

A Contrastive Analysis of Lexical Availability in Spanish and English as a Second Language at Tertiary Level

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Abstract: *In the present paper, we carry out a study of lexical availability in a sample of modern languages students, whom mother tongue is Spanish and their main language of instruction is English. The process of compilation and analysis of data has been done twice in two different groups so as to be able to establish a real contrast between the two languages: English and Spanish. A quantitative analysis of the data is done and after there is a discussion of the findings. Our objective is to find out which is the available lexicon in groups of students at tertiary level and to see if there exist differences in the vocabulary those students use in their mother tongue in comparison with the lexicon they employ in their main language of instruction.*

Keywords: lexical availability, Spanish, ESL, tertiary level.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Lexical availability is a well-known field of study in both English and Spanish linguistics. Its importance and relevance lie in the fact that it makes possible to know what the lexicon potentially used by a group of speakers is and to determine if the use of specific vocabulary has to do with personal features or sociolinguistic characteristics that the speakers have in common. It can be used to analyze differences in the lexicon deployed in situational exchanges, for instance, from a gender perspective or checking whether divergences in the vocabulary employed by people of different origins, etc. exist or not.

In the specific case of Spanish, this linguistic discipline became quite popular after the creation of the Panhispanic Project coordinated and directed by linguist López Morales, in the 90's. The core aim of this project is to know speakers' available lexicon when they are discussing about a particular topic. Subsequently, with an enormous amount of data already being collected for this research purpose, scholars from America and Spain embarked on this project would be able to compile a dictionary in which the common features of the different varieties of the Spanish language would be exemplified.

Studies dealing with vocabulary and lexicography have been quite popular in recent decades and, by extension, the studies dealing with lexical availability, cf. López-Morales (2005); Samper-Padilla and Samper-Hernández (2007); Schmitt (2010); Fernández Smith, Sánchez-Saus Laserna, Escoriza Morera (2012); Gardner (2013); Jiménez Catalán (2014); Cairns (2015), and Payne (2016) their relevance in the scientific field of applied linguistics in unquestionable. In addition to the uses mentioned above, the analysis of the lexicon used by speakers of any language is quite significant in the teaching-learning process of a foreign language. This is especially relevant when didactic materials are created, as scholars and editors need to be careful with the vocabulary they select to be taught at each level. Therefore, studies analyzing lexical availability can certainly be considered as a valuable tool for the creation of materials to teach foreign languages. In the first studies carried out in this field, the terms picked out as more practical in communicative situations were selected on the basis of their frequency, pointed out in López-Morales (2014):

Given the state of lexical-statistical knowledge in the early 1950s, the selection criteria that seemed to be more meaningful was that of frequency: the most frequent words were the most useful and also, it was thought, the most used therefore, the ones that should be given priority (2014: 2).

Despite this, terms which are commonly used by the speakers of a given language are traditionally not always included into those frequency lists created for teaching a language, especially when we come to words with a fairly precise semantic content (López Morales, 2014: 2). For this reason, available lexicons are not necessarily constituted by terms considered frequent, but by terms which are essentially employed in a specific communicative situation. In other words, terms which tend to occur in a quite specific communicative context seem to be more likely for selection and inclusion in word lists. The theories developed by some French scholars such as Gougenheim et al. (1964) have clearly influenced works dealing with the analysis of lexical availability in other languages. López-Morales, who is one of the most prominent figures in the field of lexical availability in Spanish, has extensively written about this topic (cf. López-Morales, 1973, 1979, 1983, 1994, 1999, 2012, and 2014) frequently echoing and developing from these French scholars' work.

A word can be considered as available if, when talking about a specific topic, it comes rapidly to the mind of the speaker, and this lexicon is mainly composed by nouns. While on the other hand, the concept of frequent vocabulary refers to the most used words in a language without considering the topic or context of communication. As can be expected, this second group mainly comprises grammatical parts of speech without lexical content such as articles, prepositions and conjunctions. The combination of available and frequent lexicon results in which is known as the fundamental lexicon of a language. This means both social and cognitive aspects of the language.

Among those first studies dealing with lexical availability carried out in France aiming at facilitating the acquisition of the French language by immigrants, research by Gougenheim, Michéa, Rivenc and Sauvageot (1964) revealed that some basic lexical items in frequency lists of terms used daily by native speakers were not always attested. If they ever were, they tended to appear finally in those lists. The reason lies in the fact that frequency was the only one factor considered.

At the beginning, in these studies, the scope and boundaries of some notions tend to overlap and sometimes they were confusing. In this context, concepts such as frequent vocabulary, basic vocabulary, and usual vocabulary were treated as synonyms although they were not as

it had become clear that some words regarded as common, even usual were not actually frequent. This infrequency resulted from the fact that part of vocabulary, particularly nouns, was thematic; that is to say, their use was conditioned by the discourse theme (López Morales, 2014).

Michéa (1953) presented the concepts ‘available words’ and ‘frequent words’ as independent concepts with a different and well-defined scope “Lexical availability came to be understood as the vocabulary flow usable in a given communicative situation” (López-Morales, 2014). Additionally, he made a distinction between which can be considered as a *non-thematic word*, which refers to a word that appears in any type of text regardless of the topic; and on the contrary, the concept of *thematic word*, refers to a word that occurs when dealing with a specific topic or in a concrete communicative situation.

The French scholars applied these new theoretical contributions by establishing a series of lexical fields in order to compile the thematic words. These lexical fields are called areas of interest or center of interest (*centre d'interet*), which is the key factor when it comes to maintaining this theoretical focus for the study of a language's lexicon (Fernández Smith, Sánchez-Saus Laserna and Escoriza Morera, 2012). The first centers of interest that were used by Gougenheim et al. (1964) in their studies were the following:

- (1) Parts of the body
- (2) Clothing
- (3) Parts of the house (not including furniture)
- (4) Furniture in the home
- (5) Food and drink
- (6) Objects on the dining table
- (7) The kitchen and its utensils
- (8) School: furniture and materials
- (9) Lighting, heating and methods of airing an area
- (10) The city

- (11) The countryside
- (12) Methods of transport
- (13) Jobs in the countryside and garden
- (14) Animals
- (15) Games and entertainment
- (16) Professions and trades

RESEARCH METHOD, DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Our research aims are (a) to establish the amount of words provided by students enrolled in the degree of the Modern Languages degree at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and (b) to evaluate variation in students' own lexical availability in L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English). Research implies qualitative analysis of data obtained from a designed questionnaire to trigger terms within a same center of interest. Terms similar in those languages are registered.

The questionnaire has been completed by 48 students belonging to two different groups of the third year in the degree of Modern Languages degree at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in which English is the main language of instruction. Forty-eight students with Spanish as their mother tongue participated in the study. The participants belong to two different groups of students with the same academic level and age range and whose level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is between B2-C1. In order to avoid contaminating the sample, the survey has been done to one group in English and to another group in Spanish, thus 24 lists are in order per language. The participants of the survey had only 2 minutes to complete their list of words in relation to the center of interest so that they complete it with the first words that came to their minds without having time to think about it carefully or to translate the terms from Spanish into English.

Numerous studies within this field of study record and analyze every participant's response identifying a list of the most frequent terms for each section, but this methodology is not followed in the present study as we do not seek to check frequency of diverse lexical items. We determine if differences apply in the lexicon available in L1 and L2 in the two groups of students already mentioned, all of them in a same age range. To achieve this objective, we have reviewed each participant's lists independently and the results have been separated according to language within one specific center of interest: professions. Moreover, in other studies within the same line of study, researchers have had to establish certain limits when accepting the words of the lists because of problems of inaccuracy, including grammatical and spelling mistakes, when compiling the vocabulary. This is normal as the students participating in these studies are normally non-native speakers of one of the languages studied, but in our study due to the level of the students, B2-C1, this problem is not frequent.

The data and results will be shown below in table 1.1 and table 1.2 and subsequent graphs. Table 1.1. Data of the absolute frequency (English).

List of words	Absolute frequency	% frequency
Teacher	23	96%
Doctor	16	67%
Policeman	14	58%

Cook	12	50%
Actor	11	46%
Fireman	11	46%
Number of surveys	24	

Graphic 1.1. Representation of the absolute frequency (English).

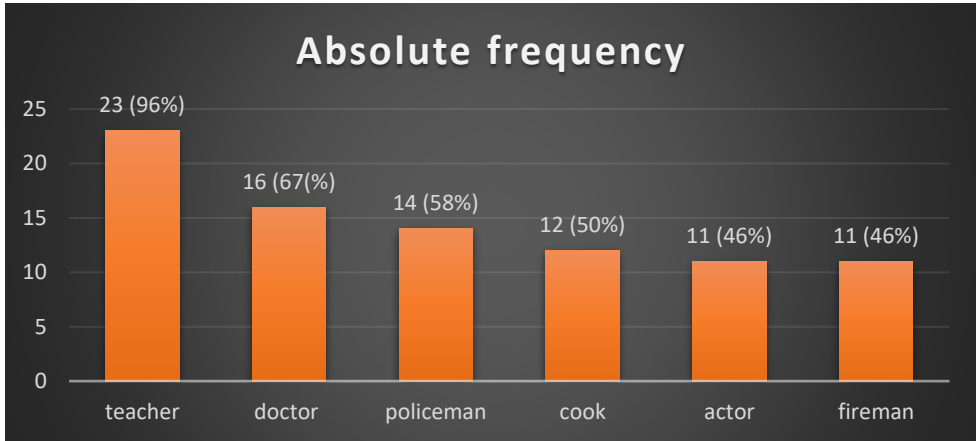
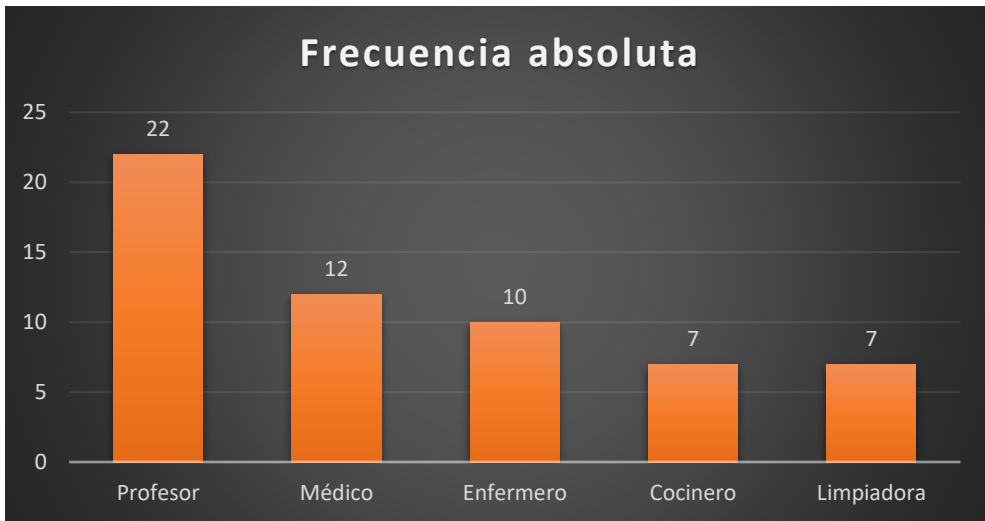


Table 1.2. Representation of the absolute frequency (Spanish).

List of words	Absolute frequency	% frequency
Profesor	22	92%
Médico	12	50%
Enfermero	10	42%
Cocinero	7	29%
Limpiadora	7	29%
Number of surveys	24	

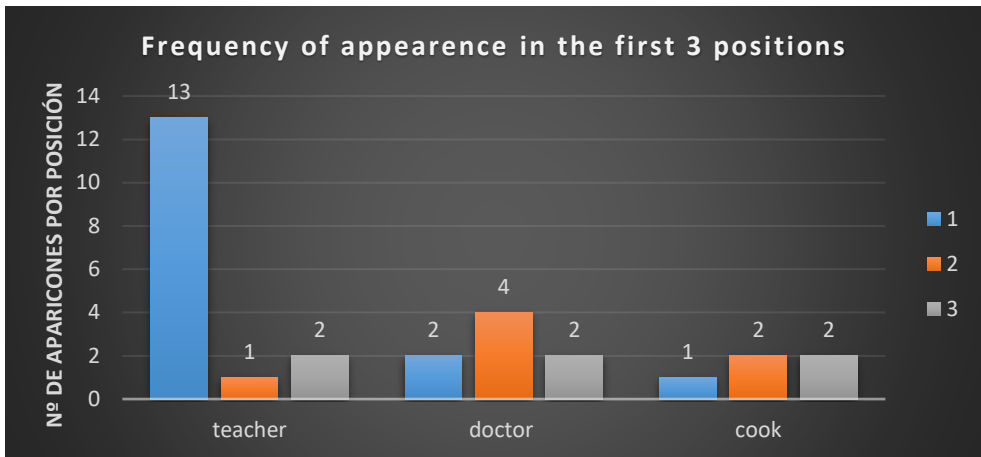
Graphic 1.2. Representation of the absolute frequency (Spanish).



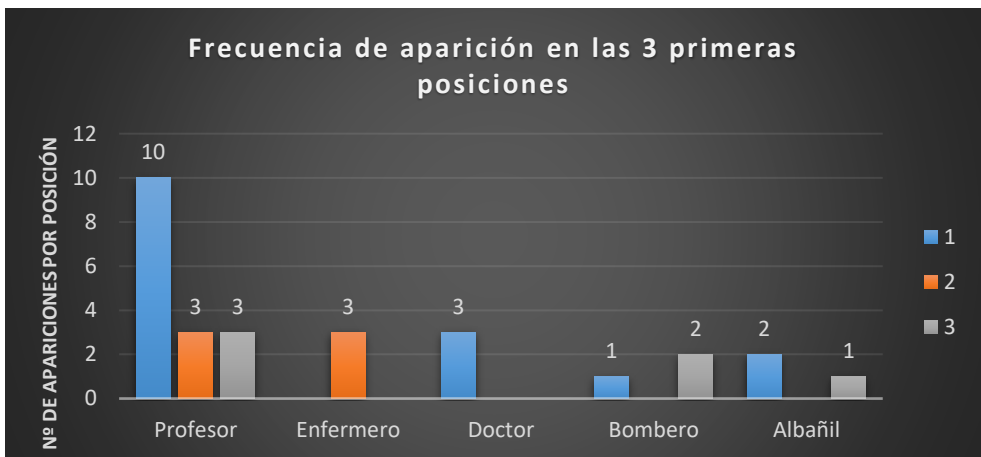
With reference to the data collected regarding absolute frequency, the most relevant fact of the present results is the three coincidences in L1 and L2; namely the pairs *teacher:profesor*, first in the rank in both languages, *doctor:médico*, in second position, and finally *cook:cocinero* in fourth position. The coincidences can be understood from diverse factors. In the Spanish surveys, the most frequent professions are the ones that are plausible to exist in the students' physical context due to social and economic reasons in The Canary Islands, while professions in English surveys likely to appear in American tv series and films are given as answer, namely *actor*, *policeman*, *fireman*, etc. Another reason to understand students' answer is to be found in their location during the completion of the questionnaire, i.e. the classroom. Consequently, the frequency of the term *teacher: profesor* and also the appearance of the profession *cleaner: limpiadora* can be justified due to the fact that these are the professionals that the students meet each day at the faculty, and cognitive relations may hold here.

However, if we note their positions in the lists variation is identified, as shown in the following graphics.

Graphic 1.3. Frequency of appearance in the first 3 positions (English)



Graphic 1.4. Frequency of appearance in the first 3 positions (Spanish)



CONCLUSION

Numerous studies concerning lexical availability have focused on the analysis of the available lexicon and of the most frequent words employed by a specific community or group. In the educational field at any level, primary, secondary or tertiary, studies dealing with lexical availability have a great relevance so as to offer teachers and scholars the opportunity to provide a more accurate and efficient teaching process and contents for foreign language lessons. They can be also considered useful to create didactic materials since they help scholars to identify which is the truly relevant lexicon for the learners of any foreign language. In this way, they will be able to express themselves and interact with other speakers of a given language in different communicate contexts in a more realistic way.

Although, studies dealing with lexical availability are fairly spread and well-known in the linguistics field, the present study has tried to give a different perspective to the topic checking lexical availability on university students whilst a great number of studies on the

topic only focus on secondary students. Moreover, we have offered a contrastive study Spanish-English to check if there exist differences or not in the available lexicon students have. The main purpose is to see if, regarding lexicon, tertiary students with a good command of the foreign language they are learning tend to use the same lexical items in relation to a specific center of interest (a) in their mother tongue and (b) in their language of instruction. From here, possible reasons follow.

In our study, we have found that, in the center of interest of professions, the most employed terms tend to coincide and that some of results can be justified through the students' sociological and physical contexts. The results obtained can be considered a first step in this topic showing that there exist some similarities in the available lexicon of Students at tertiary level. Further research would be the collection of a larger sample so as to diminish the possible deviations and variations of the results and to check if the results obtained are corroborated or not.

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