

Keyword Decoding Reliability for News B1-level Reading Comprehension

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This case study aims to examine the possible relationship between the comprehension of keywords in on-line news and some reading difficulties found in a group of intermediate (B1 level) learners of Business English. There seems to be a mismatch between these learners' language levels, with a certain vocabulary knowledge for comprehension, and their actual performance in reading authentic news texts. A common phenomenon is that they tend to confuse meanings in keywords, which leads to misunderstanding, as these items play pivotal roles to define or refer to concepts and ideas. The contradiction is that such learners may feel comfortable with their lexical level for reading comprehension, but this level may be ineffective or insufficient for news reading. One issue examined in these comprehension problems is the type of lexical approach when decoding keywords: Do these students find problems with lexical meaning, part of speech, syntactic function, or are there any other linguistic / extra-linguistic factors involved? The aim is to analyse the possible correlations between vocabulary problems and reading comprehension from a corpus-based keyword analysis perspective, since a major comprehension focus lies on the effective decoding of main thematic word forms (cf. Scott, 2000a; Scott, 2000b; Scott, 2010).

The type of problems the students face when reading can be found at the interlinguistic stage, e.g., L1 transfer problems may cause vocabulary misuse, or at the intercultural level, e.g., insufficient knowledge of international references and codes (cf. House and Blum-Kulka, 1986). Both types of conflict are observed in the B1 Business English learners of this case study when they are tested on their interpretation of news keywords. To cope with this assessment, a corpus is used, containing different news texts from both English and Spanish on-line newspapers. The purpose of this selection is to be able to offer a contrast of both news discourses to check inter-language and inter-culture issues. Both English and Spanish keywords, statistically extracted from the two corpora, serve as inter-linguistic and -cultural information for the design of keyword-driven reading comprehension tests and activities. The key data from the corpora is also used as measurement reference in the computation of results.

In the process of designing the material with news-based key items, the goal is to observe where comprehension difficulty may be prominent. For instance, the general word meaning level (i.e., non-keyword meaning) may sometimes lead to ambiguity, but, more often in our case study, a more specific meaning conflict involving concepts and ideas (i.e., keyword reference) appears, and this may complicate decoding at the lexical-grammatical stage, or at the POS (part of speech) disambiguation level (cf. Allen, 2009).

Different tests and activities are designed for the correlation of results: The students have to answer comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises in pre-tests, class work, and post-tests, so that the scores in pre-tests may be compared with those in post-tests after the effect (or non-effect) of dependent variables. The activities involve part of speech, case, and contextual questions regarding such news-based keywords.

The case study comprises 18 students from first year Business English, all with a similar language command (B1), who are divided into two groups to do the same tests.

However, nine students did more explicit work on corpus-based keyword management and data-driven learning before taking the post-test, while the other group explored lexical items in news in a more traditional fashion (e.g., observing headlines and themes / rhemes in the texts). The objective was to check if there may be any quantitative and qualitative changes / differences between the groups in terms of the types of approaches made to the vocabulary (cf. Meara, 1996; Fairclough, 2011).

This keyword-based analysis mainly seeks to examine why the B1 vocabulary knowledge may not be enough, on its own, for the comprehension of key ideas and concepts in news texts on the web. The lack of effective comprehension in these texts cannot be due to size (200-300 words) or subject complexity (general international news) alone, but to other variables related to semantic / extra-linguistic references in the texts. I find that different variables should be cross-checked, to try to answer what special linguistic and extra-linguistic traits, if any, should not be obviated for the successful reading comprehension of international news texts.

References

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