

Vocabulary size may be the most important predictor of second language reading proficiency, commonly explaining about 50% of the variation in reading proficiency (Tschirner, Hacking, Rubio in press). A handful of studies focusing on the CEFR suggested that the receptive knowledge of the most frequent 3,000 lexemes of a language is related to the CEFR B1 level, whereas knowledge of the most frequent 5,000 lexemes is related to the C1 level (Milton 2010).

This paper looks at vocabulary sizes associated with ILR reading proficiency levels in German, Russian, and Spanish. Standard Vocabulary Levels Tests (VLT) and official ACTFL Reading Proficiency Tests (RPT) were administered to a total of 184 college students at all levels of instruction.

Reading proficiency ranged from ILR 0 to 3 and vocabulary sizes ranged from less than 1000 to 5000 words. Linear regression analyses predicting ILR levels on the basis of vocabulary size suggested that ILR 1/1+ is associated with having a receptive mastery of 2,000 words, ILR 2/2+ with 3,000 to 4,000 words, and ILR 3 with 5,000 words for all three languages.

The discussion will focus on the predictive power of vocabulary size tests and their potential to screen students for low stakes purposes such as determining preliminary levels of reading proficiency.