

TESTING  
VOCABULARY



## Testing vocabulary

### *Why test vocabulary?*

Similar reasons may be advanced for testing vocabulary in proficiency tests to those used to support the inclusion of a grammar section (though vocabulary has its special sampling problems). However, the arguments for a separate component in other kinds of test may not have the same strength. One suspects that much less time is devoted to the regular, conscious teaching of vocabulary than to the similar teaching of grammar. If there is little teaching of vocabulary, it may be argued that there is little call for achievement tests of vocabulary. At the same time, it *is* to be hoped that vocabulary *learning* is taking place. Achievement tests that measure the extent of this learning (and encourage it) perhaps do have a part to play in institutional testing. For those who believe that systematic teaching of vocabulary is desirable, vocabulary achievement tests are appreciated for their backwash effect.

The usefulness (and indeed the feasibility) of a general diagnostic test of vocabulary is not readily apparent. As far as placement tests are concerned, we would not normally require, or expect, a particular set of lexical items to be a prerequisite for a particular language class. All we would be looking for is some general indication of the adequacy of the student's vocabulary. The learning of specific lexical items in class will rarely depend on previous knowledge of other, specified items. One alternative is to use a published test of vocabulary. The other is to construct one's own vocabulary proficiency test.

## *Testing for language teachers*

### *Writing specifications*

How do we specify the vocabulary for an achievement test? If vocabulary is being consciously taught, then presumably all the items thereby presented to the students should be included in the specifications. To these we can add all the new items that the students have met in other activities (reading, listening, etc.). Words should be grouped according to whether their recognition or their production is required. A subsequent step is to group the items in terms of their relative importance.

We have suggested that a vocabulary placement test will be in essence a proficiency test. The usual way to specify the lexical items that may be tested in a proficiency test is to make reference to one of the published word lists that indicate the frequency with which the words have been found to be used (see Further reading).

### *Sampling*

Words can be grouped according to their frequency and usefulness. From each of these groups, items can be taken at random, with more being selected from the groups containing the more frequent and useful words.

### *Writing items*

#### Testing recognition ability

This is one testing problem for which multiple choice can be recommended without too many reservations. For one thing, distractors are usually readily available. For another, there seems unlikely to be any serious harmful backwash effect, since guessing the meaning of vocabulary items is something that we would probably wish to encourage. However, the writing of successful items is not without its difficulties.

Items may involve a number of different operations on the part of the candidates:

#### *Recognise synonyms*

Choose the alternative (a, b, c or d) which is closest in meaning to the word on the left of the page.

*gleam*      a. gather      b. shine      c. welcome      d. clean

The writer of this item has probably chosen the first alternative because of the word *gleam*. The fourth may have been chosen because of the similarity of its sound to that of *gleam*. Whether these distractors would work as intended would only be discovered through trialling.

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Note that all of the options are words that the candidates are expected to know. If, for example, *welcome* were replaced by *groyne*, most candidates, recognising that it is the meaning of the stem (gleam) on which they are being tested, would dismiss *groyne* immediately.

On the other hand, the item could have a common word as the stem with four less frequent words as options:

*shine*      a. malm      b. gleam      c. loam      d. snarl

The drawback to doing this is the problem of what distractors to use. Clearly they should not be too common, otherwise they will not distract. But even if they are not common, if the test taker knows them, they will not distract. This suggests that the first method is preferable.

Note that in both items it is the word *gleam* that is being tested.

### Recognise definitions

*loathe* means

- a. dislike intensely
- b. become seriously ill
- c. search carefully
- d. look very angry

Note that all of the options are of about the same length. It is said that test-takers who are uncertain of which option is correct will tend to choose the one which is noticeably different from the others. If *dislike intensely* is to be used as the definition, then the distractors should be made to resemble it. In this case the writer has included some notion of intensity in all of the options.

Again the difficult word could be one of the options, although the concern expressed above about this technique applies here too.

One word that means to *dislike intensely* is

- a. growl
- b. screech
- c. sneer
- d. loathe

Thrasher (Internet) believes that vocabulary is best tested in context and, referring to the first edition of this book, suggests that a better way to test knowledge of *loathe* would be:

Bill is someone I *loathe*.

- a. like very much
- b. dislike intensely
- c. respect
- d. fear

For the moment, I leave it to the reader to consider whether the provision of context makes an improvement.

## Testing for language teachers

### Recognise appropriate word for context

Context, rather than a definition or a synonym, can be used to test knowledge of a lexical item.

The strong wind \_\_\_\_\_ the man's efforts to put up the tent.

- a. disabled      b. hampered      c. deranged      d. regaled

Note that the context should not itself contain words that the candidates are unlikely to know.

Having now presented an item testing vocabulary in context myself, I return to Thrasher's suggested improvement. It could be argued that, since learners and language users in general normally meet vocabulary in context, providing context in an item makes the task more authentic and perhaps results in a more valid measure of the candidate's ability. The context may help activate a memory of the word, in the same way as meeting it when reading in a non-test situation. It may also be said that there could be some negative backwash when words are presented in isolation. However, when we test vocabulary *by means of multiple choice*, the range of possible distractors will be wider if words are presented in isolation. In Thrasher's item, I suspect that the difference in length between the first two and the second two options would encourage candidates who don't know the word to choose a or b, thereby increasing the possibility of a correct response by guessing. I have to admit that I know of no systematic research that has compared test performance on vocabulary items with and without context.

### Testing production ability

The testing of vocabulary productively is so difficult that it is practically never attempted in proficiency tests. Information on receptive ability is regarded as sufficient. The suggestions presented below are intended only for possible use in achievement tests.

#### *Pictures*

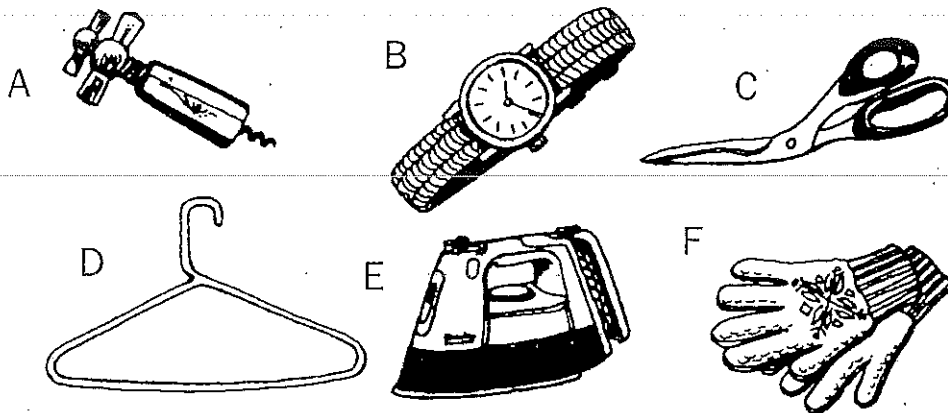
The main difficulty in testing productive lexical ability is the need to limit the candidate to the (usually one) lexical item that we have in mind, while using only simple vocabulary ourselves. One way round this is to use pictures.

Each of the objects drawn below has a letter against it. Write down the names of the objects:

A .....

Testing grammar and vocabulary

- B .....
- C .....
- D .....
- E .....
- F .....



This method of testing vocabulary is obviously restricted to concrete nouns that can be unambiguously drawn.

*Definitions*

This may work for a range of lexical items:

A ..... is a person who looks after our teeth.

..... is frozen water.

..... is the second month of the year.

But not all items can be identified uniquely from a definition: any definition of say *feeble* would be unlikely to exclude all of its synonyms. Nor can all words be defined entirely in words more common or simpler than themselves.

*Gap filling*

This can take the form of one or more sentences with a single word missing.

Because of the snow, the football match was \_\_\_\_\_ until the following week.



## Testing for language teachers

I \_\_\_\_\_ to have to tell you this, Mrs Jones, but your husband has had an accident.

Too often there is an alternative word to the one we have in mind. Indeed the second item above has at least two acceptable responses (which was not intended when it was written!). This problem can be solved by giving the first letter of the word (possibly more) and even an indication of the number of letters.

I r\_\_\_\_\_ to have to tell you ...

or I r \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ to have to tell you.

Again, moderation of items is necessary and the checklist in Chapter 7 can be used, possibly with minor modifications.

### Postscript

This chapter should end with a reminder that while grammar and vocabulary contribute to communicative skills, they are rarely to be regarded as ends in themselves. It is essential that tests should not accord them too much importance, and so create a backwash effect that undermines the achievement of the objectives of teaching and learning where these are communicative in nature.

### Reader activities

Construct items to test the following:

- Conditional: *If .... had ....., .... would have ....*
- Comparison of equality.
- Relative pronoun *whose*.
- Past continuous: *... was -ing, when ...*

Which of the techniques suggested in the chapter suits each structure best? Can you say why?

Can you see anything wrong with the following multiple choice items taken from tests written by teachers (use the checklist given as Table 1 in Chapter 7)? If so, what? Try to improve them.

a) I said to my friend ' \_\_\_\_\_ be stupid.'

Isn't      Aren't      Didn't      Don't be

b) What \_\_\_\_\_ you do, if your car broke down?

must      did      shall

Testing grammar and vocabulary

- c) You are too thin. You should eat.....  
many      more      a few
- d) – I'm sorry that the child saw the accident.  
– I don't think it matters. He soon \_\_\_\_\_ it.  
is forgetting    forgets    will forget    will be forgetting
- e) People \_\_\_\_\_ in their reaction to the same stimulus.  
replace      vary      upset      very

Produce three vocabulary tests by writing three items for each of the following words. One set of items should be multiple choice *without* context; one set should be multiple choice *with* context; the third set should be gap filling. Give each test to a different (but comparable) group of students. Compare performance on items testing the same word. Can differences of performance be attributed to a difference in technique?

beard	sigh	bench	deaf	genial
tickle	weep	greedy	mellow	callow

(If the words are inappropriate for your students, replace them with others.)

### Further reading

For a highly detailed taxonomy of notions and functions and their grammatical and lexical realisations, see van Ek and Trim (2001a, b and c). I have also found Collins Cobuild (1992) useful in writing specifications. A thorough study of vocabulary assessment (going beyond testing) is Read (2000). It includes methods of assessing both size (breadth) and quality (depth) of knowledge. Read and Chapelle (2001) proposes a framework for vocabulary assessment. A new book of word frequencies is Leech et al (2001). It gives information for spoken and written varieties of English. West (1953) is a standard word list of high frequency words learners should know. Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English mark words according to their frequency in the language.

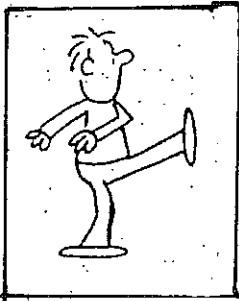
1. This technique is no longer used in the FCE.

# TESTING VOCABULARY

## Item Types for Discussion and Practice

### Multiple-Choice Items

**TYPE 1.** The stem is a picture.



- A. running
- B. rumping
- C. standing
- D. kicking



- A. ....
- B. ....
- C. ....
- D. ....

**TYPE 2.** The stem is the definition.

- A person who receives and pays out money in a bank.

- A. A.broker      B. accountant      C. creditor      D. cashier

- Wildly excited with joy, pain, anxiety, etc.

- A. frantic      B. fickle      C.      D.

**TYPE 3.** The stem is the target word while its synonym or its meaning is given within the options.

- *advocate* means ;

- A. support      B. advise      C. contradict      D. damage

- *dilatory* means;
  - growing gradually larger
  - slow in getting things done
  - showing care and effort
  - heavy with drops of water

- *eligible* means;

- A. suitable      B. famous      C. ....      D. ....  
 B.

#### TYPE 4. Multiple-Choice Paraphrase Items

The target word is given within a context.

**TASK.** Discuss the distractors in the following items. / Suggest appropriate distractors where they are missing.

1. The child was frightened of being left alone in the dark room.

- A. annoyed      B. ashamed      C. terrified      D. dismayed

2. The child was frightened of being left alone in the dark room.

- A. made someone angry  
 B. feeling shame  
 C. attacked suddenly  
 D. filled with fear

3. It's rained continuously for two whole days.

- A. without stopping      C. ....  
 B. heavily      D. ....

4. stem 1. *contemptuous* means ;

- A. deep in thought      C. self-satisfied  
 B. without a sense of humour      D. scornful

stem 2. John was contemptuous of the efforts of his friends to raise some money for thye charity.

5. \* *theatrical* means ;

- A. angry    B. histrionic    C. proud    D. foolish

6. \* *suffice* means ;

- A. be adequate    B. harras    C. acquiesce    D. be contrite

7. \* The old woman was always courteous when anyone spoke to her.

- A. Polite    B. glad    C. kind    D. pleased

8. \* *ascend* means ;

- A. go up    B. talk    C. come down    D. fetch

9. \* He began to choke while he was eating the fish.

- A. die  
B. cough and vomit  
C. be unable to breathe because of something in the windpipe  
D. grow very angry

10. the target word ; *apparition*

Which item is better ?

item 1

- A. skeleton  
B. ghost  
C. nightmare  
D. ....

item 2

- A. scenery  
B. ghost  
C. magician  
D. ....

11. She came to the party in a hideous dress.

- A. a nice    B. an old    C. a very large    D. a very ugly

## TYPE 5. Multiple-Choice Completion Items

TASK . Discuss the following items.

1. **Item 1.** I saw an \_\_\_\_\_ between two cars this morning.

- A. happening      B. danger      C. damage      D. accident

**Item 2.** I saw a nasty \_\_\_\_\_ between two cars this morning.

2. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ of getting a new job. I don't like my present one.

- A. contemplating      B. thinking      C. desiring      D. hoping

3. Your cousin \_\_\_\_\_ me of a girl I used to know.

- A. reminds      B.      C.      D.

4. **Item 1.** She says she would write an English course book if she could find a \_\_\_\_\_ to deal with the less interesting parts.

- A. reader      B. tailor      C. lithographer      D. collaborator

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- A. a vet      B. an idiot      C. an ace      D. a collaborator

## COLLOCATIONS

5. Dr. Brown charges a high \_\_\_\_\_ for his services.

- A. fee      B. profit      C. salary      D. payment

6. I don't believe you: I think you're \_\_\_\_\_ lies.

- A. telling      B.      C.      D.

7. The girl cried out with \_\_\_\_\_ at her birthday present that her friend gave her.

- A. delight      B. horror      C. dismay      D. anger

**TASK.** Suggest appropriate distractors for the following.

Paul : Can you tell me what time the doctor's (1) \_\_\_\_\_ opens?

Mrs. Lee : It's open now. The (2) \_\_\_\_\_ will help you.

Paul : Excuse me. I just want to collect a (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Mrs. Lee : Is it for some (4) \_\_\_\_\_ for a headache?

Paul : No, it's for some cough (5) \_\_\_\_\_.

Mrs. Lee : Here it is. This should soon (6) \_\_\_\_\_ your bad cough.

(1). A. office      B. surgery      C. hospital      D. ward

(2). A. porter      B.      C.      D.

(3) A.      B.      C.      D.

(4) A.      B.      C.      D.

(5) A.      B.      C.      D.

(6) A.      B.      C.      D.

**TYPE 6.**

**Instruction :**

1. The teacher \_\_\_\_\_ me what to do.

A. told      B. explained to      C. suggested to      D. said

2. I can always \_\_\_\_\_ my assistant.

A. count on      B. rely on      C. depend on      D. trust on

3. I \_\_\_\_\_ an old friend yesterday.

A.      B.      C.      D.

## ITEM TYPES WITH SETS OF WORDS ( ASSOCIATED WORDS)

### TYPE I.

#### Instruction :

son	happy	arrive
father	married	depart
boy	engaged	go away
brother	single	leave

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### TYPE 2:

#### Instruction :

hand	theatre	volume	.....	.....
wrist	sister	track	.....	.....
dial	bed	head	.....	.....
face	ward	spool	.....	.....
[= watch ]	[=	]	[=	] [= space ] [=camera]

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### TYPE 3.

#### Instruction :

They lived in a band – usually of between fifty and a hundred people. Each band had exclusive rights to a particular hunting area, and no other band was able to hunt there without permission. Each band was composed of families related through the male line and the man who led them was the hunter who had the greatest experience of the hunting groups. Each man married a woman from another band and his sister would also marry men outside his band. In this way, bands in a neighbourhood were linked by ties of marriage and so tended to cooperate with each other in hunting and other tasks.



groups	:	.....	owned	:	.....
specific	:	.....	made up	:	.....
chief	:	.....	knowledge	:	.....
similarly	:	.....	close to each other	:	.....
were inclined	:	.....	work together	:	.....

### Word-Formation Test Items

1. CARE. Be ..... when you cross the street.
2. INTEREST Do you think this book is .....?

### Items Involving Synonyms

- a. Tom went at once to the doctor's -----*immediately*  
All of a sudden, there was a loud cry. -----*suddenly*
- b. early - soon - moon  
miserable - ..... - bad  
purchase - ..... - .....

### Completion Items

- a. Snakes are one of the (1) d\_m\_n\_ \_ t groups of (2) r\_pt\_ \_ \_ \_ :  
There are at least 20000 different (3) sp\_c\_ \_ \_ s of snakes.
- b. A. What's the (1) today? (1) .....
- B. It's the seventh.
- A. At what (2) does the concert (2) .....  
start ?
- B. Seven o'clock, I think. Just a  
moment. I made a note of it  
in my (3) (3).....

