Book review

A. Leńko-Szymańska. *Defining and Assessing Lexical Proficiency*. New York: Routledge, 2019. 276 pp. ISBN 9780367337926 (hbk) £115.

Reviewed by: Jun Wang iD, *Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, China*
Jason Fan iD, *University of Melbourne, Australia*

Vocabulary has long been recognized as an indispensable component in models of communicative language ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). Recent years have witnessed a noticeable surge of interest in second language (L2) vocabulary research across related linguistic disciplines, perhaps as a result of the advancement in computer technology, especially language corpora and computational statistics, which has prompted rapid development in the statistical measures of vocabulary use. However, despite these advances, some fundamental questions in vocabulary assessment such as "what to assess" and "how to assess" still warrant substantial attention (Beglar & Nation, 2014). Leńko-Szymańska's *Defining and Assessing Lexical Proficiency* has a strong emphasis on addressing the fundamental questions in vocabulary assessment and represents a timely addition to the current literature.

The book comprises eight chapters. Besides the opening and closing chapters, which provide a succinct frame for this book, the rest of this book could be organized into three parts, with Chapters 1 and 2 in Part I, Chapters 3 to 5 in Part II, and Chapter 6 in Part III. Part I focuses on the fundamentals of vocabulary assessment. In the first chapter, the author explores the evolution of lexical proficiency within the context of applied linguistics, arguing that it is by nature a multi-dimensional construct. Also discussed in this chapter are the three primary concepts associated with vocabulary ability, namely, lexical proficiency, lexical competence, and lexical performance. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of the development of L2 vocabulary assessments as well as their applications in language education and research.

Part II examines vocabulary assessments based on learners' extended written and spoken production. Chapter 3 focuses on performance-based assessment of lexical proficiency evaluated by human raters. Specifically, this chapter interrogates the representation of lexical proficiency in the holistic or analytic rating scales in some widely known writing and speaking assessments. In addition to human ratings of lexical proficiency in Chapter 3, the next chapter elaborates on the most popular automated tools for evaluating specific aspects of lexical proficiency (e.g., lexical fluency, accuracy, and complexity). Chapter 5 critically evaluates the validity of the assessment methods discussed in the previous two chapters and their applications in L2 vocabulary research through a comprehensive literature review.

Chapter 6, which constitutes Part III of the book, reports an empirical study comparing three lexical assessment methods that have been extensively used in the field, namely discrete-point vocabulary tests, and human and automated ratings of learners' lexical proficiency in their extended language production. The study involved three groups of participants, including L2 learners of English at upper-intermediate and advanced levels and English native speakers. The findings highlight the distinctive features of different approaches to vocabulary assessment and provide empirical evidence on the validity and applicability of these approaches for related research and practice.

This book is meritorious in several aspects. One salient strength pertains to its contributions to the theoretical conceptualization of vocabulary constructs. In the current literature on vocabulary research, as indicated by several scholars, a pressing issue is the "ill-defined" nature of vocabulary in assessment (Read & Chapelle, 2001, p. 1) or the "poorly understood" status of lexical proficiency as a cognitive construct (Crossley et al., 2011, p. 182). One possible reason for this is the lack of consensus on how components of lexical proficiency interrelate and interact in language use. In this volume, a model of lexical proficiency is proposed which delineates how the three vocabulary constructs – lexical competence, lexical proficiency, and lexical performance – interact with related linguistic and non-linguistic components in a language user's communicative language ability (see the concluding chapter). This model therefore highlights the complexity of linguistic processing and the contextual nature of language use. Although the model has not been empirically verified, it clarifies some of the issues surrounding current conceptualizations of vocabulary constructs, thus providing a valuable source of reference for vocabulary assessment researchers and developers.

This volume is also instructive for vocabulary assessment practice. Since the 1960s, a variety of assessment methods have been employed to assess vocabulary, among which the discrete-point test (e.g., multiple-choice question, cloze, dictation) has arguably the longest history and most extensive use. With the emergence and increasing popularity of communicative testing, scholars have been advocating the use of more authentic tasks that resemble language use in real-life situations to elicit learner's vocabulary use for communicative purposes (e.g., Read, 2000; Read & Chapelle, 2002). In this volume, the author presents a comprehensive review of vocabulary assessment methods and stimulating discussions on how to assess vocabulary through the use of authentic writing and speaking tasks (see Chapters 3 and 4). As such, vocabulary assessment researchers and practitioners would find this volume invaluable for assessment practice.

Another positive feature of this book is that it showcases the cross-disciplinary communication between language testing (LT) and second language acquisition (SLA), which are two subfields of applied linguistics that share many areas of interest (Bachman & Cohen, 1998). For example, in the conceptualization of lexical proficiency, this book draws on approaches to, and models of, vocabulary ability in both SLA and LT literature (see Chapter 1). In the discussion of tasks for assessing lexical proficiency, the author juxtaposes how an L2 learner's vocabulary is measured in SLA research and the LT domain (see Chapter 2). In terms of how the construct of lexical proficiency is assessed with direct writing tasks, this book scrutinizes various scales employed by SLA researchers and language test providers (see Chapter 3). By exploring the interfaces between SLA and LT for vocabulary assessment, this book has implications for future exchanges about vocabulary assessment between the two subfields.

This book is not without limitations. First, test validity, arguably one of the most important facets for evaluating test quality and indeed a primary concern for any assessment instrument, is not dealt with systematically. There is no reference in the book to validity theories or frameworks in the field of language testing such as the argument-based approach to validity (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2010) or the socio-cognitive validity framework (Weir, 2005), which could have played a significant role in shaping the evaluation of different vocabulary assessment methods and the presentation of relevant findings. Second, the study reported in Chapter 6 included L2 English learners at upper-intermediate and advanced levels and English native speakers. The findings would be more convincing if a more robust sampling method had been employed and a more representative sample had been recruited, including lower-proficiency L2 English learners. Finally, one topic that escaped the author's attention, but would have considerably enriched the discussions surrounding vocabulary assessment, is how the models and tools in this book could be applied to L2 teaching and learning practices. Given the significant role of vocabulary in communicative language ability and the clarion call from the field to strengthen the intersections between teaching, learning, and assessment, it seems essential to relate the relevant discussions in this book to language teaching and learning practices.

To conclude, this book represents a welcome addition to the literature on vocabulary assessment and research because it sheds light on some crucial theoretical and empirical issues of lexical proficiency and assessment. Therefore, we recommend it to students, researchers, and practitioners working in the field of language assessment who have an interest in vocabulary assessment and research.

ORCID iDs

Jun Wang 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9399-4929
Jason Fan 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3600-548X

References

Bachman, L. F., & Cohen, A. D. (Eds.). (1998). *Interfaces between second language acquisition and language testing research*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524711

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment in practice: Developing language assessments and justifying their use in the real world*. Oxford University Press.

Beglar, D., & Nation, P. (2014). Assessing vocabulary. In A. J. Kunnan (Ed.), *The companion to language assessment* (pp. 172–184). John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118411360.wbcla053

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, *1*(1), 1–47. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1

Crossley, S. A., Salsbury, T., McNamara, D. S., & Jarvis, S. (2011). What is lexical proficiency? Some answers from computational models of speech data. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*(1), 182–193. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.244019

Read, J. (2000). *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511732942

Read, J., & Chapelle, C. (2001). A framework for second language vocabulary assessment. *Language Testing*, *18*(1), 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/026553220101800101

Weir, C. J. (2005). *Language testing and validation: An evidence-based approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.