Short Paper

The Development of a Japanese Bilingual Version of the New Vocabulary Levels Test

Stuart McLean    stuart93@me.com
Brandon Kramer   brandon.L.kramer@gmail.com

This paper describes a Japanese variant of the New Vocabulary Levels Test (NVLT) (McLean & Kramer, 2015), the process by which the test was produced, and advantages of bilingual vocabulary tests.

The New Vocabulary Levels Test

The NVLT is intended as a diagnostic or achievement vocabulary instrument for pedagogical or research purposes (McLean & Kramer, 2015). The NVLT measures knowledge of English lexis from the first five of Nation’s (2012a) British National Corpus/Corpus of Contemporary American English (BNC/COCA) 1,000-word bands with 24 items per band, and the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000) with 30 items. As Webb and Sasao (2013) state, “mastery of the 5,000-word level may be challenging for all but advanced learners, so assessing knowledge at the five most frequent levels may represent the greatest range in vocabulary learning for the majority of L2 learners” (p. 266).

Bilingual test creation

The Japanese bilingual NVLT uses the distractors created for the parallel Listening Vocabulary Levels Test (LVLT) which aurally tests the same target word families. In addition to the description below, further details regarding the creation of these distractors can be found in McLean, Kramer, and Beglar (2015).

The items were created by retrofitting and redesigning Vocabulary Size Test (VST) items using reverse engineered specifications from previous tests (Nation & Beglar, 2007; Nation, 2012b) in a process of specification-driven test assembly as recommended in Fulcher and Davidson (2007). As the VST measures knowledge of vocabulary according to frequency within the BNC, the items were then re-assigned to their appropriate BNC/COCA level. The context sentence for each item was then presented to volunteers in early pilot testing with pseudoword replacements for each target word to ensure the test was not conflating the construct of L2 contextual inferencing with vocabulary knowledge.
Finally, the key and distractors for each item were directly translated to the core Japanese meanings (Nation, 2012b). For example, the key for the target word shoe was written as 'the thing you wear on your foot' in version B of the VST. Rather than directly translate 'the thing you wear on your foot' into Japanese, 足 (kutsu), the Japanese word for shoe, was used. When the translation of the target word was an English loanword in Japanese, the direct translation was replaced with an alternative Japanese word or phrase, as examinees could otherwise select the correct answer through phonological matching. For example, for the target word pro the distractor was changed to 専門家 [senmonka] which has a similar meaning to the direct translation プロ [puro].

Benefits of bilingual vocabulary tests

Test makers strive to create tests which yield unidimensional results or tests which isolate a single target construct. It is argued that bilingual tests more accurately estimate vocabulary sizes of examinees with limited knowledge of grammar and syntax (Elgort, 2013; Karami, 2012; Nguyen & Nation, 2011). Furthermore, bilingual vocabulary tests may reduce anxiety experienced by examinees, providing a “more accurate estimation of the breadth of their L2 vocabulary knowledge” (Elgort, 2013, p. 269). This difference in scores can be quite significant, with studies such as Elgort (2013) showing around 10% higher scores for bilingual test variants.

Furthermore, students read faster in their L1 (Fraser, 2007), and bilingual tests facilitate shorter distractors, so bilingual vocabulary tests should be completed quicker than monolingual tests. This difference is compounded by longer distractors, which “are unavoidable in monolingual tests to completely convey the meaning of more difficult words” (Karami, 2012, p. 56). Bilingual test distractors, in contrast, are primarily definitions or synonyms of distractor choices, consisting of usually only a word or phrase. For example, 引き出し (hikidashi), the direct Japanese translation of drawer, is the key distractor for the target word drawer rather than “box that goes in and out for clothes,” the definition offered on a version of the monolingual test. A shorter test administration would be expected to reduce examinee fatigue, allowing for more accurate measurement.

Interpretability

While further research is required to empirically show the NVLT’s utility in a variety of contexts, we hypothesize potential uses for teachers and researchers.

The NVLT can assess learners’ readiness for a particular course of study or the appropriateness of materials for learners. Instructors could first estimate the written vocabulary load of instructional materials or a single text. Research posits that 98% or 99% coverage is ideal for easily comprehending written material (Carver, 1990; Hu &
Thus, the NVLT can be used to estimate learners’ knowledge of lexis at particular word-frequency levels to determine whether they have the necessary lexical knowledge to comprehend course materials.

The NVLT can also diagnose learners’ vocabulary knowledge at the beginning of a course of study, estimate achievement throughout the course of study (i.e., formative assessment), and measure the knowledge gained upon completion of a course (i.e., summative achievement). If the goal of a beginner level course is to acquire knowledge of the 2,000 most frequent words of English, the threshold for mastering a single 1,000-word level should be at least 23 out of 24 correct items. Importantly, for higher frequency bands the necessity for a high mastery threshold is crucial, as any language user will commonly meet the highest frequency words when using the target language.

Future research
Recommended future research using this test includes:
- Mixed-methods validation of the Japanese bilingual variant of the NVLT among various lexical proficiencies.
- Further research into the appropriateness of the 23/24 mastery threshold.
- An examination of the relationship between NVLT results and L2 reading ability.

Conclusion
In this paper we have described the creation of and justification for a bilingual version of the NVLT. When feasible, bilingual vocabulary tests are advantageous when measuring the lexical knowledge of monolingual populations because they help to produce unidimensional data, reduce test anxiety, and take less time to complete. Additionally, the NVLT can be used to determine the appropriateness of course materials and to measure knowledge of the most frequent words according to Nation’s BNC/COCA lists (2012a). The test is freely available to download from the authors’ profiles on Academia.edu.

References
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