Dictionary use as reading comprehension

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To date, research has approached dictionary use as a reading comprehension aid. The present study, in contrast, examined the dictionary consultation process as reading for information (The DIALANG Assessment Framework, cited in Alderson, 2005), and investigated how large a vocabulary is needed for successful dictionary use, given that the defining vocabulary in English monolingual dictionaries comes mainly from the 1st to 3rd 1000 most frequent words (Nation, 2015). As lexical knowledge is considered one of the central components of reading comprehension in general, it was assumed that learners with larger vocabularies would succeed better in finding lexical items and choosing a fitting option for the context. With access to online information sources, a group of Finnish upper secondary school students were asked to complete two texts according to Finnish prompts so that the additions fitted the context and register. The success rates were then compared against the students’ vocabulary knowledge measured by the Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) prior to the experiment, and correlated with the scores in a high stakes reading test. The overall findings indicated that the look-up success differed significantly between Low, Average and High proficiency groups. With regard to separate lexical items, no significant difference was detected between High and Average proficiency students, whereas all the three groups were different from one another in locating formulaic sequences. The correlation between the accepted responses and the reading scores remained weak.


Keywords: reading comprehension, online dictionary, vocabulary size.