by the statistical measures employed (e.g. correlations, regression analysis, etc), vocabulary tests and final assessment by the selected evaluators. The quantitative analysis (stages 1–9) is supplemented by a short qualitative analysis (stage 10). The research questions posed relate to the comparison of the range and specificity of vocabulary used in the argumentative essays written by upper-intermediate and advanced students of

English philology and native speakers of English, the role of vocabulary in statistical text assessment and evaluators' comments. Each stage of the data collection is scrupulously described and analysed. The only doubt one may have here is about the somewhat sketchy description of the sample - the profiles of subjects and evaluators and lack of instructions given to the evaluators in performing the assessment task. The quantitative data is complemented by qualitative comments which make the text more interesting and reader-friendly. I would like to point out one interesting aspect of the above-mentioned analysis, and that is the role of a culture component in text assessment which is so significant in the vocabulary choices of the writer. These comments were singled out in qualitative assessment of the evaluators, which most obviously points to the fact that the sole use of statistical measures deployed in lexical assessment, does not provide an adequate assessment measure. In the final chapter, chapter 7, *Conclusions*, the author provides answers to her research questions, emphasising that certain intuitive beliefs concerning the development of lexical competence in the case of non-native users of English (the students) were confirmed. Interestingly, the assessment of their written performances was higher than those of native speakers, which for a change did not follow the intuitive belief that native speakers of English would have a better-developed lexical competence. The most significant achievement of the theoretical discussion, an overview of studies and the author's own study, allowed Leńko-Szymańska to formulate a new model of lexical proficiency. This holistic model goes well beyond the traditional understanding of the concept, as it embraces such aspects as thematic knowledge, cognitive strategies and the ability to use vocabulary and the lexical quality level of a given text (spoken/written). What needs to be emphasised is that such a model of lexical proficiency caters both for educational purposes (the construction of lexical tests well-grounded in theory) and research purposes, allowing us to investigate the process of lexical development of a bi/ multilingual. This is undeniably a significant achievement.

Summing up the merits of this publication, first of all, its main achievement is developing a new understanding and definition of lexical competence from a holistic perspective. This proposed model is based not only on a fairly thorough and updated review of theory and empirical research, critically assessed by the author, and also on the results of the author's own study. Additionally, the author presents here an exhaustive description of assessment measures from the most traditional to the less orthodox (for example, computer-based tests), again taking a critical look at their reliability and validity in assessing lexical competence. There are some flaws in the book but they do not diminish significantly its value. In terms of its content, the most serious is lack of a more substantial overview of psycholinguistic perspectives on lexical competence In terms of the formal requirements of an academic text - it is a pity that it lacks both topic and author indices. This publication is the result of many years of research systematically

and meticulously carried out by Leńko-Szymańska and which can most definitely be considered a serious contribution to our awareness of lexical competence (and lexical proficiency) as a construct, as well as of possible ways of carrying out assessment in educational and research contexts. I would recommend this book mainly to second/multilingual language acquisition researchers as a source text and perhaps as an inspiration for their own research. It may also be of value to foreign language teachers and instructors as an informative guide on lexical test construction, test choice and the most reliable assessment measures.

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