

Second Language Proficiency and Word Frequency in English

David Coniam

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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.