

*High School Learners' beliefs and their Influence on the Development of Lexical  
Competence*

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*1. Introduction*

Research in vocabulary acquisition has recently focused considerable attention on the development of lexical competence since lexis plays a key role in the development of foreign and/or second languages (Sánchez & Manchón, 2007). Several factors have been found to influence the development of lexical competence such as teachers' actions, teaching materials, learners' beliefs and strategies, among others. For the last thirty years there has been a greater emphasis on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching (O'Malley & Chamot, 1994). The focus has shifted mainly to learners' preferences and styles. Spratt (2001) states that analyzing learner preferences and beliefs can provide valuable and interesting information for teachers as well as curriculum and syllabus designers to make language learning a process more in line with "good language learning.". Richardson (1996) describes beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (p. 103). The aim of this paper is to explore high school learners' beliefs regarding vocabulary learning. It further aims to establish links between the learners' beliefs and the results of two vocabulary tests. We

hope this information is useful to the current state of research on vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary instruction and teachers' practices.

## *2. Theoretical Background*

In the last 25 years, the field of second language acquisition has seen the reemergence of interest in one area of language study, vocabulary (Meara, as cited in Schmitt, 1997).

Vocabulary has become an important aspect in second language learning, in fact, many believe, just as important as the main skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Nation (as cited in Nation and Waring, 1997) explains, "vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use and so on" (p. 6).

Learning vocabulary is an ongoing process that takes time and practice; it is a complex, continuous and dynamic process due to the fact that a person's lexicon is constantly changing. Unlike mother tongue acquisition, learning a foreign language implies that the learner has fewer possibilities of being in contact with the language he/she is studying and fewer opportunities of using the language in actual communicative situations. Thus, the ESL teacher has the challenge of helping students develop their lexical competence even though nowadays syllabuses and textbooks tend to be focused on skills, functions and grammar, especially in high school instruction. Furthermore, many teachers are exploring new ways of approaching the teaching of vocabulary taking into account various aspects; one of these is based on what learners feel about vocabulary instruction.

The importance of learners' beliefs has been widely accepted, as many studies have proved the relation between what students believe as regards lexical acquisition and their

relative success in learning a second language. According to Ramos Méndez (2007), beliefs are relatively stable ideas that an individual has about a certain topic. They arise and are shaped from personal experience, and they are inserted in a social context and grouped in networks or systems. The individual is convinced that they are true and thus they serve as a filter through which the person perceives and interprets the world around him/her.

Furthermore, an individual's actions are led by his or her beliefs. Pajares refers to beliefs as “messy constructs” that include

attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy (Pajares, as cited in Ramos Méndez, 2007, p. 16).

Williams and Burden (1997) make reference to certain features connected to beliefs that are worth mentioning. Beliefs are limited by the individual's cultural background; they are resistant to change; they are related to the knowledge the person believes to have and, as previously stated, they act as a filter for thoughts and information processing.

As stated earlier, students' beliefs are of great importance in the field of second language acquisition. Some studies concentrate on teachers' or student teachers' beliefs and how these influence their teaching practices (Macalister, 2012; Hassankiadeh, Jahanda, & Khodabandehlou, 2012; Gao & Ma, 2011). However, there are very few studies that analyze learners' perceptions or beliefs as regards the acquisition of vocabulary in a foreign language and their impact on the development of this competence. For this reason, we believe our study will be of help.

### 3. Methodology

This paper derives from the research project *Adquisición del léxico de una lengua-cultura extranjera: creencias de los aprendientes y uso de estrategias*, carried out at the School of Languages at the National University of Córdoba. This project is based on theoretical background and empirical research related to second language lexical acquisition, its use and evaluation and learners' beliefs and strategies. Its aims are to:

- 1) inquire into the factors that affect vocabulary learning and teaching in English and German as a foreign language in formal and non-formal institutions, with elementary level students (A1-A2);
- 2) find out to what extent factors such as materials, L2 exposure outside the classroom, and learning strategies have an impact on vocabulary acquisition;
- 3) analyze the characteristics of the activities that promote the development of vocabulary learning strategies in the textbooks analyzed in the previous part of the project carried out in 2012-2013, and
- 4) contribute to a better understanding of the process of vocabulary acquisition and promote a positive impact on language teaching.

This paper discusses the results related to the first and fourth aims.

For this study, the participants involved were high school students in three schools (two state-run schools and a private one) in the city of Córdoba. Three aspects are central in the analysis presented here: the learners' performance in two tests, the connection between their performance and their beliefs about vocabulary learning, and the similarities and differences between learners' performances and beliefs in the private and the state

secondary schools involved. Data were collected by means of a survey and two vocabulary tests administered at the three schools.

In total, around one hundred students, aged between 11 and 12 years old, answered the questionnaire and took the tests. It is worth mentioning that these students belong to the first year of high school, their level of English is elementary, and they have English classes two hours per week.

The questionnaire consisted in 16 questions related to learners' beliefs and strategies regarding vocabulary acquisition. The students also had to provide some personal information and details about their previous experience with the second language. On average, students spent 10 to 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire. For this paper 11 questions were analyzed. They aimed at three main aspects: beliefs about their personal opinion about learning vocabulary, beliefs about the treatment of vocabulary in the classroom, and beliefs about the role of vocabulary in communication. As this project seeks to find out the relation between students' performance and their beliefs about vocabulary acquisition, not only the answers to questionnaires are relevant but also the test results are. Two tests were designed on the basis of the most frequent activity types and the vocabulary items present in the materials used in each institution. The tasks in the tests aimed at both recognition and retrieval of vocabulary. Each section consisted in 15 items and it took the students around 20 minutes to complete the whole test.

In the following section the most relevant aspects regarding the questionnaire will be discussed, and afterwards, these findings will be correlated with the results of the tests.

### *3.1 Analysis*

### 3.1.1. Beliefs about vocabulary and communication (See appendix A)

In the group of the questions concerning the beliefs about vocabulary and communication, three main questions were asked: how important do you think it is to have a good command of vocabulary to communicate in the foreign language?, what do you think is more important to communicate in the foreign language?, and finally, do you think mistakes related to vocabulary can hamper effective communication? Considering the first question, the answers *not so important* and *unimportant* got very few answers, 6% and 1% respectively; 51% of the students believe it is very important whereas 39% think it is important. When asked about the most important aspect of language to be studied in order to communicate in the foreign language, the option *grammar* got 1% of the answers while the option *vocabulary* was chosen by 34% of the learners. The most chosen answer was both (vocabulary and grammar), as 65% of the students chose it. As regards the third question, 61% of the learners believe that mistakes related to vocabulary can hinder communication while 32% answered they were not sure.

### 3.1.2. Beliefs related to the acquisition of vocabulary in SL (See appendix B)

The second group of questions was intended to analyze students' beliefs related to the acquisition of vocabulary. To start with, students were asked whether they believe that success in vocabulary learning depends on the student's ability/talent, to which 72% of the students answered they do, while 18% said they do not. Another question was how sure students feel about their vocabulary knowledge to use new words when they speak or write. In this case, the answers were quite varied: 38% of the learners feel *not so sure* about their knowledge of vocabulary, whereas 34% feel *sure* about this fact; 12% feel *really sure* and

16% feel *not sure at all*. Students were also asked if they thought that learning new words was difficult: 32% said it is easy for them to acquire new vocabulary, 30% answered it is not so difficult and 20% said it is difficult. The extremes, *very easy* and *very difficult* got 6% and 12% of the answers respectively. When students were asked whether they have to make an effort in order to learn new vocabulary, 15% said they make a lot of effort, 45% answered they have to make quite a lot of effort to learn new words while 30% answered they make little effort to learn new words; 8% said they make little effort and only 2% of the students stated they do not have to make any effort at all. When asked how many of the words seen during the year they recognize and understand, around 82% of the students answered they understand most or many of the words and just 18% answered they understand few or very few words.

### 3.1.3. *Beliefs related to the vocabulary activities done in class* (See appendix C)

The first question in this group had to do with the importance students believe is given to vocabulary acquisition in their English class. There were five options in the answer: a lot of importance, quite much, not much, little and no importance at all. 50% of the students answered they believe quite much importance is given to this aspect while 25% of the students thought that a lot of importance is given to the field of vocabulary. Students also had to rank the importance of doing vocabulary exercises in class; almost 61% of the students consider it is important to do vocabulary exercises in class: 26% find it very important while just 1% believes it is not important at all. Students were also asked about their feeling as regards their understanding of vocabulary when listening or reading a text; 42% of the students believe they understand most of the words or many words while almost

46% think they understand just some of the words. The students who answered that they understand few words were 12% of the total.

### *3.2. Results*

All the answers previously mentioned have been compared to the results students got in the two tests they had to do. Taking into account the answers provided in the questionnaire, in only one of the schools, one of the state-run schools, which is known for its exposure to and study of languages, the results of the tests clearly match what students believe in relation to the importance of vocabulary. These students assigned a lot of importance to vocabulary for effective communication as well as the need to do vocabulary exercises regularly in class. This was reflected in the results the students of this school got in the tests. In this group, the average mark was 65%, the lowest mark was 50.5 % and the highest was 96.5 % (see appendix D). Although the students of the three schools place importance on vocabulary, as shown in the results of the survey, this is not always reflected in the results of the tests. In the other state-run school, the test results were lower: the average was 44%, the highest and lowest marks were 71% and 17% respectively (see appendix E). In the private school, on the other hand, the average mark was 45%, the highest mark was 83% and the lowest mark was 21.5% (see appendix F). The influence of factors such as time of exposure to the language, materials used, number of students per class and assessment, among others, also play an important part in the results obtained by the students. Research related to these factors would be helpful.

### *4. Conclusion*



To conclude, it can be said that the results of this investigation allow us to make a generalization about high school students in the city Córdoba: they perceive vocabulary to be important for adequate communication in English and they highlight the relevance of doing activities related to vocabulary in class. Moreover, generally speaking, they feel they have to make an effort to learn vocabulary and although they do not feel sure as regards their lexical competence, they believe it is easy to learn new words. They also consider their comprehension in the second language as well as their use of the vocabulary learnt in class during the year to be good. These results are of interest to language teachers, who need to know what their learners' beliefs and expectations are about vocabulary at high school level. Nevertheless, as stated before and in order to account for the differences found in the test results, more research is needed to establish the incidence of variables other than the students' beliefs, as well as an analysis of the strategies learners put into practice when learning vocabulary.

## 5. References

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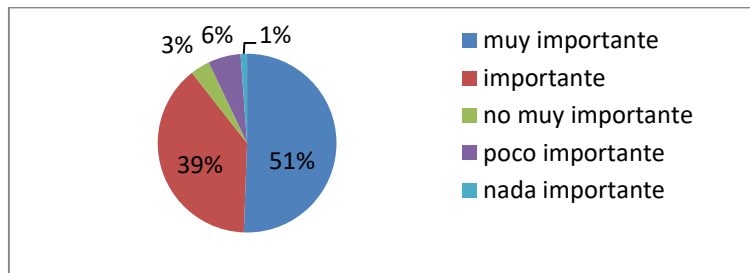
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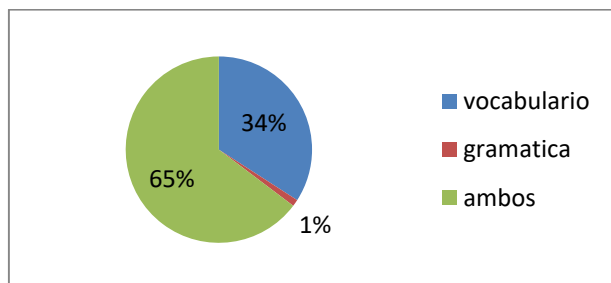
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## 6. Appendixes

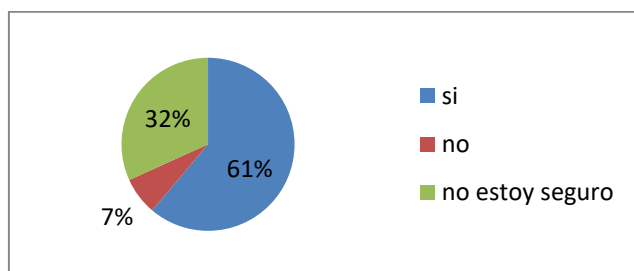
### Appendix A: Questions related to beliefs about vocabulary and communication.



¿Cuán importante cree que es tener un buen dominio del vocabulario para poder comunicarse eficientemente en inglés?

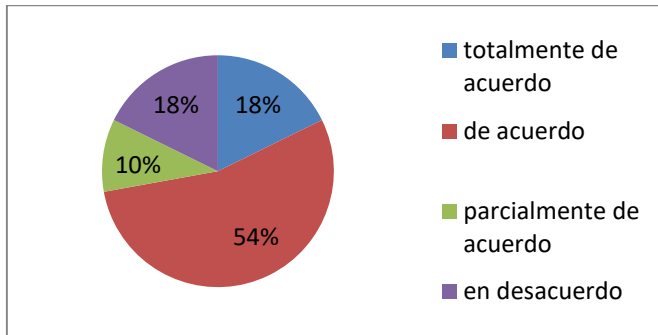


Para comunicarse en el idioma que aprendés, ¿qué considerás que es más importante?

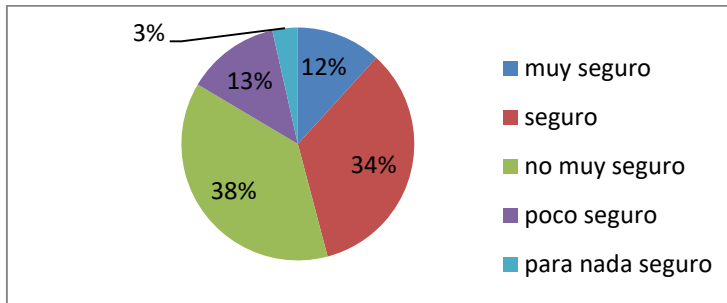


¿Cree que los errores de vocabulario pueden impedir una comunicación efectiva?

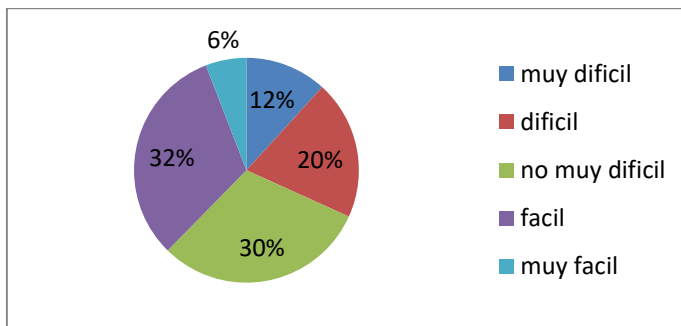
Appendix B: Questions about beliefs related to the acquisition of vocabulary in SL.



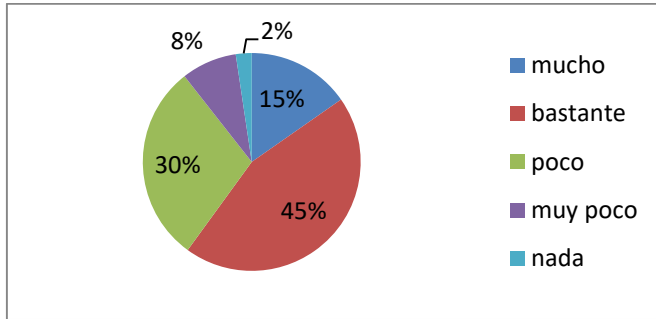
¿Piensas que el éxito en el aprendizaje del vocabulario depende del talento del alumno?



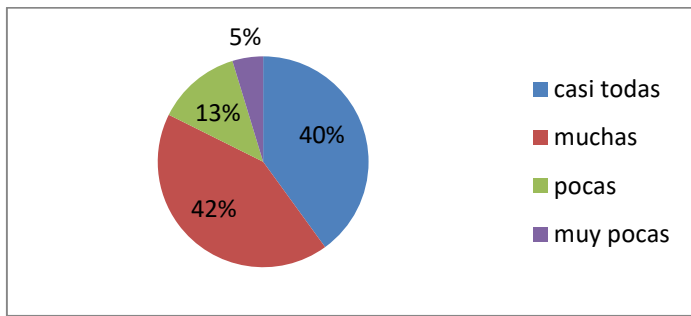
¿Cuán seguro se siente de sus conocimientos de vocabulario para usar las palabras cuando habla o escribe oraciones o textos?



¿Cuán difícil cree que es aprender palabras nuevas en inglés?

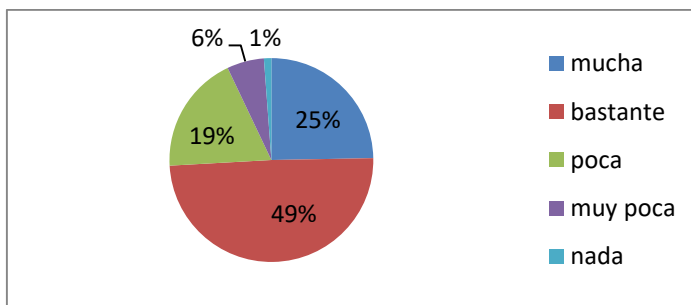


¿Cuánto esfuerzo debe realizar para aprender vocabulario?

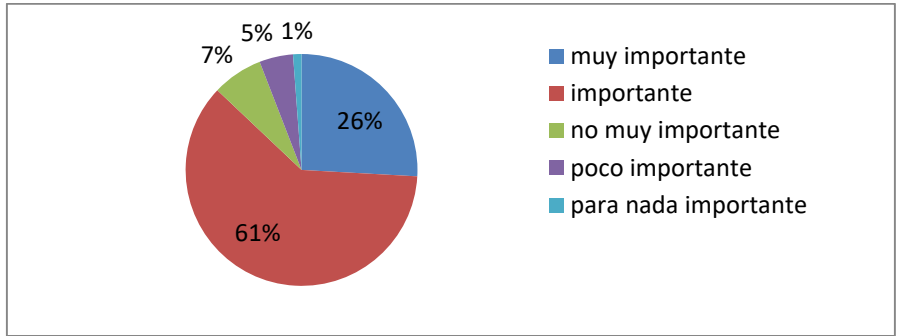


¿Cuántas de las palabras que nos enseñaron en lo que va del año considero que reconozco y entiendo y que puedo usar al hablar o escribir?

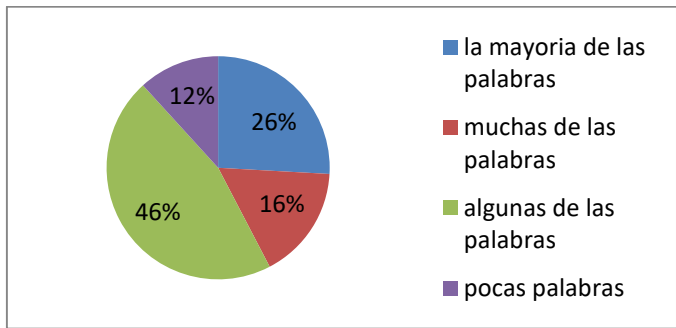
*Appendix C: Questions about beliefs related to the vocabulary activities done in class.*



¿Cuánta importancia te parece que se le da al vocabulario en tu clase de inglés?



¿Cuán importante es realizar ejercicios de vocabulario para aprender inglés?



¿Al leer o escuchar textos y hacer actividades en clase siente que entiende?

*Appendix D: Test results in State-run school 1*

<b>Highest mark</b>	<b>96.5%</b>
<b>Lowest mark</b>	<b>50,5%</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>64,5%</b>

*Appendix E: Test results in State-run school 2*

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<b>Highest mark</b>	<b>71%</b>
<b>Lowest mark</b>	17%
<b>Mean</b>	44%

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*Appendix F: Test results in the Private school*

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<b>Highest mark</b>	<b>83%</b>
<b>Lowest mark</b>	21,5%
<b>Mean</b>	45%

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