

THE VOCABULARY OF *FOOD* IN EFL LEARNERS' COMPOSITIONS¹

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Abstract: Vocabulary plays an essential role in successful foreign language learning as shown in a great number of vocabulary studies. Likewise, the importance of food in the shaping of culture and language has been acknowledged in sociolinguistics. In this paper we look at the vocabulary implemented by EFL learners in a writing task. Our results show the recurrent, though unprompted, presence of food-related vocabulary. Participants have produced vocabulary pertaining to a number of different lexical fields, yet from no other topic has been elicited a greater variety of types than from that related to food. A comparison of the figures by gender suggests that females use more terms related to food than their male counterparts. A qualitative analysis of lexical units reveals that food vocabulary is becoming increasingly more 'foreign' in EFL learners.

Keywords: English as a foreign language. Productive vocabulary. Lexical fields. Vocabulary related to Food. Vocabulary in written compositions. Learner corpus.

Resumen: El vocabulario es esencial en el éxito del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera como demuestran un gran número de estudios. Asimismo, en sociolingüística se ha reconocido la importancia de la comida en la cultura y la lengua. En este artículo analizamos el vocabulario de aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera en una tarea escrita. Nuestros resultados demuestran la presencia recurrente de vocabulario relacionado con la comida. Los estudiantes producen vocabulario perteneciente a diferentes campos léxicos; sin embargo, el campo relacionado con la comida es el que aglutina una mayor variedad de tipos, y son las alumnas quienes producen un mayor número de términos. El análisis cualitativo de los datos revela la «extranjerización» del vocabulario de los aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Inglés Lengua Extranjera. Vocabulario Productivo. Campos semánticos. Vocabulario relacionado con la comida. Vocabulario en composiciones escritas. *Learner corpus*.

Résumé: Le vocabulaire joue un rôle essentiel dans le bon apprentissage d'une langue étrangère comme le démontrent de nombreuses études. En ce sens, l'importance de la nourriture dans la culture et la langue a été récemment reconnue par la sociolinguistique. Dans cet article nous observons le vocabulaire utilisé à l'écrit par des élèves en Anglais comme langue étrangère. Nos résultats démontrent la présence récurrente, quoique spontanée, de vocabulaire relatif aux aliments. Les élèves participants ont produit un vocabulaire appartenant à des champs lexicaux différents; néanmoins, le champ lexical qui a produit le plus de variété de types, a été celui de la nourriture. Aussi, ce sont les élèves filles qui ont utilisé davantage de termes par rapport à leurs compagnons masculins. Une analyse qualitative des unités lexiques nous révèle que parmi les étudiants en Anglais langue étrangère, le vocabulaire relatif aux aliments contient de plus en plus de mots d'origine étrangère.

¹ This project is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education (MEC). The authors acknowledge the support of MEC and FEDER for the completion of this paper through project HUM2006-09775-C02-02/FILO

Mots-clés: Anglais langue étrangère. Vocabulaire productif. Champs lexicaux. Vocabulaire relatif aux aliments. Vocabulaire en composition écrite. *Learner corpus*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The neglect of vocabulary in L2 language learning/ teaching scenarios belongs now to the past. More than three decades ago D. A. Wilkins called attention to the importance of the lexical dimension in communication; we all have in mind his often quoted declaration, «The fact is that while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed» (1972:111). Wilkins, as David Singleton remarked years later (1999:9), may have gone too far in his assessment, but the hyperbole does not disallow the fact that vocabulary is essential in communicative interactions that encompass the slightest complexity. Ever since Paul Meara published in 1980 «Vocabulary acquisition: a neglected aspect of language learning», there has been a continuous flow of publications, still in crescendo, that have dealt with vocabulary in L2 language teaching/ learning (e.g., Carter, 1987; Meara, 1987; Nation, 1990; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). In addition, scholars of a more pedagogical orientation have also claimed that more attention to lexis is necessary (e.g., Lewis, 1993; Swan, 1985a & 1985b; Widdowson, 1989). In the nineties Lewis coined the term ‘Lexical Approach’, and this approach to L2 teaching also furthered a new understanding of the role of words in communication. However, there are still gaps to be filled. Although there is an abundance of publications containing advice on how to teach and learn vocabulary, there is not yet a unified theory, and a more systematic way of teaching vocabulary would certainly help. Likewise, more empirical research is necessary, particularly in an area traditionally neglected such as that of productive written vocabulary implemented by primary school English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. This paper contains a corpus descriptive study on the analysis of EFL informants’ productive vocabulary in one specific lexical field, that of food.

Food is not only a must for the survival of living creatures, it also plays an unquestionable cultural role: practices and rituals related to food have always conformed the sociocultural profile of communities. Indeed, for ancient Greeks, man’s need for nourishment was considered one of the characteristics that distinguished humanity from the gods. In our times, thinkers and scholars have also paid a great deal of attention to the cultural role and symbolic significance of food (e.g., Barthes, 1972; Lévi-Strauss, 1983; Rozin, 1977). At present, the flow of publications related to this theme is still active (Nemeroff & Rocin, 1989; Strauss, 2005; Wilkins, Harley & Dobson, 1999). The sociolinguist Robin Tolmach Lakoff recently called attention to «the importance of food as a cultural artifact at the dawn of the third millennium» (2006:147), and she believes that «cuisine has in many ways affected our languages, both our vocabularies

and the way we construct discourse around food» (2006:165). Lakoff does not deal here with second or foreign languages, but lexical development in L1 and L2 are closely related. Singleton reminds us that 'L2 lexical development does not happen in a vacuum. By definition, it takes place against the background of lexical development in at least one other language' (1999: 41).

2. OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study is to identify, describe and analyse the vocabulary implemented by a sample of primary school EFL learners in school compositions. Specifically, as observed above, we focus on the lexical field of food. Additionally, the impact of the sex variable is also scrutinized: the two subgroups of informants are separately measured, and discrepancies in the use of food related terms is searched for and commented upon. We also compare the occurrence of types and tokens in this field against that found in others. Finally, we discuss the information which the choice of specific words related to food may reveal about students' concerns and formulate, when possible, some preliminary ideas related to the pedagogical implications.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Informants

For the purpose of this study we have worked with a sample of 269 participants; at the time of data gathering they were all 5th grade EFL students (average age \pm 11) from four primary schools of analogous socio-economic characteristics located in a city in the North of Spain. The sex distribution was as follows: 151 males and 118 females. All the students have Spanish as L1 and English as L2, and had received approximately 525 hours of tuition in EFL.

3.2 Instruments and procedures

Informants were asked to write a composition in English to an Oxford family, and we gave them the following instructions to complete the task:

Imagine you are going to live for a month with an English family (the Edwards), in Oxford. There are four members in the family: Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, and the children Peter and Helen. Write a letter to them in English in which you should introduce yourself, and tell them about your town, your school, your hobbies, and any other thing of interest that you would like to add.

Before beginning the assignment the participants also received the same explicit oral instructions in Spanish. The time allocated to complete the task was 30 minutes, and the students did not have access to dictionaries or any other kind of language help. The adequacy of the topic had been previously confirmed in a pre-testing session done with students of the same age and educational level in a different school that was not participating in the project. Once the compositions had been completed and collected they were edited, transcribed, and electronically encoded. The editing process began by identifying the words written; then, Spanish proper names, as well as other Spanish words, were deleted, (in the quotations cited these Spanish words have been reintroduced in order to illustrate certain points). Then, each composition was scrutinized by means of the word analyser *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 1996), so that alphabetical, frequency, and concordance lists were yielded; other formal characteristics such as the Type-Token Ratio (TTR) were also retrieved. The word lists were then lemmatised. In this regard, following Francis and Kuèera's definition, we understand lemma as a "set of lexical forms having the same stem and belonging to the same major word class, differing only in inflection and/or spelling" (1982:1). This quantitative analysis was complemented by a qualitative one in order to classify the words into different categories: grammatical/content, lexical fields, and others. The lexical variation of the food field was measured versus that in other fields, and a close qualitative analysis was applied to each term in its context to circumvent difficulties generated by polysemy, homonymy, and the like.

4. RESULTS

Our first objective, to identify and quantify food related terms, has proved to be quantitatively informative both in types and tokens. Food is a favourite issue for 145 students out of the total 269 informants, (53.15 %). To properly assess the value of these figures, it is essential to bear in mind the total absence of encouragement: a glance at the directives the participants had received for the completion of the task confirms that this topic is neither mentioned nor suggested, and consequently it might easily have been entirely disregarded as were other topics.

Regarding our second objective, the distribution and percentages by sexes is very relevant: 6 boys (4 % of the male participants), and 72 girls (61.01 % of the females) implement food vocabulary. These figures already establish a substantial discrepancy between the sexes: compared to males females produce a considerable higher number of words related to food in this specific writing task.

As to our third objective, the total number of food related tokens implemented in the corpus reaches 1,065 (546 the females and 519 the males); these figures yield an average of 7.34 words used by each of the 145 participants who implement the topic

(7.58 the girls and 7.10 the boys). Calculating the percentage of food tokens in relation to the total number of tokens in the corpus (32, 257) we obtain the figure of 3.30 %. The two sexes separately yield the following percentages: the female sample, with a total of 15, 363 tokens, yields 3.55 % of food related words; and the male sample, with 16, 892 tokens, yields 3.07 %. These results may appear scarce at first sight, but it should be considered here that the largest number of words within any given text belongs to the grammatical class. That is to say, the TTR is typically much higher for function words than for content ones. Word frequency lists elaborated throughout the last decades have mostly agreed on this point, for example, the Brown Corpus 2000 word frequency list by Francis & Kuèera, (1982:132) includes in the first seven positions the following words: 'the', 'of', 'and', 'to', 'a', 'in', 'that', and similar figures can be found in other English frequency vocabulary lists (e.g., Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001; Nation, 1984; West, 1953). In our corpus, grammatical types 'my', 'is', 'I', 'and', 'the', 'in', 'a' rank in the first seven positions of the frequency list, and accumulate a usage count of 9, 550 tokens, almost a third of the total number of words in the entire corpus (see table 1). A similar proportion of grammatical types was elicited from the same sample of EFL learners in a written task administered in 4th year of primary education. (see, Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2007; Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008).

Table 1: The 20 most frequent words in 5th year EFL learners' essays

Rank	Types	Tokens	Rank	Types	Tokens
1	<i>My</i>	2156	11	<i>very</i>	373
2	<i>Is</i>	1898	12	<i>play</i>	357
3	<i>I</i>	1655	13	<i>have</i>	355
4	<i>And</i>	1626	14	<i>school</i>	326
5	<i>The</i>	900	15	<i>big</i>	248
6	<i>In</i>	700	16	<i>to</i>	240
7	<i>A</i>	615	17	<i>go</i>	234
8	<i>Like</i>	591	18	<i>of</i>	230
9	<i>Got</i>	442	19	<i>are</i>	219
10	<i>Name</i>	402	20	<i>you</i>	217

More notable are the results in relation to types. A total of 108 food related types has been found. This number represents 10.61 % of the total 1,017 types found in the whole corpus. The distribution by sexes was as follows: 82 word types implemented by the females (11.66 %) and 81 by the males (9.93 %). The value of these figures is enhanced when compared with the word types catalogued in other lexical fields such as sports or games. Food has prevailed in quantity and variety of types (see table 2).

Table 2: Distribution by Lexical Fields of the most Frequent Types

Types	Raw	Females n=118	Males n=151
Total	1017	703	815
Food	108 (10.61 %)	82 (11.66 %)	81 (9.93 %)
Sports	83 (8.16 %)	48 (6.82 %)	61 (7.48 %)
Function words	75 (7.37 %)	65 (9.24 %)	65 (9.24 %)
Proper names	58 (5.70 %)	39 (5.54 %)	31 (3.80 %)
Family & friends	41 (4.03 %)	34 (4.83 %)	27 (3.31 %)
Pets	40 (3.93 %)	22 (3.12 %)	29 (3.55 %)
Games	11 (1.08 %)	4 (0.56 %)	7 (0.85 %)

The analysis of the specific word types provides information concerning our third objective: the group with the highest number of word types used by both sexes has been that of nouns, followed by some verbs, and finally a few adjectives. The food types implemented by the girls are all nouns except for six verbs (see table 3), and four adjectives (fizzy, sweet, hot, and fast). The types most frequently implemented by the boys have again been nouns, followed by seven verbs (see table 3), and four adjectives (fizzy, sweet, hot, and hungry). The TTR of verbs and the abundance of nouns, especially clustering with the verbs ‘eat’ and ‘like’, reveals that the informants are primarily interested in expressing their own nutritional likes and dislikes: both sexes favour the use of words related to eating and drinking, in detriment to words referring to the preparation of food and the tidying up after meals.

Table 3: Food Related Verbs

Females		Males	
Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens
<i>Like</i>	79	<i>eat</i>	41
<i>Eat</i>	34	<i>like</i>	39
<i>Drink</i>	24	<i>drink</i>	19
<i>Cook</i>	9	<i>wash</i>	9
<i>Feed</i>	5	<i>feed</i>	5
<i>Wash</i>	4	<i>cook</i>	2
		<i>lay</i>	2

In relation to the specific food nouns there have been some suggestive findings. To begin with, our Spanish, largely Mediterranean, diet appears to have been mostly cast off, except for a few superordinates such as ‘fish’ and ‘vegetables’. Hyponyms have mostly an alien flair, and dishes such beans, peppers, or asparagus are absent from their

productive vocabulary; others such as 'spaghetti' or 'pizza', practically unheard of in Spain a few years ago, have taken their place (see table 4).

Table 4: Food nouns with over 20 occurrences

Type	Raw frequency	Females	Males
<i>Fish</i>	53	26 (22.03 %)	27 (17.88 %)
<i>Vegetables</i>	46	24 (20.33 %)	22 (14.56 %)
<i>Spaghetti</i>	38	17 (14.40 %)	21 (13.90 %)
<i>Meat</i>	36	15 (12.71 %)	21 (13.90 %)
<i>Chips</i>	35	16 (13.55 %)	19 (12.58 %)
<i>Ice cream</i>	33	17 (14.40 %)	15 (9.93 %)
<i>Fruit</i>	28	17 (14.40 %)	11 (7.28 %)
<i>Milk</i>	26	11 (9.32 %)	16 (10.59 %)
<i>Pizza</i>	26	17 (14.40 %)	9 (5.96 %)
<i>Rice</i>	23	13 (11.01 %)	10 (6.62 %)
<i>Cakes</i>	21	11 (9.32 %)	10 (6.62 %)
<i>Fizzy drinks</i>	21	11 (9.32 %)	10 (6.62 %)
<i>Sweets</i>	21	11 (9.32 %)	10 (6.62 %)

The initial impression of the wholesomeness of the nutritional items implemented vanishes when each term is analysed in its context. As an example, we focus on the two superordinates at the top of the frequency list. Although two staunch traditional such as 'fish' and 'vegetables' occupy the first two positions in both sexes' frequency lists, this fact does not indicate that they are included in the participants' favourite fare, or incorporated in their meals. For instance, among the girls, in spite of being the most frequent food term, 'fish' is, in fact, said to be liked only three times; while four informants assure straightforwardly that they disliked it; and two more merely admit to eating it. The rest of the occurrences are neutral, and often give third person information, such as female student number 141 who informs:

(F141) *'The things traditional in Logroño are, The greap, the fish and the bread; and more things'.*

The term 'vegetables' is an even more illustrative example, of the 24 occurrences found in the girls' corpus, only four avow to their liking vegetables; while in no fewer than 11 cases they proclaim their distaste. Female student number 3 expresses her aversion so strongly that she compares it to the 'fearful' activity of studying, as she declares in example 2:

(F3) *I don't like study and I don't like eating vegetables'.*

Female informant number 205 uses her dislike of vegetables as a kind of self definition informing in:

(F205) *My name is Alejandra i like pizza and I don't like vegetables'.*

And female number 239 effectively illustrates the generation gap in her testimony as expressed in example 4:

(F239) *'The favorite food of my father is the vegetables. The favorite food of my brother is pizza, chips and chocolate'.*

In the boys sample, again, the two types at the top of the frequency list are the superordinates 'fish' and 'vegetables'; and again, though not in as high a proportion, many of the occurrences are in the negative: 'fish' is said to be liked by five different males, while six assert that they dislike it. The rest of the occurrences are neutral or general information such as male informant number 242, who observes:

(M5) *'In La Rioja is famous the bino [wine] and vegetables'. In the case of 'vegetables'.*

Only six boys write positively about them, while seven strongly assert that they dislike vegetables: subject number 10 again connects eating them to the (by default) 'unpleasant' activity of studying:

(M10) *'I don't like studing maths, studing lenguaje, studing religion, pilot plane, reading, writing and eat vegetable'.*

As with 'fish', most of the other occurrences are neutral with sentences such as that of male student number 253 who writes:

(M253) *'In my houses eat salchiks, chees, eggs, chips, stick, vegetables and frid fish'.*

In the entire corpus, terms such as 'milk' and 'rice' are frequently used, but still pizza and spaghetti rank in positions where Spanish traditional dishes might have been. Most of our typical products happen to be hapaxlegomena: this is the case with garlic, carrots, olives, omelettes, onion, or watermelon. What is more, the one occurrence is often in the negative, such as female informant number 50 who asserts in:

(F50) *'I don't like vegetables, play football, the boys, garlic'.*

In relation to the influence of the sex variable, some features worth mentioning have been found. Thus, the verb 'lay' appears twice connected to food but it is exclusively used by the boys, while it is absent from the girls' corpus: male informant number 226 attributes this house chore to another male, his father, when he clarifies:

(M226) *'My father lay the table and on the morning go to the supermarket and buys the food'.*

Similarly, both girls and boys use the verb 'wash' in clusters with 'dishes', but the latter have implemented it more often than the former. Males have used 'wash' in relation to 'dishes' in the affirmative eight times, and a ninth in the negative when informant number 234 observes:

(M234) *'I'm not lazy. I not washes the dishes or sweep the floor or tidy my bedroom or make my bed but I' am not lazy'.*

So, it appears, that the only male who uses this verb in the negative betrays some sense of guilt about it. Meanwhile, 'wash' is used only four times by three different females: informant number 251 writes in the negative:

(F251) *I don't like wash the dishes'.*

Informant number 228 uses the verb twice in the affirmative, asserting that both she and her sister wash the dishes; and a third female, number 227, informs:

(F227) *In my house I sometimes ... wash the dishes and cook the dinner'.*

Thus, although females use the food topic more frequently than males, oddly enough, the latter admit to washing the dishes and laying the table more often than their female counterparts do. If our testees are informing truthfully of their preferences and practices, it may be concluded that the modification of habits in relation to their gendered roles is reflected in their written discourse.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis and classification of the vocabulary in this corpus has demonstrated the recurrent, though unprompted, presence of food-related vocabulary in the EFL written performance of 11-year-old EFL learners. Participants have implemented vocabulary pertaining to a number of different lexical fields, yet from no other topic has been elicited a greater variety of types than from that related to ingestion. This result prompts an additional query that needs further research: why do students implement so much food-related vocabulary? If this implementation responds to their interest for the topic, these data should be taken into account in designing course books and in planning teacher input.

A comparison of the figures yielded by the male and the female sub samples separately suggests that females are more conscious of food than their counterparts, and they have demonstrated it by using not only more types, but also more tokens. The data are particularly suggestive in view of the fact that, attending coeducational schools, all students were intended to receive exactly the same input, and were given the same exact instructions for the completion of the task. In addition, and though data are still anecdotal, females' discourse suggests that they might be discarding their traditional role for doing household chores associated to meals. Meanwhile, these tasks are apparently being increasingly taken over by males.

A qualitative analysis of word types reveals that, at least in this corpus, food vocabulary is becoming increasingly more 'foreign'. Conventional Spanish food has been often disparaged by the informants, while foreign fast food items have mostly been welcome, and never once said to be disliked.

The prevailing word class has been that of nouns, with the incidence of a few verbs of which only 'eat' and 'drink' have had a comparatively high number of occurrences. This massive use of nouns (often clustering with the verb 'like' or 'eat') seems the consequence of the informants' enumeration of food terms mainly to express their

gastronomic preferences. In addition, we have found a few adjectives, half of which are related to a foreign, mainly Americanised, diet.

The vocabulary implemented by these informants suggests an increase of fast food trends, and since it is common knowledge that the consumption of this type of food augments the danger of becoming overweight or obese (see, e.g. Benton, 2004; Brownell, 2004; Glewwe, Jacoby, & King, 2001), one wonders whether the routine presentation of a certain type of food vocabulary in textbooks is appropriate, since it may function as a kind of subliminal recommendation or advertising, as we believe to be true in other areas (see, Ojeda 2004). In the belief that many current nutritional practices are hazardous for the physical and mental fitness of youth, medical authorities and school administrators in developed countries are attempting to steer the population, particularly children, to a better diet by controlling, for instance, menus in school cafeterias. Should language teachers join forces in this effort?

Foreign language students' receptive, as well as productive, vocabulary is necessarily predetermined by the vocabulary selection previously made by editors and publishers of classroom materials, as well as by teachers' input. If our informants have simply put into service the received input, then what might be questionable by reason of its partiality is the L2 input itself, and it should be acted upon. Teacher input, however, seems difficult to restrict, and printed material might be the fastest, most definite and efficient way to influence classroom vocabulary input.

Books are unquestionably a safe starting point. A cursory glance at these participants' EFL course books proves that their publishers had not been concerned with including a set of words that might enable foreign language learners to write about their own life experiences: there is a total absence of Spanish cultural aspects, be it fashion, children's games or food. Interaction cannot be unidirectional, foreign language learners need not only vocabulary specific to the target culture, but also the lexical items needed to enable them to describe their own cultural background. This should also be applied to the specific field of food. Didactic materials and teacher input should include an informed vocabulary which allows students not only to understand vocabulary related to an American 'pizza hut' or an English 'fish and chips' shack, but also to inform their foreign interlocutors about their own traditional lifestyle.

Mark Twain encapsulated the difficulties involved in reversing harmful eating habits when he wrote, 'The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like, and do what you'd rather not' (2003:312). However, trends and fashion often shape food preferences. The fact that young people may prefer 'pizza' to 'lentils' goes beyond flavour: the former is fashionable, while the latter isn't. That is to say, having greasy 'chips' at McDonalds carries more social prestige among early adolescents and their peers than lunching on a dish of healthy 'beans' at home. Nutritional

choices allow youngsters to shape for themselves a more trendy identity: taste has long been predominantly a matter of image and social acceptance.

Including healthy food vocabulary in textbooks, and presenting these articles as trendy and desirable will not solve children's overweight and foreign language academic problems, but it will contribute. At any rate, we believe that a more profound knowledge of our students' productive lexicon can be applied to teaching procedures at large, and specifically to EFL teaching in particular. All this, we trust, may materialize in better overall academic results. Thus, our suggestion is that educators insist that textbook publishers include a more careful selection of vocabulary. In the specific lexical field of food, to present fast food as desirable and omit Spanish traditional food conveys the subliminal message that new is better and old should be replaced and forgotten.

On the whole, this study has been written in the belief that a better acquaintance with the vocabulary that L2 learners implement will provide clues about word availability and the input they have been exposed to in the L2 classroom. However, this is a preliminary descriptive study that has helped us in the identification and description of the type of vocabulary produced by EFL learners in a specific writing task. In order to obtain a more informed picture of our learners' productive vocabulary more data and lengthier research would be necessary: questionnaires, inferential statistics, and other kinds of tests would help to further the analysis and to define the significance of the data.

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