The influence of cognates on Dutch pupils’ English vocabulary scores in the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

Claire Goriot¹, Mirjam Broersma¹, Roeland Van Hout¹, Sharon Unsworth¹, James M. McQueen²

¹Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University, Netherlands
²Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition & Behaviour, Radboud University, Netherlands

To investigate English vocabulary, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT; Dunn, 1959) is often used. In this study, we examined whether cognates in the PPVT influence the vocabulary scores of young learners of English. This test is used increasingly, as early foreign language education, and especially early English education, has become increasingly popular in Europe. Over the last decade, the number of primary schools that provide children with early English lessons, often from kindergarten onwards, has grown. Many studies (see for example Goorhuis-Brouwer & de Bot, 2010) have focused on the question whether this type of education leads to a better proficiency in English, especially English vocabulary. We administered the PPVT (4th edition) to 204 Dutch pupils who were at the beginning, halfway or the end of primary school. Approximately half of them attended an early English school and had received English lessons since kindergarten, the other half attended a school in which English lessons were given in the higher grades only. Cognate status of items in the PPVT-4 was examined by three measures: orthographic Levenshtein distance, phonetic Levenshtein distance, and subjective ratings. We investigated how these measures were related to each other, and how each of them influenced pupils’ vocabulary scores. It was found that scores were positively influenced by cognate status, such that pupils perform better on cognate than on non-cognate items. We conclude that researchers should be careful using the PPVT in a cross-linguistic study, because children with a Germanic mother tongue may be favoured over children with a non-Germanic mother tongue.


Keywords: second language learning, cognates, early English education, language testing.