Reading habits and lexical competence of future teachers of English in Primary Education

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on linguistic competence and the development of reading habits in higher education, specifically focusing on the analysis of the lexical competence of future primary English teachers and their reading uses in this foreign language. 34 students from the English Intensification Itinerary, from the Primary Education Degree at the Faculty of Education from the University of Extremadura have participated in the research. These students completed a questionnaire to determine the extent of their receptive vocabulary and a simple test in which they reported their reading habits. Most of the students have not yet acquired the knowledge of the lexicon of the 3000 most frequent words and neither have they established a reading habit in a foreign language. Lastly, in the correlation analysis carried out, no relationship between reading frequency and vocabulary size was observed.

Keywords

Reading, Vocabulary, Initial Teacher Training, Modern Foreign Languages.

Hábitos lectores y competencia léxica de futuros profesores de Inglés en Educación Primaria

Resumen

Este artículo pretende reflexionar sobre la competencia lingüística y el desarrollo de hábitos lectores en la educación superior, centrándose específicamente en el análisis de la competencia léxica de los futuros profesores de inglés de Primaria y sus usos lectores en esta lengua extranjera. En la investigación han participado 34 estudiantes del Itinerario de intensificación de inglés, del Grado de Educación Primaria de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Extremadura. Dichos estudiantes completaron un cuestionario para determinar la extensión de su vocabulario receptivo y un sencillo test en el que informaban de sus hábitos de lectura. La mayoría de los alumnos no tiene aún adquirido el conocimiento del léxico de las 3.000 palabras más frecuentes y tampoco tiene afianzado un hábito lector en lengua extranjera. Por último, en el análisis de correlación efectuado no se aprecia relación entre la frecuencia de lectura y el tamaño del vocabulario.

Palabras clave

Lectura. Vocabulario. Formación inicial del profesor. Lenguas extranjeras.

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Hábitos de leitura e competência lexical de futuros professores de Inglês na Educação Primária

Resumo
Este artigo pretende refletir sobre a competência linguística e o desenvolvimento de hábitos de leitura no ensino superior, focando especificamente a análise da competência lexical de futuros professores primários de inglês e seus usos de leitura nessa língua estrangeira. Participaram da pesquisa 34 alunos do Itinerário de Intensificação de Inglês do Ensino Fundamental da Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de Extremadura. Esses alunos preencheram um questionário para determinar a extensão de seu vocabulário receptivo e um teste simples no qual relataram seus hábitos de leitura. A maioria dos alunos ainda não adquiriu o conhecimento do léxico das 3.000 palavras mais frequentes e também não estabeleceu um hábito de leitura em uma língua estrangeira. Por fim, na análise de correlação realizada, não foi observada relação entre frequência de leitura e tamanho do vocabulário.

Palavras-chave
Leitura. Vocabulário. Formação inicial do professor. Línguas estrangeiras.

1 Introduction

In the Spanish context, the training of foreign language teachers in Primary Education has undergone an important renewal with the entry of our country into the European Higher Education Area. Thus, a three-year training course, specialized from the first year, has given way to a generalist training course of one more year, in which the training of future English teachers is concentrated on the last year of the degree, through the monitoring of a specialization itinerary that is articulated around three or four optional subjects. In this way, there has been a reduction in the teaching load for specialization, coinciding, moreover, with an increase in possible scenarios for action due to the generalization of bilingual teaching, which demands specialized training that is crucial to the success of these innovative experiences (BERTAUX *et al.*, 2010; FRIGOLS *et al.*, 2011; PAVÓN; ELLISON, 2013; PÉREZ CAÑADO, 2016).

The skills of foreign language teachers are key to quality language education. As stated by the European Centre for Modern Languages, successful language learning depends largely on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of language teachers. In this respect, there are numerous proposals setting out what these key competences of teachers should be (BLEICHENBACHER *et al.*, 2016), that is, what knowledge and skills

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they need to carry out their work, at a didactic, linguistic and cultural level. Without going into the determination of levels of mastery, which are sometimes also considered in development phases, what these proposals highlight is the demand for professionals who have a suitable command of the language that they have to teach, and this aspect is therefore key in initial teacher training programs. In this work, we intend to reflect on the linguistic competence of teachers in training and, more specifically, on their lexical competence and the development of reading habits.

Beyond the central role that vocabulary acquisition plays in language learning (BOGAARDS, 1994; LAUFER, 1986; WILKINS, 1974), there are numerous contributions supporting the importance of the lexicon in language use (SCHMITT, 2010), its condition as an indicator of the general competence possessed in a given language, so that the greater the vocabulary, the greater the competence (ALDERSON, 2005); FAN, 2000; HILTON, 2007; MEARA; JONES, 1988; MILTON, 2010; OVTCHAROV; COBB; HALTER, 2006; ZAREVA; SCHWANENFLUGEL; NIKOLOVA, 2005) and its relationship to different skills, such as reading comprehension, writing and, to a lesser extent, listening (AGUSTÍN LLACH; TERRAZAS GALLEGO, 2009; MILTON; WADE; HOPKINS, 2010; QIAN, 2002; STAEHR, 2008; WANG; TREFFERS-DALLER, 2017). Thus, for example, Alderson (2005) in his research on the DIALANG shows how there is a significant relationship between the lexicon and oral and written comprehension. The same result is shown in the conclusions of the study by Staehr (2008), who corroborates that the increase in lexicon is strongly related to success in oral and written comprehension and also, although less intensely, to oral comprehension. It is precisely on the oral side of the language that the work by Hilton (2008) is centered, which highlights the relationship between lexical knowledge and fluency in a language, so that the more words one knows, the more fluency one has in speech.

As we have pointed out previously, in learning a language, vocabulary is a key aspect:

> No language acquisition, whether first, second, or foreign; child, or adult, can take place without the acquisition of lexis. Sound patterns of a language which do not form a lexical item are no more than meaningless noise; grammatical rules in themselves, unless they relate particular sounds to particular meanings, are only interesting abstractions with insufficient communicative value. (LAUFER, 1986, p. 69).

Therefore, it is clear that it is important for students to have a wide vocabulary, which has led different authors to establish lexical thresholds for the performance of certain communicative tasks. Thus, with regard to the comprehension of oral texts, the work developed by Adolphs and Schmitt (2004) estimates in at least 2000 words the vocabulary necessary to achieve a coverage of between 90.36 and 94.30%, depending on the context of the oral discourse. Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) estimate between 2000 and 3000 families the knowledge needed to reach a 95% coverage that would allow an adequate oral comprehension. Regarding the comprehension of written texts, Laufer (1989) concludes that a lexical coverage of 95% can ensure reasonable comprehension, and therefore sets at 5000 words, or 3000 word families (LAUFER, 1992) the lexical threshold for satisfactory comprehension. In a later work, Laufer together with Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) suggest two lexical thresholds, one minimum and one optimal. The first assumes knowledge of 4000-5000 words and a 95% coverage and allows students to read with some assistance. The second, the optimal threshold, predicts independent reading and involves knowledge of 8000 word families which translates into 98% coverage. As Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) point out, these lexical coverage figures are very important as they allow us to calculate the size of the vocabulary needed for the use of the language in oral or written comprehension tasks.

Vocabulary acquisition, as Schmitt (2010) points out, is incremental in terms of both the acquisition of an adequate size of vocabulary and individual knowledge of lexical items. As Richards (1976) and Nation (2001) have pointed out, knowing a word implies mastering a series of aspects (form, meaning and use, in its receptive and productive aspects) which show the complexity of this task. This acquisition, moreover, differs in the case of L1 and L2, mainly because of the amount of input that, in one context or another, the student receives (WEBB; NATION, 2017). Likewise, although we generally think of learning conceived in an intentional way, with planning on the part of the teacher, most of the learning, in the case of L1, is done in an incidental way (NATION, 2001). Again, the amount of vocabulary learned in this way will depend on the amount of input and the number of times we find certain words, so that the more repeated contacts, the more possibilities of learning them (WEBB; CHANG, 2015). In the case of the L2, the little time devoted to learning the foreign language, and consequently the limited input received by the students, reduces, on the one hand, the impact of the frequency and range of

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appearance of the words on the vocabulary learning (WEBB; CHANG, 2012) and, on the other hand, it makes it unlikely, as Webb and Nation (2017) indicate, that the student can learn all the vocabulary necessary to carry out the communicative tasks mentioned above, so that incidental learning can also contribute to vocabulary growth, although in a much more limited way. However, as these researchers state, it is important to consider the benefits that both types of learning provide: faster and based on quantity, the first, and of more quality and depth, the second, as it allows the learning of certain aspects, such as placements (PELLICER-SÁNCHEZ, 2017), derivations or associations. In this sense, Restrepo Ramos (2015) points out that students of a second language develop most of their vocabulary incidentally by means of lexical occurrence in highly informative contexts, an occurrence that is encouraged and complemented by reading and multimodal annotations.

The research has been particularly interested in incidental learning through reading (HORST; COBB; MEARA, 2008) and, more recently, also in this type of learning through audiovisual input: television programs in L2 (PETERS; WEBB, 2018; RODGERS; WEBB, 2019) or short videos (MONTERO-PEREZ, 2019; MONTERO-PEREZ et al, 2014), in which, in addition to checking that vocabulary gains are made, although these are in the initial stages of learning, certain individual characteristics which may condition such learning are also assessed (QUIXADÁ; LINS; TAVARES, 2018).

If we focus on the first type of work, those that address incidental learning through reading, as Grabe (2009) points out, there is scientific evidence that extensive reading supports vocabulary learning. And this is despite the reticence shown by some researchers about the scarce increase in vocabulary from reading. Thus, according to this researcher, extensive exposure to reading influences associative learning patterns that turn out to be the basis of reading skills and vocabulary knowledge. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) propose, for their part, that thanks to extensive reading, students can access medium-frequency vocabulary which is sometimes difficult to learn, given the difficulty of dealing with so many lexical items explicitly in class and their exclusion from graded readings, which focus above all on the most common lexicon. Likewise, other researchers highlight the benefits that reading can have on vocabulary. Among them, Santos Díaz (2015) states that the productive vocabulary of her students, measured through a lexical availability test, as well as the identification of technical terms, increases

as the reading frequency increases. Both aspects, vocabulary and reading, are closely linked because if reading facilitates the learning of vocabulary, it favors access to reading.

Santos Díaz (2015) takes into consideration a key aspect in our work: the frequency of reading. As far as the reading habits of future Primary Education teachers are concerned, there are few works which address this issue when the reading habit refers to a foreign language. If we focus on reading habits in general, the results of the research are not encouraging. Granado (2014, p. 44) states that future teachers are readers "[...] poco asiduos e inmaduros, frecuentan poca variedad de textos, no dan gran valor a los libros, sobreestiman su práctica lectora, utilizan poco las bibliotecas y hacen un mero uso instrumental de la lectura". Munita (2014), for his part, explains that the students from the University of Barcelona evaluated have a profile defined by discontinuous reading careers, scarce intertexts and reading practices related mainly to best sellers. Vera Valencia (2017), this time with students from the Faculties of Education of Castilla La Mancha, confirms the little continuity with which future teachers read, as only a scarce 6% of their sample can be considered frequent readers. With regard to the reading in English of those students who are preparing to become teachers of this language, the work by Gómez López (2014) shows results that are consistent with the previous ones in that a high percentage of his sample does not have the habit of reading in English, reading only those academic materials whose reading is compulsory. Likewise, the analyses carried out revealed a strong correlation between the level of English command and the reading habit, with the students with the highest level being those who read the most and who are closest to reading materials that are not compulsory. Santos Díaz (2015), for her part, in her analyses with future secondary school teachers, finds that most of her respondents read some books, but only 4.8% read more than five books a year. She also finds a significant positive correlation between the frequency of reading in Spanish and in a foreign language.

Based on the data presented, in this paper we aim to explore the English reading habits of future teachers of this discipline and relate them to the size of their receptive vocabulary, which may also be an indicator of their general language competence. Therefore, we intend to answer the following research questions: What are the reading habits of students preparing to be future Primary School English teachers?; What is the

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extent of their receptive vocabulary?; Is there a correlation between the frequency of reading and the size of their receptive vocabulary?

2 Methodology

The research we present is framed within a quantitative approach, with a cross-sectional, descriptive correlational design. The sample is convenient and intentional, although 100% of the population has been counted.

For the development of this research, two different instruments have been used which have allowed us to measure the receptive vocabulary of the students with the first one, and the reading habits of our students with the second one.

With regard to the students' receptive vocabulary, we have used the Vocabulary Level Test (NATION, 1983), using the update made by Webb, Sasao and Ballance (2017). This is a multiple choice test in combination in which the student is presented with 30 questions organized into 10 groups of 6 words (3 correct and 3 distracting) and 3 definitions, which must be matched. Although this version is divided into five levels that test knowledge of the 1000 to 5000 most frequent words in English, in this study we have limited ourselves to the first three. In relation to reading habits, we have adapted the questionnaire by Gómez López (2014) by introducing, in addition, questions relating to the languages they know and the levels they have in them.

The study sample was initially made up of 36 students who are studying the Itinerary of Intensification in Foreign Languages -English-, of the Degree in Primary Education, at the Faculty of Education of the University of Extremadura. These are, therefore, students in the last year of the degree who are preparing to become English teachers at that educational stage. Since two students did not complete all the tests, they were eliminated from the research, leaving the sample of 34 students. The average age of the subjects is 23.5, with a majority presence of girls (n=20; 58.8%) compared to boys (n=14; 41.2%). All the students have Spanish as their mother tongue, except for two informants whose languages are Ukrainian and Portuguese.

The data were obtained at the end of the first semester (February 2020), once the theoretical subjects that make up the Itinerary had been completed.

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Firstly, the number of successes obtained in each of the frequency levels analyzed was counted and then the size of the lexicon was estimated, based on the results obtained and following the formula established by Nation (1990). To carry out the statistical analysis, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 19, was used. After studying the data, the suitability of the statistical tests to be carried out was determined and the size of the effect was established by means of *d* by Cohen (1988).

3 Results and discussion

In response to the first research question that asked about the reading habits of future teachers in Primary Education, Figure 1 shows us the distribution of students among those who declare to have the habit of reading in Spanish and English:
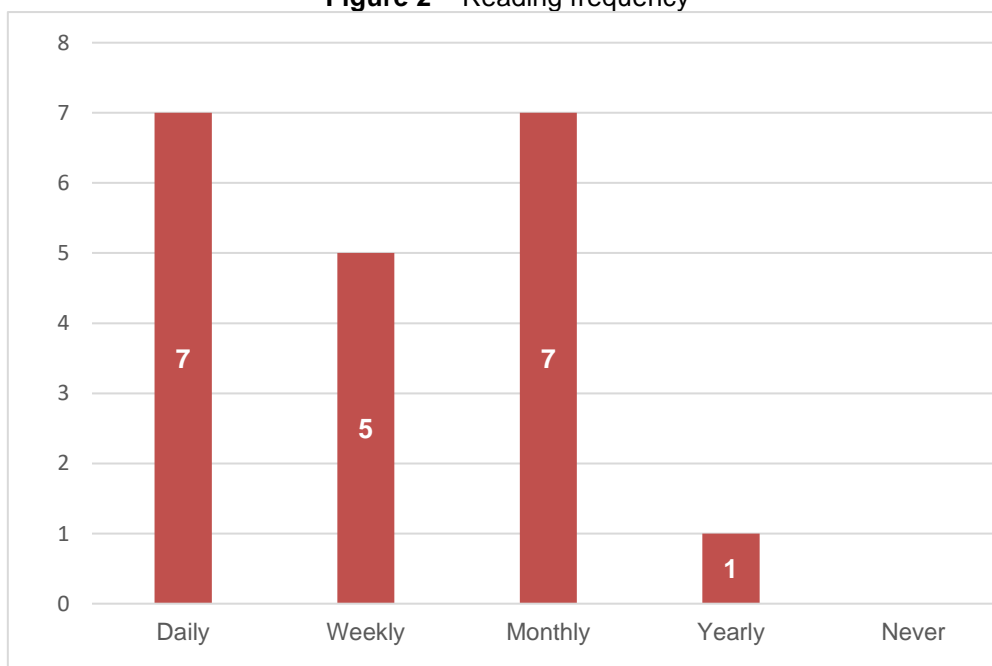
Figure 1 – Mother tongue and foreign language reading habits
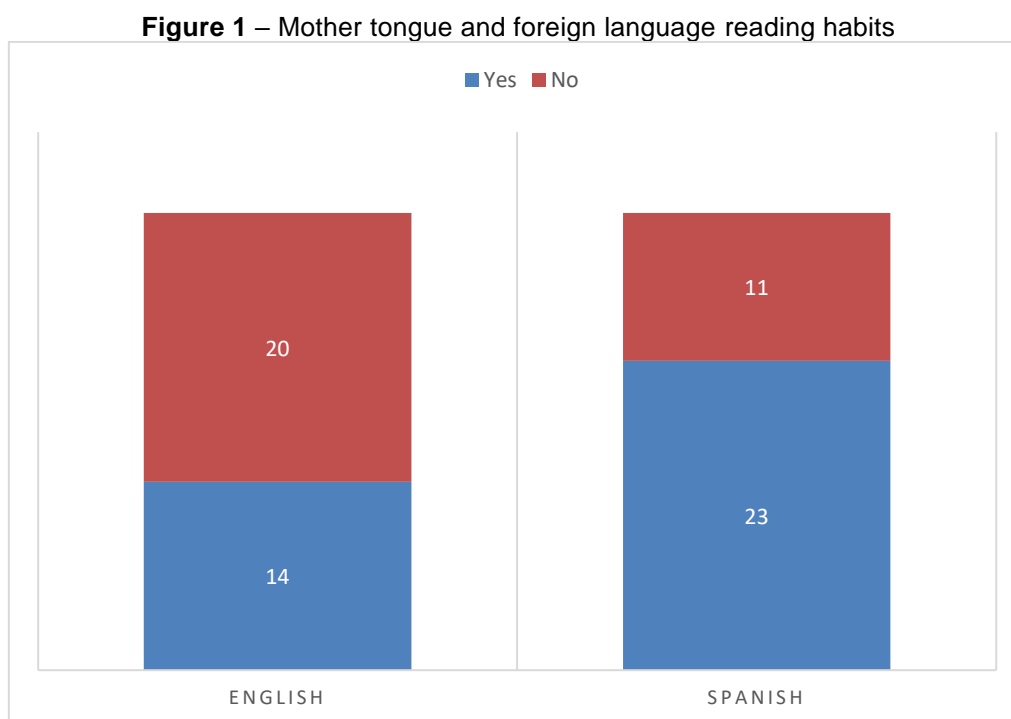
Source: Own elaboration (2020).

As it can be seen in the figure, the reading habit is more established in the mother tongue than in the foreign language. While in the former, 67.7% of the sample stated that they had developed this habit, in the latter only 41.2% had it, while a majority of 58.8% stated that they did not have a reading habit in the language they were going to teach. However, an interesting fact is that although 56.5% have the habit of reading in Spanish,

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but not in English, 71.4% of those who read in English usually do so in Spanish, that is, they are readers in both languages. This result coincides with that obtained by Santos Díaz (2015) as in his study there was a 99% positive correlation between the frequency of reading in Spanish and in the foreign language. However, if we focus specifically on the data in English, the results are not very good, given that, as we have mentioned, reading is an important source of learning in relation to language. Our results are better than those obtained by Gómez López (2014), although it is true that, in his case, the questionnaire was passed to students in both Primary and Infant grades and did not focus specifically on future English teachers.

With regard to the materials read, the majority of students (60.6%) stated that they did not limit themselves to reading the materials provided to them in their training and that they were advised to read them in order to pass the subject. Regarding the length of what is read, although a good number did not answer this question of the questionnaire, 70% of those who did indicate that they chose to read short texts, which do not take up more than half a page in length. Finally, they were asked about the frequency with which they read. Figure 2 shows how the sample is distributed with this question in mind.

Figure 2 – Reading frequency

Source: Own elaboration (2020).

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As we can see, an equal number of subjects do some reading monthly, on the one hand, and read daily, on the other, with each case representing 35% of those who have answered. Given that there are 14 missing cases, we can venture that these are students who do not read at all, hence they have not answered, as this question was intended only for those who had stated that they read non-compulsory materials. If this were the case, the figure for those who never read would rise to 41.2%, a figure that would be quite worrying, bearing in mind that these are future English teachers who can find in reading a way to perfect and broaden their knowledge of English. In any case, based on the results obtained, we can say that most of the students read occasionally, not having a deep-rooted habit of reading in English and this, despite the fact that 40% of the sample has shown itself to be a regular reader. If we compare our data with those obtained by Gómez López (2014), we find that in our sample the percentage of students who read daily is higher (35% against 10%) and less that of those who read only occasionally during the year (5% against 27.5%). However, we must remember that, although the samples are made up of students in Education Degrees, ours is specific to students preparing to become English teachers, which would explain the better results.

Finally, with regard to the number of books read, the average is 1.27 books per year, the sample being distributed as follows:

Figure 3 – Number of books read annually in English
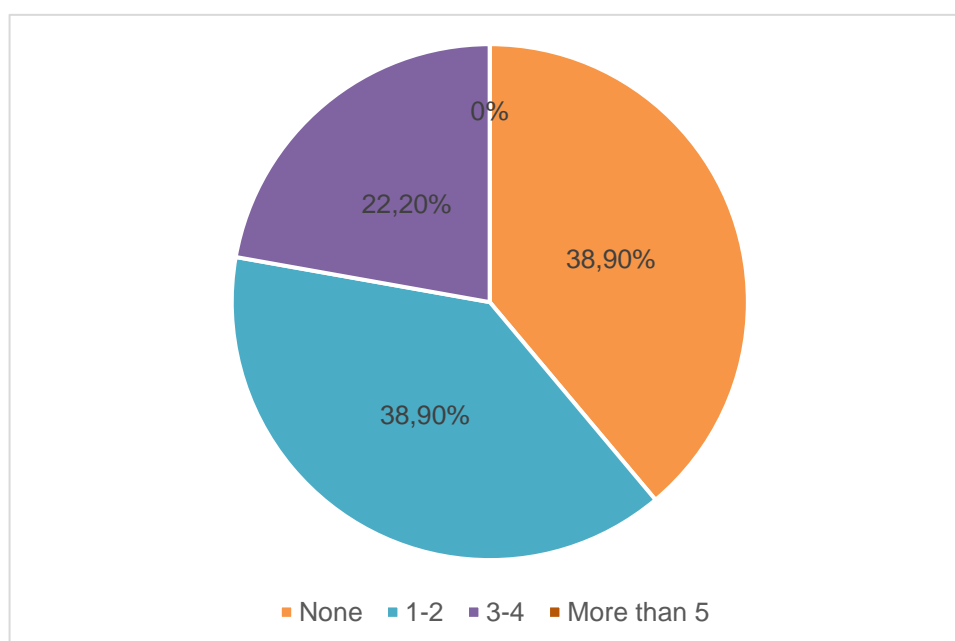
Source: Own elaboration (2020).

The figure obtained, which we consider to be insufficient, once again shows the little importance that our students attach to reading. However, if we compare them with those obtained by Santos Díaz (2015) with students from the Master's Degree in Secondary Education Teaching, our data is somewhat coincidental. Thus, in her case, almost 50% of his sample does not read any book in English, while in ours, if we take into consideration those who have explicitly indicated 0 and those who have not answered, the percentage could rise to 67.6%, which is much higher than that by Santos Díaz. In both our work and hers, the majority reads between 1 and 4 books, with no one in our sample reading above that figure.

Our second research question aimed to explore the extent of receptive vocabulary. To do this, we evaluated knowledge of the first three frequency bands (1K, 2K and 3K). Table 1 presents the descriptions of the results obtained.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics 1K, 2K and 3K

|	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Typical Dev.
1K	34	25	30	28,50	1,638
2K	34	9	30	24,06	4,605
3K	34	0	29	20,09	6,806
N valid (according to list)	34				

Source: Own elaboration (2020).

As it can be seen from the results, the average obtained indicates that the students have practically mastered the band of the 1000 most frequent words, as more than half (61.8%) have obtained a score equal to or higher than 29, a figure established by the authors of this version of the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) as an indicator of the mastery of that lexicon. However, although these figures are positive, we cannot forget that 13 students have not yet mastered the most frequent words in English according to the British National Corpus/Corpus of Contemporary American English frequency list (NATION, 2012).

As we move towards the less frequent lexicon, we notice how the number of students mastering the higher frequency bands is decreasing. Thus, while in 2K, the average number of known words is 24.06, there are now only 7 students who have mastered that frequency band and the minimum value obtained, situated at 9 words, is far from the mastery (also set at 29 words) of those 1000 words. When we look at the 3K, we see that the average drops again and only 2 students can prove that they have

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mastered the next 1000 words, none of them having achieved the maximum of 30 successful words.

Figure 4 shows an estimate of known words, according to the above data, using the Nation formula (1990) for converting the number of hits into words.

Figure 4 – Extension of vocabulary in the different frequency bands
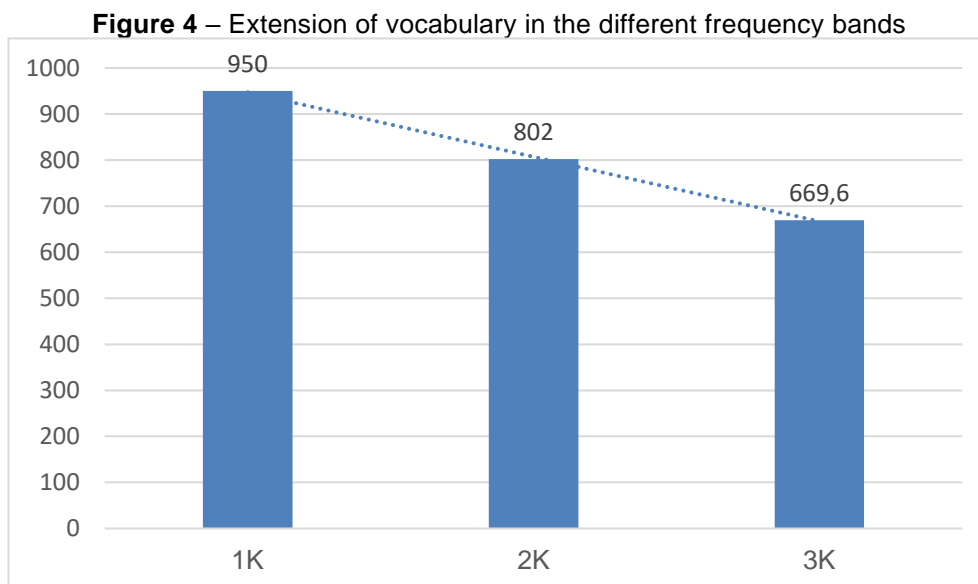
Source: Own elaboration (2020).

As we have already explained, while in the first frequency band students are, on average, very close to knowing the 1000 words that make up the band, knowledge decreases as the infrequency of vocabulary increases. The trend line shows the typical frequency profile set out by Meara (1992) in which the line descends from left to right, reflecting the fact that students of a foreign language know more frequent vocabulary and that this knowledge decreases when the vocabulary is less frequent.

Table 2, on the other hand, presents the descriptive statistics of the estimation of the number of known words.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics of known words

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Typical Dev.
Known words	34	1366,67	2966,67	2421,5697	378,98298
N valid (according to list)	34				

Source: Own elaboration (2020).

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As we have already commented, taking into consideration the frequency bands individually, following the indications of Webb, Sasao and Ballance (2017), there are very few students that we can consider to have mastered the lexicon included in all of them, two students specifically and seven, if we contemplate only the first two. However, if we study the average of globally known words among the 3000 most frequent, the figure rises to 2421, although, as the standard deviation shows, there are significant variations between them. If we look at the lexical thresholds that facilitate the performance of certain communicative activities, the average knowledge of vocabulary presented by the sample would not yet enable us to reach a coverage of 95% that would allow adequate oral comprehension, according to the estimates of Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013), nor the minimum lexical threshold set by Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) for independent reading, which may explain why the sample has not yet acquired the habit of reading, as they do not know the lexicon necessary for reading that does not require any help.

We cannot compare these results with other students with the same characteristics as our sample, that is, future teachers of English in Primary Education, as we do not know of any work that has been done on this issue. The studies carried out in the Spanish context have focused more on exploring the receptive vocabulary of students in the final years of Primary and Secondary Education. Thus, for example, Canga Alonso (2013) focuses on students in the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) who present a receptive vocabulary, also measured with the VLT, although in the version of Schmitt, N., Schmitt, D. and Clapham (2001), of 935.33 words on average. Two years of high school and three years of university studies separate the two, but the increase in vocabulary is quite considerable. The vocabulary of our sample is also greater than that of the students of the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas, studied by Canga Alonso and Fernández Fontecha (2014) who know an average of 1658 words at the end of their second year of studies.

Finally, the third research question aims to determine whether there is any correlation between the frequency of reading and the size of their receptive vocabulary. Firstly, we have compared the size of the vocabulary between students who claim to have the habit of reading in English and those who have not acquired it. Since variance homogeneity was not met, we applied Mann-Whitney's U-test, whose result (Z=-.298;

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p=.766), informs us that there are no differences in vocabulary size depending on whether or not one has the habit of reading in English. Likewise, if we interpret the magnitude of the effect size (LENHARD; LENHARD, 2016), we observe how, in this case, it is non-existent (d=.102). Next, we have proceeded to carry out a correlation analysis between reading frequency and vocabulary size, for which we have applied Spearman's non-parametric test. In this analysis we have focused on the 20 students who have answered this question, since the 14 who had stated that they did not have a reading habit have not answered. The results indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between reading frequency and receptive vocabulary (r=.005, p=.984). Thus, we can conclude that students who read daily or weekly do not obtain better results in the test and, therefore, do not have a greater receptive vocabulary than those students who read several times a month or a year. Although there is a belief that a greater vocabulary can be related to frequent reading, our results contradict that idea. Santos Díaz (2015) does find a correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary in the two foreign languages analyzed, although, in her case, it is the productive vocabulary, measured through an availability test, which is the object of analysis. Curiously, it is in the mother tongue that this relationship is not present.

4 Conclusions

In this work we have sought to investigate the relationship between the reading habits of a sample of future English teachers and their receptive vocabulary. The answers to the research questions formulated allow us to conclude the following:

- The students who make up the sample do not have a consolidated reading habit, which is much more present in the mother tongue than in the foreign language. Few students read on a daily basis and a high percentage do not approach texts written in the language they intend to teach. Therefore, it would be interesting, especially for future teachers of English, to encourage, on the one hand, the reading of texts that will allow them to broaden their knowledge, encouraging the reading of images, or other types of non-verbal language that accompany written texts (NÓBREGA, 2016) and, on the other hand, to

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investigate the reasons why they do not make the reading of texts in English an everyday activity.

- Receptive vocabulary is less than 3000 words, which poses problems in understanding oral and written texts. This may be the reason why students have difficulties in reading; hence the need to deepen the knowledge of the most frequent lexicon, since as Milton and Treffers-Daller (2013) point out, the size of the vocabulary is clearly related to the acquisition of reading competence.

- There is no relationship between the frequency of reading and the receptive vocabulary of the students analyzed.

Our work has some limitations in relation to the sample. Despite having worked with the total number of students who take the English intensification course, the total number is not excessively large. This opens up the need to replicate the study with new students, which will allow us to obtain more data that will enable us to analyze whether or not the results obtained here are confirmed. In addition, it would be advisable to investigate in greater depth the reading habits of our students and, especially, the causes that lead to the absence of such a reading habit.

As we have explained above, the size of the lexicon of the students who are preparing to become English language teachers, as well as their reading habits, have not been issues that have been analyzed very much, which is why comparisons with other studies cannot be made. In this respect, we believe it is necessary to continue working on this line of research and we think that, as a complement to the analysis developed here, we can also study the relationship between reading frequency and vocabulary, considered in its productive aspect.

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