

THE PRESENT APPROACH TO VOCABULARY TESTING IN EFL COURSE BOOKS

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Abstract

Vocabulary is an important aspect of language and communication skills. A good master of the target language vocabulary helps learners to know and use the target language effectively at all levels: phonetic, grammatical and semantic. This is because a complete knowledge of a word needs far more than simply recognizing the word or being able to give its meaning; it includes learning its: form (spoken and written form, word-parts), meaning (form and meaning, concepts and referents, associations) and use (grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on use).

Testing, a form of assessing learners' foreign language knowledge and competence, needs to be supportive of good language teaching and learning including vocabulary aspect. There are different kinds of vocabulary test tending to focus on different aspects of word knowledge. Since the aim of English language school program is to learn English for communicative purposes, this research aims to analyze the methodological features of some EFL course books used in Albanian secondary schools in order to probe into the main present approach to vocabulary testing and make proposals for English language teachers for an effective vocabulary testing and therefore its teaching and learning, referring to recent research of foreign language acquisition.

It is concluded that different EFL course books offer a structural approach to vocabulary testing: some course books offer activities that mainly focus on the comprehension of the form and meaning of target lexical items through reading skills, others include further activities focusing on other aspects of word knowledge through other communicative skills. It is recommended the use of a wide variety of formats needed to test a range of aspects of word knowledge. Foreign language teachers, especially those who are in lack of such course books, need to become familiar with different techniques that can help testing to have a beneficial backwash on teaching.

Keywords: vocabulary testing, approach, course book, aspect, format/operations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Course books are the most pervasive tool for classroom-based foreign language learning. They support and facilitate teaching and learning process by including a carefully planned and balanced selection of language content and by providing readymade texts and tasks with possible appropriate level for most of the class, which save time for the teacher (Ur, 1999). Besides, course books usually provide teachers and learners with a rubric called 'Self-assessment', 'Self Check' or 'Progress Check'. As it is known, this rubric includes different tasks which focus on the target language items presented in certain units of the course book. As such, it supports teaching and learning: it helps teachers to check their learners' achievements in learning a foreign language (FL); moreover, it helps learners themselves to know and recognize the

standards they are aiming for.

Testing, as one form of assessing learners' foreign language knowledge and competence, is widely used in the world, including Albania. In our country, it is usually a decisive means in assessing learners' language knowledge and competence, because of the relatively large (30-35 students) and mixed ability FL classes. Since the aim of EFL school program is to learn English for communicative purposes, it is important that course books provide teachers and learners with available practice materials for tests as to help them in the communicative language learning and teaching process.

This research aims to analyze some English language textbooks used in Albanian secondary schools in order to probe into the main present approach to vocabulary testing and make methodological proposals for English language teachers for an effective vocabulary testing, teaching and learning, referring to recent research of foreign language acquisition. The selected English course books may be used in other countries abroad or may have characteristics in common with other English course books; therefore the findings and the methodological proposals can be significant to other teachers of English as a FL abroad who use them in teaching and learning English communicatively. Moreover, the findings and the methodological proposals can be significant to teachers of other foreign languages who notice the same deficiencies in their foreign language course books and who view testing as a decisive means in assessing their learners' language knowledge and competence.

This study is limited to the selected course books published by Express Publishing.

2 THE BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

2.1 Aspects of word knowledge

When testing vocabulary it is important to consider what it means to know and learn a word. Many learners see vocabulary learning as mainly a matter of learning its meaning, so they devote a great deal of time to memorizing lists of FL words. Referring to Nation (2005), knowing a word is complex as it is not an isolated unit of the language; it fits into many interlocking systems and levels (phonetic, grammatical and semantic). As such, there are many things to know about any particular word from the view point of receptive and productive language knowledge and use: form (spoken and written form, word-parts), meaning (form and meaning, concepts and referents, associations) and use (grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on use) (Nation, 2005; Thornbury, 2008). Knowing and learning these aspects of word knowledge contributes to learning English for communicative purposes.

The spoken and written form: The lack of consistency between spelling and pronunciation makes it difficult (or impossible) to base pronunciation on the written form or vice-versa, not only for foreign learners but also for native speakers (Nation, 2005, p. 45). Unfamiliarity with correct pronunciation can result in failing to understand words in spoken English that the learner clearly understands in written English. Moreover, the stress in a word determines the lexical and grammatical meaning of the word (*/i'mport/-noun, /im'port/-verb.*), the length of a phoneme determines the lexical meaning of a word */ʃi:p/ - /ʃip/*, and one sound can be represented by one or more letters: */N/ (cut, come, country, blood, does).*

Word-parts: A known stem or affix facilitates the process of word learning and use; it helps the learner to: remember its meaning, recognize it in another context, make guesses about the meaning of unknown items and widen the learner's range of expression by using another word instead of the target one, unable to recall at a certain communicative situation.

Meaning: To understand a word fully, learners must know not only what it refers to, but also when the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (as synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, part-whole relations) (Gairns & Redman, 2004, p.13). Moreover, to avoid confusion, learners need to know that a word-form can have: several different meanings not closely related (homonymy: *a file* – for papers; a tool for cutting) and a referential (denotative) and a connotative meaning.

Grammatical function: In order to use a word correctly, it is necessary to know what part of speech it is and what grammatical patterns it can fit into. This is essential especially in English where: the same word form can be used as a different part of speech (*a book / to book a table*); the lexical choice, especially of verbs, determines the grammatical construction of the rest of the sentence: *Prices rose* (intransitive verb); *She enjoys music* (transitive verb); *I left the key at home* (complex-transitive verb). What is more, as in other languages, words, in a certain word class, are classified based on their grammatical features (regular/irregular verbs, countable/uncountable nouns, regular/irregular plural noun forms). Unfamiliarity with the irregular forms can result in incorrect learning and use by the learner.

Collocation involves knowing what a word typically occurs with [*The earth revolves (not circulates) around*

the sun]. Such word knowledge helps learners learn and use the target language correctly and fluently. In case of insufficient word collocation knowledge and under the influence of his mother tongue, the learner tends to use grammatically correct but unnatural linguistic sequences ('I took a decision' instead of 'I made a decision').

Constraints on use relates to the sociolinguistic factors (such as the relationship of the speaker to the speaker referred to, their social status, age and gender, the aim of communication, etc) which lead the language user to choose one word (of a certain style or register) rather than another (from another style or register) in a certain written or oral communicative situation. Failure to consider these can result in inappropriate language use.

This multi-dimensional character of the word knowledge needs to be considered in designing a short- or long-term achievement test that aims at testing the learners' ability to recognize and use the targeted vocabulary of the course books.

2.2 Approaches To Vocabulary Testing

The development of different theories and approaches of language learning and teaching has also affected the history of language and vocabulary testing.

Traditional linguistics, considering the language as a formal system and mental phenomenon, isolated from the communicative context, led to a structural (Hedge, 2000) or discrete-point (Reed, 2000) approach to language testing. It provided language teachers with a wealth of information about grammatical forms and the rules that govern them what served as a basis for syllabus design, materials preparation and classroom assessment for several decades. Testing involved designing tests to assess whether learners had knowledge of particular structural elements of the language; regarding vocabulary, it targeted word meanings, word forms, sentence patterns, sound contrasts and so on (Reed, 2000). It was typically done by means of isolated sentences, using techniques such as sentence unscrambling, fill-in-the-blanks, error correction, sentence completion, sentence combining, sentence transformation, table completion, picture description, elicited imitation, judging grammatical correctness and modified cloze passages (Larsen-Freeman, 2009, p. 533).

Such an approach as Reed (2000) noted, has had some criticism: it focuses entirely on the knowledge component of language ability; it tests receptive but not productive competence; it uses isolated sentences, but the meaning of a word is significantly influenced by the context in which it occurs; it ignores learners' ability in using words appropriately in their own speech and writing.

In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, language testers progressively moved away from this approach for proficiency assessment (Reed 2000). Hymes' theory of communication (1972) has had a great impact on both foreign language teaching and assessment approach: shifting the emphasis of language classrooms from a formal focus to a communication-based one. The contemporary linguistics, considering the language as a functional system and social phenomenon, has led to an integrative (Larsen-Freeman 2009: 533) or communicative (Hedge, 2000, p. 378; Reed, 2000) approach to language testing. Language proficiency, as McNamara and Roever (2006, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2009, p. 533) has noted, is not seen in terms of knowledge of structures, but in terms of the ability to integrate and use the language knowledge in performance, which could best be accessed through the production and comprehension of written texts and through face-to-face interaction. For this purpose, it has offered a language description that takes into consideration its different communicative contexts.

In this vein, an integrative or communicative test is based on tasks simulating communication activities that the learners are likely to be engaged in outside the classroom. Such tasks tend to measure learners' ability to integrate aspects of language knowledge during language use. They, unlike a discrete-point test, do not consider vocabulary or any other structural component of the language as the primary focus of the assessment, but language functions. However, even this approach cannot assess all the aspects of word knowledge; being focused on meaning, learners may be distracted to word form.

As either approach to language testing (structural or communicative) is limited in the abilities it can assess post-modern language testing aims to take the best of each two approaches (Spolsky (1999, p. 702). The choice of either testing (assessment) approach is greatly determined by the testing objective. If the testing goal is testing for partial vocabulary knowledge, then teachers need to choose test item types from either approach that require learners to use the kind of knowledge that they want to test, receptive or productive.

2.3 Kinds of Vocabulary Test Item

There are different kinds of vocabulary test item. Some have choices, some put the word in a sentence context, some use the first language, or some require the learner to use the word. Most of them target one or

two aspects of word knowledge (Thornbury, 2007, p. 130). Some focus on meaning, others focus on the word form, its grammar, collocations or associations. Referring to Nation (2005), Reed (2000), Spolsky (1999) and Thornbury (2007), the followings are typically used in vocabulary tests:

- Word level true/false test (asking learners to write T if a sentence is true, N if it is false, X if they do not understand it).
- A matching test (asking learners to match words/phrases based on the meaning / definition / collocation).
- Multiple-choice test (asking learners to decide which word option would best give the meaning of the underlined test word, or which would best fit in a phrase or incomplete sentence, or which would be stylistically most acceptable in answering a question).
- A (definition / phrase / sentence) completion test (asking learners to choose one from the list to complete the definition / phrase / sentence).
- Gap-fill tests require learners to recall and write any grammatically and semantically acceptable word from the memory in order to complete a sentence or text; a cloze text is the best example of this type (Thornbury, 2007, p. 134).
- Short or long open-ended questions requiring learners to answer them in order to check reading / listening comprehension.
- A translation test (asking learners to translate the words /phrases / sentences into their first language).
- Dictation (a passage is read aloud to students, with pauses, during which they must try to write down what they have heard as accurately as possible).
- Focused (guided) writing tasks (asking learners to write an article / a letter etc. based on a text or using some information provided from a map, a timetable, etc.).
- Group discussion, prepared talk and role playing in face-to-face tests of oral ability.

As Nation (2005, p. 345) noted, a good vocabulary test should have many different vocabulary test items which target different aspects of word knowledge. However, as we mentioned above, short- or long-term achievement tests should reflect the goals of testing and course teaching, so as they could be supportive to teaching. Based on the teacher and learners' need, the test can include more or less vocabulary test items from either approach that target some aspects of word knowledge realized receptively (in reading and listening) and/or productively (in speaking and writing).

3 WHAT APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES DO EFL COURSE BOOKS OFFER IN TESTING VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING?

3.1 Method

The research materials are four English language course books of foreign publishers, commonly used in teaching English as a FL in public Albanian secondary schools: *Access*, *Click on*, *Blockbuster* and *Wishes*. Further information about them and its target of study is given at the end of the paper.

Giving an answer to the research question, the following questions are considered while analyzing the activities given in the course book rubric 'Self-assessment', 'Self Check' or 'Progress Check'. The questions listed by Nation (2005) refer to the aspects of word knowledge for testing. They are useful and helpful for deciding what aspects of vocabulary knowledge are to be tested and what vocabulary test items are to be chosen.

- Spoken form: Can the learner recognize the spoken form of the word? Can the learner pronounce the word correctly?
- Written form: Can the learner recognize the written form of the word? Can the learner spell and write the word?
- Word parts: Can the learner recognize known parts in the word? Can the learner produce appropriate inflected and derived forms of the word?
- Form and meaning: Can the learner recall the appropriate meaning for this word form? Can the learner produce the appropriate word form to express this meaning?
- Concepts and referents: Can the learner understand a range of uses of the word and its central concept? Can the learner use the word to refer to a range of items?
- Associations: Can the learner produce common associations for this word? Can the learner recall this word when presented with related ideas?
- Grammatical functions: Can the learner recognize correct uses of the word in context? Can the learner use this word in the correct grammatical patterns?
- Collocations: Can the learner recognize appropriate collocations? Can the learner produce the word

with appropriate collocations?

- Constraints on use: Can the learner tell if the word is common, formal, infrequent, etc.? Can the learner use the word at appropriate times?

3.2 Findings And Discussion

Generally speaking all the selected course books include activities that are typically used in vocabulary tests; they provide the teacher with some information on the learners' progress related to different aspects of word knowledge. Let us see them in detail.

A completion test with phrases (as 2 in *Click On/Student's Book* and *Wishes*), or with discrete (de-contextualized) sentences (as 4 in *Click On/Student's Book*, 1 in *Wishes*, T1/A in *Blockbuster/Test booklet*), requiring learners to choose the word from the list that best fits in the phrase or sentence, is a receptive test exercise; it tests learners' ability to recognize the correct word collocation. When a completion test with sentences requires learners to recall the word from their memory (as 3 in *Click On/Student's Book*, 1 in *Click On/Workbook*), it tests the ability to produce a word rather than just recognize it; the sentence provides learners with a minimal context which is helpful in recalling the correct word meaning and written (grammatical) form. It is the same when a sentence completion test provides learners with a simple but incorrect form of the word (as exercise 6 in *Wishes*, 5 / 7 in *Click On/Student's Book*, 3/ 4 in *Access/Student's Book*, C/D in *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests*, 2 in *Blockbuster/Workbook & Grammar Book*, E in *Blockbuster/Test booklet*).

Moreover, a completion test is provided with a text (short dialogue). Requiring learners to choose from the list (8 in *Click On/Student's Book*, 5 in *Access/Student's Book*, E in *Access /Teacher's resource pack & tests*) or recall from their memory (3 in *Click On/Workbook*) to complete the questions or answers of the dialogue, it tests the ability to recognize or produce the right question and answer patterns used in everyday speech and the aspects of word knowledge (form, meaning and use), but through a controlled writing activity. Besides these, another example of such a test, but through listening skill, is included in *Click On/ Student's Book* (exercise 11). Requiring learners to complete the gaps (while listening) with the correct word, it tests learners' ability to identify the spoken form and write it (based on the comprehension of the text).

Matching test is another vocabulary test type used in the selected course books. It targets mainly the meaning and use aspects of word knowledge: Exercise 1 in *Access/Student's Book* requires learners to match words to form correct collocations; 1 in *Blockbuster/Student's Book* requires them to focus on word association; Test1/C, Test1/F, Test2/B in *Blockbuster/Test booklet* focuses respectively on word associations, question / answer patterns and meaning relations.

Double/multiple-choice tests exercise target the form besides meaning and use aspects of word knowledge; they are receptive tests. Exercise 1, 3 in *Blockbuster/Workbook & Grammar Book* test the ability to recognize the grammatical form and function of the lexical verbs; exercise 3, 4 in *Wishes* the grammatical form and collocation; exercise 2 in *Click On/Workbook* the word meaning and use aspects; exercise 2 in *Access/Student's Book* and B in *Access /Teacher's resource pack & tests* the meaning and collocation aspects of some adjectives; exercise 4 in *Blockbuster/Student's Book* tests the recognition of right question and answer patterns used in everyday speech.

The following writing test tasks assess productive contextualized word knowledge in a guided but not totally free manner: exercise 10 in *Click On/Student's Book*, Test1/H in *Blockbuster/Test booklet* and G in *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests* require learners to write a short article / description, based on a given model, by using some (detailed) prompts); exercise 2 in *Blockbuster/Student's Book* and Test 1/B in *Blockbuster/Test booklet* requires learners to write sentences based on a picture. They mainly test the written form, meaning, grammatical function and collocation of the targeted vocabulary. Such activities are important in leading learners towards realization of free communicative activities and a command of vocabulary knowledge for a real life purpose.

Besides the above activities, typically used in vocabulary tests, one or more of the selected course books include other kinds of test items where vocabulary knowledge testing is combined with communication skills testing.

- Controlled oral practice activities: exercise 1 in *Click On/Student's Book*; it targets the spoken form of the target vocabulary (requiring learners to practice saying the time given by figures).
- Meaningful controlled oral practice exercises: the second question in exercise 2 (*Click On/Student's Book*) tests learners' ability in using the target vocabulary productively by requiring them to use the completed phrases to talk about their personal experience.
- Jumbled paragraphs and literal reading comprehension questions: exercise 9 in *Click On/Student's Book* provides the teacher with information on different aspects of vocabulary knowledge (spoken

- form, word part, meaning, grammatical function and collocation) through reading skill.
- Literal reading comprehension questions: exercise F in *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests*, required to be answered in a written form, tests some receptive and productive word knowledge through reading and controlled writing.
 - Literal listening comprehension questions with multiple choice answers: exercise H in *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests* targets receptive word knowledge (spoken form and meaning).
 - Word completion with letters: Test 1/G in *Blockbuster/Test booklet* targets the written word form knowledge.
 - Listing or grouping items: T2/A/D in *Blockbuster/Test booklet* focus on meaning relations;
 - Listening for specific information: exercise I in *Blockbuster/Test booklet*.
 - Sentence transformation: exercise 5 in *Wishes* focuses on the correct grammatical patterns and collocations.

Considering all the activities, it should be noted that all the course books include tasks with discrete sentences focusing on the target vocabulary (language) of the respective units. The use of discrete sentences, characteristic of a structural approach to testing, provides a minimal context of word use. A wider context is more helpful for learners in doing the task correctly and therefore in being tested reliably and appropriately, as the meaning and use of a linguistic item is significantly influenced by the context in which it occurs (Weaver, 1996). In this vein it is recommended continuous texts opposed to discrete sentences in order to test learners' ability in recognizing all the aspects of word knowledge.

Isolated sentences are not recommended even in testing learners' ability in using the word. As Larsen-Freeman (2009, p. 533) noted, they are not considered effective in testing learners' FL knowledge and competence as they do not assess their ability in using the target language correctly in real-life communication.

Only four course books make use of a continuous text: *Click On/Student's Book*, *Access/Student's Book*, *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests*, *Blockbuster/Test booklet*. But the number of the activities with a continuous text is insignificant (usually one).

Similarly the number of the activities focusing on the aspects of word knowledge through oral speech is very limited. As Thornbury (2007, p. 130) stated, all the aspects of word knowledge can be realized receptively (in reading and listening) and productively (in speaking and writing). The inclusion of activities in oral and written form would help teachers in testing learners' language proficiency in both written and oral speech.

Most of the above mentioned activities used in the course books are controlled ones focusing mainly on the knowledge component of learners' language ability, representing another characteristic of a structural approach to testing. Free activities are only used in *Click On/Student's Book*, *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests* and *Blockbuster/Test booklet*, but again they are less in number comparing to the guided activities.

It is understandable the use of a range of well-known controlled item types (multiple choice, completion, translation, matching) to assess learners' progress in vocabulary learning because they are easy to write and score. But, since the aim of EFL education program is to learn English for communicative purposes, it is important that course books provide teachers and learners with available practice materials targeted for testing learners' vocabulary (language) proficiency. Based on the recent research, such materials should include a wide variety of formats (of either testing approach) needed to test a range of aspects of word knowledge. In case of the lack of such materials, teachers should use other forms (see Hedge, 2000 and Spolsky 1999) of assessing learners' foreign language knowledge and competence, besides testing.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the methodological features of some EFL course books related to vocabulary testing, it is concluded that they mainly offer a structural approach. Most of the test items target word meanings, word forms, phrase or sentence patterns, by means of isolated sentences; these sentences are not considered effective in testing learners' FL knowledge and competence as they do not assess their ability in using the target language correctly in real-life communication. Though some of the course books make use of test items with a continuous text, their number is insignificant.

Similarly, most of the test items (multiple choice, completion, matching, transformation, picture description) are controlled ones focusing mainly on the knowledge component of learners' language ability; free activities (as a writing task) are less in number comparing to the guided activities and they are used only in some course books (*Click On/Student's Book*, *Access/Teacher's resource pack & tests* and

Blockbuster/Test booklet). In this way receptive rather than productive competence of the EFL learners is tested.

Moreover, most of the test items target aspects of word knowledge through written rather than oral speech. Since the aim of EFL education program is to learn English for communicative purposes, based on the recent research, it is important that course books provide teachers and learners with available practice materials that include a wide variety of test items (of either testing approach) needed to test a range of aspects of word knowledge and competence in both written and oral speech. In case of the lack of such materials, it is the teachers' responsibility to design them what is a real and current challenge to EFL teachers when using only this format of assessment. Otherwise, teachers need to find and use other effective techniques in order to respond to the communicative model of vocabulary teaching and testing. However, FL teachers' decision on how to test vocabulary has to be taken individually, based on their testing goals and situation and professional judgment. What is recommended is a simultaneous and supplementary focus on both accuracy and fluency of language use.

Since this study is limited to the above selected course books, future study can be carried out by covering a larger number of EFL course books including different publishers in order to have a clearer and wider view of the present approach to vocabulary testing in EFL course books all over the world.

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