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CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG LEARNERS' GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE BASIC VOCABULARY

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated 12-13 year old students' German (FL) basic vocabulary. According to literature, students should acquire the most frequent words of a language at the beginning of learning. Pictures can be used in acquisition of words, as well as in the assessment of students' vocabulary. This research aimed at assessing of 6th and 7th grade students' word knowledge with visual stimuli. The study focused on the similarities and differences among the beginners' and advanced students' performances, and on the characteristics of their vocabulary patterns. Six tests of an online test battery were developed for the assessment. 443 6th grade and 389 7th grade students were involved in the measurement.

There are no significant differences among the students' performances on the tests in the same grades. But the 7th graders achieved significantly better than 6th graders. Based on the strong correlation between the test performances and the length and intensity of language learning, the groups of „beginners” and „advanced learners” were compared. The variance analyses based on the characteristics of the tests and of the words in tasks show significant differences between younger beginners' performances and the others'. The beginners' vocabulary is mainly at level A1 with the dominance of the nouns. The word knowledge of the advanced groups is richer. The 7th graders know more A2 level and less frequent words.

The online vocabulary test measures students' German vocabulary independently of the learning context. A detailed analysis of the scores offers guidelines for further development.

EXTENDED SUMMARY

The present study investigated 6th and 7th grade (12-13 year old) students' German basic word knowledge. An online test battery was developed and applied that is capable of assessing the students' vocabulary by visual stimuli. The characteristics of students' vocabulary patterns may be explored independently from the context of language learning. The main questions of this study: How do the students perform on the test in consideration of certain background factors? What similarities and differences can be identified according to test characteristics in the results of the sub-samples created on the basis of the same length and intensity of language learning? What are the characteristics of beginners' and advanced students' vocabulary patterns?

Students' vocabulary has been identified as one of the most important conditions of reading proficiency and of academic language skills (Qian, 2002). According to Nation (2001), students should directly acquire the most frequent words of a foreign language at the beginning of language learning to be able to take part in everyday conversations and to read everyday texts. Selected vocabulary for young learners must have a high level of

demonstrability, e.g. pictures can help learners to memorize words (Kersten, 2010). Pictures can also be used in the assessment of children's vocabulary (Dunn and Dunn, 1997). Tests of vocabulary size are useful tools for diagnostic purposes (Meara, 2009). They allow teachers to identify and remedy deficiencies in their students' vocabulary.

The size of 6th and 7th grade students' word knowledge was assessed by using an online context independent test with visual stimuli. The words to be assessed were selected according to the frequency of words (the 3,000 most frequent words; Tschirner, 2008), the descriptors (basic level A1, A2) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the recommendations of the national curriculum. Six equivalent test versions were administered. Each version had the same structure and contained 30 tasks. Each task contained a picture and 4 words. The students were asked to decide, one by one, whether the words fitted the picture or not. The reliability figures (Cronbach's alphas) of the test versions ranged between 0.88 and 0.92. 443 6th grade and 389 7th grade students were involved in the online assessment. Typically, the students started to learn German either in Grade 1 (46%) or in Grade 4 (33%). The major part of students has either five (40%) or three (38%) classes per week at school. The measurement was conducted by using the eDia online assessment system in February 2014.

The results show that (1) there are no significant differences among the means and the standard deviations of the students' test performances of the same grades (6th graders: 71–75%, SD:11–12%; 7th graders: 74–78%, SD:10–13%). However, when comparing the different grades, the 7th graders achieved significantly better than the 6th graders ($p < 0.001$). A strong correlation has been verified between the test performances and the length and intensity of learning German ($r_6 = 0.53$, $r_7 = 0.37$; $p < 0.01$). These two factors together strongly explain the variation of the test performances especially in the case of the 6th graders (32%). (2) Regarding the length and intensity of German language learning, two comparable subsamples per grade were identified: two groups of „beginners” (length: 2,5–3,5 years, number of classes: 2–3/week; $N_6 = 132$, $N_7 = 126$) and those of „advanced learners” (length: 5,5–6,5 years, number of classes: 5/week; $N_6 = 150$, $N_7 = 120$). There are significant differences between the means (14%) and the standard deviations of the beginners and the advanced learners ($p < 0.001$). The results of the variance analysis based on test characteristics (task solving operation, picture type and task structure) show that according to all factors, the younger beginners performed significantly lower (around 65%) than the others. The means (around 80% or above) and standard deviations of both advanced groups, according to the operations (identification/implication) and task characteristics (simple/complex pictures, the number of matching words) do not significantly differ from each other. (3) The examination of students' vocabulary patterns strengthened and explains the differences according to test features. According to the factors examined (A1/A2 levels, parts of speech, word frequency), the beginners' vocabulary is mainly at level A1 and it consists mainly of content words with the dominance of the nouns. Students recognised relatively few words (around 70% or below) in the different frequency ranges. The word knowledge of advanced students is characterised by the enrichment of word classes in their vocabulary (nouns, verbs, adjectives, numerals and function words) and by that of words above the frequency rank of 1000. Generally, there are no significant differences between the vocabulary patterns of the two advanced groups, but 7th graders know more A2 level and less frequent words.

The vocabulary test measures the basic German word knowledge independently of the learning context. The online diagnostic assessment provides the students and teachers immediate feedback on the efficiency of the test. A detailed analysis of the individual differences in the students' test scores offers the teachers guidelines for the further development of students' vocabulary.

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