Second Language Proficiency and Word Frequency in English

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This paper investigates word frequency as an indicator of language proficiency in the written English of Grade 13 learners of English in Hong Kong. The study develops Laufer and Nation's (1995) work involving the Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP), in which vocabulary profiles were produced from student writing on the basis of the frequency of the words. The current study extends Laufer and Nation's (1995) work from the perspective of the relationship of word frequency to a student's overall language proficiency. It is the development of a previous study (Coniam, 1999) which examined the methodology for obtaining student word frequency measures and procedures for achieving greater accuracy in data analysis. By examining the frequencies of the words used by students of different ability levels on a writing task and by correlating marker grade with word frequency through the use of an extensive tagged word-list compiled in the Bank of English, the current paper illustrates that more able students use significantly more low frequency words in their writing than less able students.

Introduction

The motivation for the study described in this paper centres around the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition, both productively and receptively. This paper focuses on the productive aspect and examines the extent to which ratings of student proficiency on a writing test correlate with range of vocabulary in terms of word frequency, that is, to what extent do more able students use less frequent words in their writing.

The value of vocabulary frequency research from a receptive perspective can be appreciated through the analysis of material in ESL students’ textbooks. There is often considerable disparity between the content vocabulary that is employed to convey/explain the language focus of a unit in a textbook, and the metalanguage — the language to talk about