Starting with a clean slate: Innovations in testing vocabulary size

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Vocabulary testing is deeply rooted in conventionalized traditions, with most tests still conceptualized as paper-pencil tests, using word families as the counting unit, recycling old test formats without criticality, and using outdated frequency lists for sampling.

This talk will outline the process of developing a new computer-adaptive measure of vocabulary size, which has attempted to start from a clean slate and base its development decisions on empirically-founded rationales. Four key concerns in these stages will be presented.

1) Based on a study on 99 EFL learners, the interpretability of four different test formats for discrete vocabulary tests will be explored. On the basis of the results, multiple choice formats will be recommended as the most useful item type.

2) Using data from the same study, the word family is challenged as a counting unit for vocabulary tests. The study shows that even if learners know one or more members of a word family, they do not necessarily know all of its members. Findings from this comparison of learners’ knowledge of root forms with their knowledge of the entire word family will suggest the lemma as a better counting unit.

3) Using coverage figures of frequency lists from 4 different corpora, the talk will also suggest that the frequency continuum should not be divided into static bands of exactly 1,000 for all purposes. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to frequency division, more narrowly defined bands appear to be more useful for higher frequencies, while wider bandings can be perfectly workable for lower frequencies.

4) Incorporating the findings from studies 1-3 into an online test environment, the results from the piloting of an innovative testing instrument (N=180) will be reported, particularly probing the success of the computer-adaptiveness of the measure.

Keywords: innovations, vocabulary, testing.