Lexical Component of the Young Learners' English Syllabus in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

A lexical syllabus in a foreign language program is a first step in providing adequate input to L2 vocabulary as it dictates what goes into the course material. The present study evaluates the lexical component of the Turkish Education Ministry's (MEB) English language syllabus for primary and middle grades revised in 2017. As the official MEB syllabus does not contain a separate vocabulary list, one was worked out in the present study from the MEB's published English language programme document and the validity of the list was evaluated against other vocabulary lists as well as against findings of vocabulary research with other EFL learners. The comparison lists were Cambridge Young Learners Exams word lists (Starters, Movers, Flyers), word lists based on large English corpora of adult language users (BNC-COCA-25 lists) and children's word lists based on oral language use of native-speaking English children (VP-Kids lists). The results have indicated rather poor coverage of native speaker word lists (both adults' and children's) by the MEB syllabus. The syllabus also envisaged a rather low input in terms of the number of words to be introduced to learners per class hour in comparison to the input received by EFL learners in other contexts. On the other hand, the list was at a comparable level with the Cambridge YLE lists with respect to overall size, but overlapped to a lesser extent in content. Only 60% of the words in YLE lists were covered in the MEB lists. The specification of clearer targets for grade levels and compilation of official vocabulary lists based on empirical data has been recommended.

Key Words: EFL, lexical syllabus, MEB, word lists, young learners.

1. Introduction

Attaining a high level of proficiency in a foreign language requires a large vocabulary. Research has shown that unaided comprehension of written language requires around 8,000-9,000 words and of spoken language 6,000-7,000 words (Nation, 2006). A vocabulary of this magnitude is likely to take a long time to build along with the right kind of exposure. It is, therefore, important to start early and carefully plan and monitor the vocabulary we are feeding into our learners. Children in Turkey start to learn English as a foreign language in second grade, which can be considered sufficiently early with more than half of the 42 European countries starting at a later age according to a recent report published by EU (Eurydice, 2017). However, it is not clear if we are providing the right kind of exposure to the right amount of target vocabulary. The syllabus has a vital role over the vocabulary

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input provided to learners as it has a direct influence on what goes into the course material. Largely, it will be the syllabus which will determine what vocabulary is presented to the learners. Despite its importance Ministry of Education's English syllabus has not been evaluated or validated previously. The present study aims to evaluate the lexical component of the English syllabus in primary and middle grades in Turkey both qualitatively and quantitatively. In particular, we ask:

1. Does the English syllabus for grades 2-8 in Turkey contain a sufficient number of words to teach?
2. Does the English syllabus for grades 2-8 contain the 'right' words to teach?

In what follows, we first describe the lexical component of the national English syllabus for grades 2-8. After that, we report the results of a number of comparisons we carried out to validate the lexical syllabus. Finally, we discuss the conclusions from these comparisons.

2. English Lexical Syllabus in Turkey

The Ministry of Education does not have officially-specified vocabulary size targets for English in primary and middle education expressed in number of words to be taught to children. There isn't, either, an independent official list of target vocabulary for these levels. Nevertheless, a vocabulary list was worked out, in the present study, from the language syllabus provided in the revised version of the English language education program document for grades 2-8 published in 2017 by the Ministery of Education (http://mufredat.meb.gov.tr/ProgramDetay.aspx?PID=149). In the language syllabus, the vocabulary targets are mixed with structural targets (cf. Appendix for an example) and the word lists given for each unit contain only content words (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives) although target structures also contain a number of function words (articles, pronouns, forms of verb be, question words, etc) which are not included in the word list. Therefore, a comprehensive list that included all the vocabulary to be introduced to learners had to be worked out, in the present study, from the language syllabus for each grade level (We are going to refer to these as *MEB lists* in what follows). In doing so, a word was operationally defined as a 'lemma' which includes a word and its regularly inflected forms. Thus, the singular *lion* and its plural *lions* were taken to be one word whereas the irregular forms such as *children* for *child* were included as separate words. Although knowledge of the regularly inflected forms like *lions* cannot be automatically assumed of the very young children in the early grades, it is reasonable to expect that the regularity will be easily understood and quickly learnt once introduced.

Another issue involved multi-word units. The language syllabus contained a variety of multi-word units such as compounds (*living room*, *dining room, playground*), phrasal verbs (*fall over*), multi-word grammatical words (*in front of, a lot, lots of* etc), or frozen formulae (*Excuse me, Thank you*). Each multi-word unit was counted as one word as these are used as single units by native speakers and non-native speakers alike (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). For identification of compounds and phrasal verbs major English learners' dictionaries have been consulted (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Multi-word function words and frozen formulae have been identified by checking against two recent phrase lists (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Shin & Nation, 2008).

A total of seven lists (one for each grade from 2 to 8) were compiled along these criteria, which included 1,373 words in total. The distribution of the words across grade levels is given below in Table 1. According to these results, 40% (551 words) of the words are introduced in the first three grades of the primary level in 210 hours of instruction and 60% (821 words) are introduced in the middle grades over 4 years in 490 instructional periods. Each year, 10-15% of this vocabulary is intended to be introduced to learners, which corresponds roughly to 200 words a year. The overall rate of exposure per class hour is about 2 words (1,373 words in the MEB lists divided by 700 instructional periods combined for primary and middle grades) with more words being introduced in the primary grades. The important question is: Are these numbers satisfactory? To answer this, we make a number of comparisons below.

Table 1. Number of Words in the MEB Lists

Word List	Number of Words	% of Combined List	Words Per class hour
K2	200	15%	2.85
K3	150	11%	2.14
K4	201	15%	2.87
Primary Grades Combined	**551**	**40%**	**2.62**
K5	187	14%	1.78
K6	173	13%	1.65
K7	226	16%	1.61
K8	235	17%	1.68
Middle Grades Combined	**821**	**60%**	1.68
All Grades Combined	**1,373**	**100%**	**1.96**

3. Comparison to Cambridge Young Learners' English lists

Given the age range of the learners in grades 2-8, a reasonable criterion measure for comparison would be the vocabulary target lists for similar age groups recognised internationally. The word lists for Cambridge Young Learners English exams (Starters, Movers, and Flyers) were used for this comparison as the exams on which the lists are based are intended for a similar age group and are recognised globally with several thousand test centres in over 130 countries.

 (http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/young-learners-handbook-2018.pdf). The wordlists (YLE lists from now on) themselves are regularly revised and updated (Wilson, 2007) and made publically available. For comparison, the online analysis tool Tex_Lex Compare on the Compleat Lexical Tutor (Lextutor) website https://www.lextutor.ca/cgi-bin/tl_compare/ was used. This tool computes the number of shared words between two texts which, in the present case, consisted of two word lists. Each comparison involved a pairing of a MEB list with a YLE list. Both overall lists and sublists were compared. The results from this analysis are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Extent of the YLE lists covered by the MEB Lists

	Shared With Starters (N=461)	% of Starters	Shared With Movers (N=301)	% of Movers	Shared With Flyers (N=384)	% of Flyers	Shared With YLE (N=1,146)	% of YLE
K2	126	27%	17	5%	17	4%	160	14%
K3	71	15%	43	14%	12	3%	126	11%
K4	55	12%	42	14%	40	10%	137	12%
Primary Grades Combined	**252**	**55%**	**102**	**34%**	**69**	**18%**	**423**	**37%**
K5	23	5%	30	10%	41	11%	94	8%
K6	19	4%	17	6%	27	7%	63	5%
K7	15	3%	23	8%	28	7%	66	6%
K8	9	2%	9	2%	28	7%	46	4%
Middle Grades Combined	*66*	*14%*	*79*	*26%*	*124*	*32%*	*269*	*23%*
All Grades Combined	*319*	*69%*	*181*	*60%*	*193*	*50%*	*693*	*60%*

The YLE lists contain 1,146 words in total. The MEB lists are slightly larger in size by 227 words (1,373 words). Although the two lists look similar in size, they are rather different in content as only 60% of the words in the YLE lists are shared by the MEB lists. Starters list is covered the best: 69% of the Starters words appear in the MEB lists and the Flyers list is covered the worst with only half (50%) of the words occurring in the MEB lists. A greater proportion of the YLE words are covered in the primary grades (37%) in comparison to middle grades (23%). Primary grade lists cover Starters and Movers vocabulary to a better degree than the Flyers vocabulary (55% and 34% vs 18%) whereas middle grade lists provide a better coverage of the Flyers list (32% vs 14% and 26%).

4. Comparison to other EFL learners and CEFR levels

Another plausible comparison would be to compare the MEB vocabulary targets with actual vocabulary sizes of EFL learners of similar age and proficiency level in other contexts. The MEB Syllabus aims at an A1 level of English proficiency in grades 2-6, and A2 in grades 7-8 for children aged 6-11 and 12-13 respectively. The target vocabulary sizes for these levels in the MEB Syllabus worked from Table 1 are 911 words for A1 (grades 2-6) and 1,373 words for A2. Unfortunately, the literature provides us little by way of comparison as there is a dearth of studies in other contexts which link vocabulary size figures to proficiency levels in an L2. Only two studies, to our knowledge, attempted to do this. Milton & Alexiou (2009) have measured the vocabulary sizes of Greek EFL learners from different CEFR levels in a private language school using a checklist test of vocabulary (X-Lex) and found that learners who had mastery of the A1 level knew 1,477 words on average and those with an A2 level mastery knew 2,157 words. These figures are in line with those in an earlier study by Meara & Milton (2003 cited in Milton & Alexiou, 2009), who measured the vocabulary sizes of EFL learners passing Cambridge language tests using X-Lex. They found that learners with A1 level mastery knew less than 1,500 words while A2 level learners knew between 1,500 and 2,500 words. These figures are rather higher than the MEB sizes, which mean learners in other contexts know many

more words than the MEB Syllabus aims to teach Turkish pupils in primary and secondary education. However, these differences must be treated with caution. The X-Lex test measures receptive vocabulary size which is mostly relevant to the reading skill. There is no indication, however, in the MEB's program document whether the MEB list was intended for receptive or productive use. Productive vocabulary tends to be smaller than receptive vocabulary (cf. Laufer, 1998; Fan, 2000) and the MEB figures could be perfectly normal for productive vocabulary. There are no studies, however, to the best of our knowledge, to provide guidance about productive vocabulary sizes.

The average number of words to be taught per class hour is around 2 in the MEB lists. This figure approaches 3 in the early grades but falls below 2 in middle grades. This is rather low in comparison to EFL learners in other contexts. Milton & Meara (1998) studied the vocabulary knowledge of foreign language learners in three countries and found the average uptake to be 3-4 words per contact hour. The input to Turkish learners, i.e. 2 words per class hour, is typical of less able learners reported in other studies (cf. Barnard, 1961 and Quinn, 1968 in Milton & Meara, 1998). This amount of input will result in an even smaller uptake as every experienced EFL teacher very well knows, learners do not learn 100% of what we teach them. Therefore, these rather conservative vocabulary targets are likely to lead to very little vocabulary uptake and very small vocabulary sizes in learners.

5. Comparison to BNC-COCA lists

We also compared the MEB lists to word frequency lists drawn from large English corpora using the vocabulary profiling software on Lextutor website. The word frequency lists are based on the British National Corpus (BNC) and Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA). Although the BNC and COCA lists represent adult vocabulary, they might still be considered relevant for a comparison of children's vocabulary as it is this vocabulary the children ultimately need to obtain and come to know as grown-ups. In particular, the high frequency vocabulary of English has uttermost importance and often recommended as the initial target vocabulary in EFL (Nation, 2001). The high frequency vocabulary is often thought to comprise of the most frequent 2,000 words in English, but was proposed recently to be raised to the first 3,000 by Schmitt and Schmitt (2014). The results of this comparison for the first three 1,000 word levels are given in Table 3. To provide a signpost for comparison the YLE lists were also profiled.

Table 3. Vocabulary Profile using BNC-COCA-25 (in families)

	Meb	**YLE**
1K	590 (59%)	628 (62%)
2K	260 (26%)	169 (17%)
3K	77 (8%)	22 (2%)
Total (2K)	850 (43%)	797 (40%)
Total (3K)	927 (31%)	819 (27%)

Overall results indicate that only 927 words out of the most frequent 3,000 words of English appear in the MEB lists. This amounts to only one third (31%= 927/3,000) of the first 3,000. Of the first 2,000 words, again less than half (43%=850/2000) is covered. In comparison, the YLE lists cover a slightly lower percentage of the high frequency vocabulary: 27% (=819/3000) of the 3K and 40% (=797/2000) of the 2K vocabulary. This suggests that neither list provides a good grounding in adult vocabulary and that a lot would need to be learnt for the transition to adult vocabulary. Studies on the lexical content

of EFL coursebooks suggest a similar trend. Alcaraz-Marmol (2009) studied the vocabulary in an EFL coursebook used in primary education in Spain and found that about one third (28%) of the words were not included in the General Service List (GSL), which is an older list of the most frequent 2,000 words in English (West, 1953). In Alsaif & Milton's study (2012) of the 22 English textbooks used in the seven years of schooling between year 6 and year 12 in Saudi Arabia, around 20% of the GSL vocabulary was not covered. In Criado & Sanchez (2009), more than half of the words in an intermediate coursebook used in Spain were outside of the GSL vocabulary. Clearly, English language coursebooks do not target vocabulary from word frequency lists and the MEB Syllabus is no different in that respect. It could be argued, however, that word frequency lists should form the basis of the lexical content of language syllabuses and coursebooks if these are to be of real value to learners in using the foreign language. It is this vocabulary, after all, that native speakers use and learners will have to encounter in real life.

The first thousand words were covered to somewhat a better extent in the MEB and YLE lists. More than half of the words were covered by either list. Given their importance in English in general, this is still not good enough. These words make up at least 70% of all types of discourse (Nation, 2001, p.17) and therefore form the essential core of the English language. The syllabus would be expected to give full coverage to this vocabulary over the seven years of language education.

6. Comparison to L1 children

Even though the acquisition of native-like vocabulary in an L2 entails learning the adult vocabulary in the long run, it has been suggested that word frequency lists of English based on adult corpora contain words which are not appropriate for children. Alcarez-Marmol (2009) cites the following examples from the first 1,000 level: *account, article, declare, population, faith*. A more appropriate native-speaker profile for children might be native-speaking English children of similar age rather than adults. In this section, we compare the MEB lists with vocabulary lists derived from the oral productions of native-English-speaking children, which are built in the VP-Kids component of the VocabProfile on Lextutor website. This component contains 2,500 word families in total and provides vocabulary profiles of texts (word lists in our case) with respect to this vocabulary in 250-word bands ordered in frequency. The results from this analysis are given in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Vocabulary Profile of the MEB lists with VP-Kids

Freq. Level	Families	Types	Tokens	Coverage%	Cumulative%
Kid250 - 1:	170	221	310	20.99	20.99
Kid250 - 2:	136	163	175	11.85	32.84
Kid250 - 3:	112	125	135	9.14	41.98
Kid250 - 4:	96	107	116	7.85	49.83
1K Total:	**514**	**616**	**736**	**49.83**	**49.83**
Kid250 - 5:	65	71	76	5.15	54.98
Kid250 - 6:	68	74	76	5.15	60.13
Kid250 - 7:	50	56	58	3.93	64.06
Kid250 - 8:	38	39	40	2.71	66.77
Kid250 - 9:	35	36	37	2.51	69.28
Kid250 - 10:	35	36	38	2.57	71.85
List Total:	**805**	**928**	**1,061**	**71.85**	**71.85**
Off-List known:	327	345	347	23.49	95.34
Off-List unknown:?	?	68	69	4.67	100.00
Total	**1132+?**	**1341**	**1477**	**100%**	**100%**

These results suggest that just about one third (805 word families from the 10 lists or 32% of the 2500 words) of the VP-Kids Lists are covered by the MEB lists and only half (514 words or 51%) of the first four lists comprising 1,000 words is covered. This means that the MEB list omits most of the words used by native-speaking children productively in their speech. If the aim is to provide native-like or near native-like competence in English to our learners, the MEB syllabus is far from doing so as far as vocabulary goes. On the other hand, around 70% of words in the MEB list are from the VP-Kids vocabulary while some 30% are outside of this list. This means that the MEB list contains words which are not used by native-speaking children. The inclusion of these words in the list needs to be justified and the utility of the words included is yet to be shown. For comparison, we have also profiled the YLE lists and the results are given below in Table 5. The YLE lists provide a similar coverage of the native-speaker list at 33%, but are better in covering the first four lists at 56%. A greater proportion of the YLE words (87.71%) are from the VP-Kids list with only 12% of the words being different. It can be concluded from these results that the MEB list is somewhat less native-like than the YLE list.

Table 5. Vocabulary profile of the YLE lists with VP-Kids

Freq. Level	Families	Types	Tokens	Coverage%	Cumulative%
Kid250 - 1:	180	246	329	27.17	27.17
Kid250 - 2:	159	185	194	16.02	43.19
Kid250 - 3:	123	130	138	11.40	54.59
Kid250 - 4:	98	108	113	9.33	63.92
1K Total:	**560**	**669**	**774**	**63.92**	**63.92**
Kid250 - 5:	69	74	75	6.19	70.11
Kid250 - 6:	55	60	61	5.04	75.15
Kid250 - 7:	47	48	51	4.21	79.36
Kid250 - 8:	41	42	42	3.47	82.83
Kid250 - 9:	33	33	33	2.73	85.56
Kid250 - 10:	25	26	26	2.15	87.71
List Total:	**830**	**952**	**1,062**	**87.71**	**87.71**
Off-List known:	95	98	99	8.18	95.89
Off-List unknown:?		49	50	4.13	100.00
Total	**925+?**	**1099**	**1211**	**100%**	**100%**

7. Conclusion

The present study evaluated the lexical component of the English language syllabus for primary (2-4) and middle grades (5-8) in Turkey. Comparisons with criterion lists suggested that it provided poor coverage of native-speaker vocabulary both of adults and children. It also provided less coverage of the A1 and A2 vocabulary than those known to other EFL learners as well as fewer input per class hour than in other EFL contexts. Nevertheless, it was comparable in size to a young learners' word list recognised internationally. The content of the two lists, however, was somewhat different with only 60% similarity between the lists. It can be concluded from these results that the English lexical syllabus in Turkish primary and middle education puts the learners at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers elsewhere in the world.

A sensible future direction would be to identify, on the basis of empirical data, more specific vocabulary targets for grade levels with accompanying official word lists. We would argue for separate lists for receptive and productive purposes as these entail different sizes with receptive list being bigger in size. We also recommend a separate list for grammatical words which need to be taught differently from content words.

If we want the product of our teaching efforts to be at an internationally acceptable level, we need to start from the syllabus and provide the right amount of the right kind of input to the learners. This is true of vocabulary more than anything else.

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