

The Use of Componential Analysis to “Deepen” L2 Students’ Lexical Competence

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a platitude to say today that lexis is at the heart of language acquisition. As Wilkins suggested, “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without lexis nothing can be conveyed” (1972:111). However, and despite current efforts to introduce lexical perspective in the language syllabus, many advanced English students at the University of Granada (Spain) lack adequate lexical competence (Pérez Basanta 2005).

The question which may arise at this point is “what is meant by being lexically competent?”. Many authors have turned their attention to this issue. The most well-known article is Richards’ ‘The Role of Vocabulary Teaching’ (1976) in which the author describes different aspects involved in the assumption “what is to know a word”. This seminal paper asserts that the construct of vocabulary is characterized by its multiple dimensions. However, some linguists involved in the area of language testing (Meara 1996), have criticized his excessive, and thus, impractical multiplicity. Therefore, most authors at least identify two different traits in the concept of vocabulary: breadth and depth (Harley 1995; Meara 1996; Read 1988, 1993; Wesche & Paribakht 1996). The former implies lexical size, i.e., the number of lexical items. The later, on the other hand, consists of the quality of the learner’s knowledge of a word, i.e., “a word’s different sense relations to other words in the lexicon, e.g., paradigmatic [...] and syntagmatic” (Haastруп & Henriksen 2000: 222). Following from this definition, the interconnection between depth of lexical knowledge and semantic knowledge should be clearly acknowledged. For instance, Channell affirms that lack of semantic concern in vocabulary teaching would result in “a flat, uninteresting style, and failure to express the variety of ideas [the learner] wants to communicate” (1981:115). Furthermore, from a psycholinguistic stand, words are longer retained when deeper