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The Relative Contribution of Grammar and Vocabulary to Explaining Reading Test Performance

This paper discusses the relative contribution of grammar and vocabulary knowledge to explaining performance on reading tests. In the past, language knowledge, often represented by vocabulary only, has been found to be an important predictor for reading. Studies that compared the relative contribution of both grammar and vocabulary, almost all concluded that vocabulary is the stronger predictor of the two (e.g. Bossers, 1992; Brisbois, 1995; Yamashita, 1999). As an exception, Shiotsu and Weir (2007) found that grammar is a stronger predictor for reading test performance. They found this for EFL readers from a variety of L1 backgrounds, FL learning experiences and EFL proficiency levels, using structural equation modelling (SEM). Shiotsu and Weir sought explanations for the diverging findings in research methodology and choice of statistical techniques. E.g. they speculated that if previous studies (with vocabulary prevailing) had used SEM instead of conventional multiple regression analysis (MR), their conclusions would have been reversed. To further clarify the inconclusive issue of the relative contribution, and of the impact of analysis techniques, the present paper discusses a study looking into the predictive power of the two language variables for FL and L1 reading test performance, comparing SEM and MR results (Brunfaut, 2008). With both techniques, vocabulary was found to outperform grammar in predictive power for reading test performance. The findings confirm the important contribution of both variables for explaining reading test performance and the findings of most studies (that vocabulary prevails), but contradict Shiotsu and Weir's assumption on the impact of analysis technique.