Lexical Profiles of Reading Texts in High-Stakes Tests: Where are the Benchmarks?

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ABSTRACT

In language testing literature, the lexical profiles issue has been extensively discussed when examining the quality of reading texts in high-stakes tests. The interpretation and use of lexical profiles, however, have been lacking a point of reference (i.e., benchmarks). Therefore, this study attempts to establish benchmarks for lexical profiles of reading texts in a high-stakes test in China – the National Matriculation English Test (NMET). To elicit sufficient samples, a corpus of 909 NMET reading texts was constructed. Based on the corpus, two stages were employed. Firstly, the 909 texts were screened through a text coverage analysis and representative text samples were selected. Secondly, two sets of benchmarks were established based on the text samples. Overall, this study contributes empirical evidence to evaluating the lexical profiles of NMET reading texts, and has practical implications for developing reading texts in high-stakes tests.

KEYWORDS

Benchmarks, High-Stakes Tests, Lexical Profiles, Reading Texts, Text Coverage

INTRODUCTION

A reading comprehension component has been routinely included in high-stakes English proficiency tests for assessing the reading ability of test-takers (Alderson, 2010). In assessing reading ability, a number of texts are employed followed by questions in order to make judgments of test-takers’ levels of reading comprehension, such as IELTS (Taylor & Weir, 2012) and TOEFL iBT (Chapelle, Enright & Jamieson, 2008). In this connection, the preparation of reading texts has been an issue for language testers; trained and experienced item writers are involved to select and edit texts from a large amount of text sources (Green & Hawkey, 2012). To maintain the quality of reading texts, systematic measures are applied in the production process including both qualitative reviews and quantitative analysis (Green & Jay, 2005). In the qualitative reviews of the reading texts, experienced item writers and testing experts are commissioned for pre-editing, editing and pretest review as specified in The IELTS Question Paper Production (IELTS website, 2015). As for the quantitative analysis of the reading texts, one of the major approaches is to detect the lexical profiles (Webb & Paribakht, 2015), which examines the vocabulary proportion of reading texts across vocabulary levels (Coniam, 1999; Nation, 2006). For example, based on a certain word list, 80% of the words in a text may come from the most frequent 1K word families, 10% of the words may come from the
second most frequent 1K word families, and the remaining 10% of the words might be at the lower 1K vocabulary levels or even off-list.

While an examination of lexical profiles has been widely used in assessing reading texts in high-stakes tests suited for particular language proficiency levels (Khalifa & Schmitt, 2010), there has been the lack of a point of reference (i.e., benchmarks specifying an acceptable range) to compare and evaluate the values of the vocabulary proportions in the lexical profiles (Coniam & Falvey, 2013). Establishing benchmarks of lexical profiles for evaluating reading texts, however, has been a very challenging issue due to the substantial variation in the lexical profiles of reading texts (Nation, 2006; Webb & Paribakht, 2015). According to Nation (2006), based on an analysis of British National Corpus data, the largest variation in the proportion of vocabulary occurs probably in the most frequent 1K word families, and the range of variation decreases as the word frequency levels decrease. Until recently, it still remained unclear whether lexical profiles of reading texts could be benchmarked with acceptable ranges in the context of high-stakes tests. Furthermore, as claimed by Webb and Paribakht (2015), early studies investigating the issue of lexical profiles in reading tests were conducted using a very limited number of reading texts, which made the setting of benchmarks impossible. Therefore, this study has been designed to fill the gap in exploring the benchmarking issue on lexical profiles by examining a large sample size of reading texts from a corpus of high-stakes test papers in China. Specifically, we operationally define the benchmarks for lexical profiles as a point of reference specifying acceptable ranges for values of vocabulary proportions at certain frequency levels. More importantly, this corpus-informed study is aimed to shed light on the methodology in the research of lexical profiles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, corpus-based studies have been widely carried out to investigate the lexical profiles of reading texts for both teaching and testing purposes (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014; Webb & Paribakht, 2015). For teaching purposes, researchers have expressed concern over the amount of vocabulary learners must know for the comprehension of various types of reading texts (Hsu, 2013; Nation, 2006; Webb & Macalister, 2013). To this end, a line of studies was conducted to explore the quantity of vocabulary for reaching 95% and 98% cumulative coverage indices on lexical profiles, as 95% and 98% are two reasonable targets for English language learners to demonstrate an adequate comprehension of reading texts (Laufer, 1989; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). For testing purposes, language testers paid attention to what lexical resources were necessary to engage with the individual reading texts in high-stakes tests (Chapelle, Enright & Jamieson, 2008; Jin, 2011; Taylor & Weir, 2012). In this connection, a number of studies were conducted to analyze the lexical profiles of individual reading texts from high-stakes tests in order to examine the relationship between the lexical profiles of an individual text and a particular proficiency level (Green & Hawkey, 2012; Khalifa & Schmitt, 2010; Webb & Paribakht, 2015).

Lexical Profiles of Reading Texts for Teaching Purposes

As a pioneer in this area, Nation (2006) established fourteen 1K word-family lists based on the British National Corpus (BNC 14K lists, hereafter) to investigate the amount of vocabulary necessary for unassisted comprehension of spoken and written English. Results showed that a learner would be required to know the first 6K to 7K word families to achieve 98% text coverage of spoken texts, and the first 8K to 9K word families to reach the same text coverage of written texts. As for a word family, it includes a root form, its inflections and regular derivations. As for a word family, it includes a root
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