Can productive vocabulary knowledge measures predict IELTS writing proficiency?

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Studies (e.g., Treffers-Daller, Parslow, & Williams, 2018; Jarvis, 2017) suggest that vocabulary knowledge measures might help to distinguish between learners of different language abilities. Treffers-Daller et al. (2018) show a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge, lexical diversity (LD) measures, and different proficiency levels. The current paper extends this exploration by considering different productive vocabulary knowledge tasks in relation to L2 language learner general writing proficiency. Our aim, therefore, is to investigate potential relationships between different proficiency L2 learners, vocabulary knowledge, and LD measures, and the extent to which these relate to IELTS bands. We assess (n = 69) L1 Japanese undergraduate learners of (L2) English (CEFR B1) and (n = 35) L1 French undergraduate learners (CEFR B2). We adopt a multi-faceted approach to vocabulary measurements, using: Lex30, a task based on word association responses (Meara & Fitzpatrick, 2000); G_Lex, a gap-fill task (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2017); and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (PVLT), a sentence completion task (Laufer & Nation, 1999). Participants responded to two different IELTS writing questions. For writing processing, we followed recent research (Kyle, 2019) and lemmatized all writing samples. Our results show that the productive vocabulary task measures can, to some extent, predict both the LD scores and IELTS writing proficiency. We report significant relationships between Lex30, G-Lex and PVLT scores, and a variety of LD measures and IELTS ratings. We report on PVLT scores show the strongest and most significant correlations with our higher-level participants. As correlations range from weak to strong according to proficiency level, this suggests that a higher IELTS task score reflects a rich productive vocabulary knowledge. We discuss these findings in terms of vocabulary knowledge, with specific pedagogical implications for L2 writing.