
*Estudios de
lingüística inglesa aplicada*



A BILINGUAL GLOSSARY FOR IELTS BAND 5

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A thematic, bilingual glossary was used in an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) course at Politecnico di Torino, Italy. This paper reports on an evaluation performed on this glossary with the objective of determining its validity as a learning tool, as well as its usefulness in helping students pass IELTS at the required band mark. An overview of the literature on the subject of word lists, list-learning and bilingual pair vocabulary learning, together with a critical discussion of the glossary allows positive conclusions to be reached regarding the glossary's validity. However, the difficulty of ascertaining any tangible influence of the glossary in students' exam results reveals that the second objective of the evaluation may have been too ambitious. This paper pleads in favor of decontextualized vocabulary learning and the use of bilingual word pairs in SLA theory and English language teaching.

Key words: word lists, bilingual word pairs, IELTS, decontextualized vocabulary learning

En un curso de preparación para el examen International English Language Testing System (IELTS) en el Politecnico di Torino (Italia) se utilizó un glosario bilingüe organizado por temas. Este trabajo informa sobre una evaluación crítica del glosario cuyo objetivo era determinar la validez del mismo como instrumento para el aprendizaje, así como su utilidad para ayudar a los alumnos a superar el IELTS con la puntuación necesaria. Una panorámica de la bibliografía existente sobre la cuestión del aprendizaje de

listas de vocabulario y de parejas bilingües de palabras, junto con un análisis crítico del glosario permiten llegar a conclusiones positivas en lo que se refiere a la validez del mismo. Sin embargo, la dificultad de determinar una influencia tangible del glosario en los resultados obtenidos en el examen ponen en evidencia que el segundo objetivo de la evaluación fue demasiado ambicioso. Este trabajo aboga por volver a valorar positivamente el aprendizaje descontextualizado del léxico y el uso, por parte de la teoría del aprendizaje de segundas lenguas (SLA) y en el ámbito de la enseñanza del inglés, de listas bilingües de palabras.

Palabras clave: listas de palabras, parejas bilingües de palabras, IELTS, aprendizaje descontextualizado del léxico

1. Introduction

Politecnico di Torino requires its students to pass IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Academic Module at a Band 5 in order to graduate. This level has been established by the British Council, Milan, as approximately equivalent to Common European Framework (CEF) level B1+. The majority of students who enrol at this university do so with an overall level of proficiency in English of around A2-B1 on the CEF and a noticeably poor vocabulary repertoire. This has led the Politecnico Language Center (Centro Linguistico di Ateneo – CLA), in charge of all language teaching at the university, to dedicate a significant effort to vocabulary learning. A bilingual English – Italian glossary was designed by the English-teaching team as support for the Politecnico IELTS Academic Band 5 course. This paper reports on an evaluation performed on this glossary.

2. Vocabulary and IELTS Academic

Although a Band 5 candidate “uses a limited range of vocabulary” which “is minimally adequate for the task” (IELTS Speaking band descriptors, http://www.ielts.org/pdf/UOBDS_SpeakingFinal.pdf), a student intending to sit IELTS must possess quite a large receptive vocabulary, given the long and relatively complex texts they meet in the Reading and Listening papers.

They also need enough productive vocabulary to be able to respond to characteristic Writing and Speaking test tasks such as summarizing data in a graph (IELTS Academic Writing task 1) or replying to abstract oral or written questions. Some examples are “Do you think advertising influences what people buy?”, “What kind of things give status to people in your country?” (IELTS Speaking part 3) or, regarding the use of cars, “Alternative forms of transport should be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use. To what extent do you agree or disagree?” (IELTS Academic Writing task 2 – all examples taken from <http://www.ielts.org/teachers.aspx>).

It would seem then that our task at Politecnico should be to consolidate the 1000 – 2000 word level, and help learners acquire a modicum of lower frequency vocabulary that will allow them to structure an articulate response to speaking and writing tasks and tackle the reading and listening tests with some degree of ease. This does not agree with the typical pacing of vocabulary input in conventional language courses, but finds support in the literature. Hyland, 2002, refutes the idea that learners at lower levels of proficiency cannot cope with subject-specific language without first having mastered a core of general English: “... that weak students need to control core forms before getting on to specific, and presumably more difficult, features of language is, quite simply, not supported by research in second language acquisition. Students do not learn in this step-by-step fashion according to some externally imposed sequence. They acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than incrementally in the order that teachers present them.” (Hyland, 2002, p.388)

What vocabulary exactly is needed in order to pass IELTS at a Band 5 is not officially stated in any publicly available IELTS document, and it may well be impossible to establish. It is an examination that “covers the full range of linguistic ability from non-user to expert user” (IELTS Handbook, 2007, p.3) – that is, candidates sit the same test regardless of their level of proficiency, each candidate attaining a band which reflects their level of knowledge of English at the time of sitting the exam – and uses largely authentic reading texts. Therefore, it can have no specific vocabulary or grammar syllabus. The IELTS organization has not published a suggested

band-by-band syllabus. The Politecnico glossary may thus constitute a first IELTS Academic Band 5 vocabulary syllabus.

3. Background to the Glossary

In the 2006/07 academic year the CLA introduced a new course to prepare students to pass IELTS Academic at Band 5. Exam training and focus on language were dealt with separately in each lesson, the first occurring in smaller classes (30 – 40 students) and the latter in lecture classes with up to 250 students. A set of fourteen glossaries was created for the vocabulary part of the lecture course, with one glossary per lesson. The lectures were broadly based around the themes in the course book, *IELTS Foundation Student's book* (Roberts, Gakonga & Preshous, 2004), and the glossaries were compiled selecting relevant vocabulary from this book and other IELTS course books and collections of practice tests (see section 5.5 below for details on this process).

The students who attended this course were predominantly native Italian speakers in their freshman year of a mixture of engineering courses. They were 19 to 20-year-olds with an English-learning background that consisted of 6 - 7 years of English lessons. The main focus of language learning in the Italian school system is on grammar until the last two years of schooling. At that stage, students attending *Liceo* (science or arts- orientated highschools) do English literature (which usually involves translating English classics into Italian for comprehension and discussion) and those attending technical colleges take technical English lessons. Italian highschool graduates tend to have underdeveloped productive skills and an elementary vocabulary repertoire of general English. The predominant learning culture, carried over to and encouraged by the university system, consists of last-minute studying for exams, which are numerous, frequent and very often oral. Engineering students often have little interest in or even an aptitude for language learning. They are often ill-equipped for studying a language, as they tend to come away from school with few language-learning skills and may even have chosen a technical line of study in order to get away from arts subjects.

A set of bilingual glossaries seemed the most efficient way of responding to learner needs for a variety of reasons. Although a number of experts in vocabulary acquisition contend that vocabulary cards are the most appropriate vehicle for learning new words (Nation, 2001; Schmitt & Schmitt 1995; Schmitt, 2000), Hulstijn (2001) is more realistic when he admits that they may be scarcely practical as they are cumbersome to carry around. Likewise, the CLA teachers felt it was unlikely that the students would come to class armed with ring binders or index-card boxes full of vocabulary cards, which would also be extremely difficult to monitor in classes of 200+ students. Thematic, bilingual glossaries produced by the CLA teachers and made available on line seemed instead to fit their academic culture better by giving them concrete, goal-led learning materials ready-made to study. A glossary for each lesson promised to be useful support for the average Politecnico student, who usually matches what Sanaoui (1995) (quoted in Hunt & Beglar, 2005) defines an *unstructured [language] learner* – that is, a learner who tends to be dependent on class materials and takes little initiative in his/her learning. Finally, given that a 56-hour exam course of once-weekly meetings would give little scope for incidental vocabulary learning, glossaries seemed the most efficient means to convey the lexis the students would need for their exam.

Obviously, rather than creating a brand new glossary from scratch, we could have considered existing, published word lists. The Academic Word List (AWL, Coxhead, 1998) would seem an obvious choice if aiming to prepare students for what is marketed as an academic English exam. However, in-progress research of IELTS-type reading and listening texts seems to indicate that IELTS Academic Reading passages may be too short of academic lexis to justify using the AWL to prepare for them (Serrano, 2008). Another consideration against using the AWL is that it is probably excessive to require learners at A2-B1 level to master a word list which Laufer & Nation (1999) locate around the 5000-word level in terms of frequency. Furthermore, the ‘academic’ nature of IELTS Academic appears to be open to discussion, as it has directly or indirectly been questioned by a number of experts (Banerjee & Wall, 2006; Moore & Morton, 2005; Read & Nation, 2002). Even a superficial perusal of the IELTS materials available to the public (specimen materials from www.ielts.org; para-official materials - Cambridge IELTS Practice Tests; IELTS training materials from the main

publishers) will reveal that it is an exam that uses an academic setting rather than an examination of academic English. Thus, an ad-hoc, tailor-made bilingual glossary seemed the most appropriate option for our context.

4. The Use of Word Lists for Vocabulary Acquisition

Learning words from lists has a long tradition in the language classroom. It is often the case that this technique for learning vocabulary is a resource in teaching environments lacking in structured, principled methodology (the so-called Grammar-translation method – see Brown, 2000, p.15-16 and Schmitt, 2000, p.17) and often has scarce scientific grounding. Teachers may create for their classes lists of words taken from literary texts or course books, using selection criteria that do not usually require justification beyond their authority as language teachers. On the other hand, research has produced word lists that are the result of the effort to identify the words that are most useful to learners at different stages of their language development or that are most suited to their aims in learning the language. The British ‘vocabulary control movement’ of the 1930’s marked the beginning of an era of scientific production of word lists, which continues today with the aid of the revolutionary improvements brought about by computerized corpora.

Interestingly, a number of the researchers involved in studying word frequency and vocabulary learning do not view these word lists as instruments to be used by learners, but rather as guides to help teachers plan the vocabulary component of a course (Nation & Hwang, 1995; Nation & Waring, 1997). Their objection to putting word lists in the hands of the learners springs from the opposition to rote learning that has pervaded a substantial part of SLA research as well as ELT (see Hulstijn, 2001, p.280-81, for an overview). The reappraisal of intentional learning in these fields is leading to a shift in paradigms regarding learning strategies and tools, and word lists may be one of a number of instruments salvaged from earlier approaches to language learning. Hulstijn (2001) may be an example of this shift: “[the] unqualified rejection of rote learning information kept in a list format [...] may be unwarranted... Although it would not make sense to learn the entire list (... in the listed order), it would make sense to learn each individual item on the list.” (p.281)

Another change in ELT and SLA viewpoints that may clear the way for students using word lists is the reassessment of culture as a factor in the learning process. Hyland (1993) notes that an important area of intersection between education and culture is that of learning styles. Tinkham (1989) contends that rote learning is a learning style common in many non-English-speaking academic cultures and argues that it is more productive to use rote learning as a resource rather than struggle to impose new learning styles that clash with learner expectations. This attitude fits well with what Nation, (2001) calls “environmental analysis” (p.383), that is, discovering features of teachers, learners and the teaching/learning situation which may help or hinder learning.

It is a fact that there exists a substantial body of researchers and classroom practitioners that support learning directly from word lists: “The main argument against the use of word lists is that they are an unnatural way of acquiring vocabulary items. This, of course, is true. Word lists ARE unnatural, but so are many of the other things that we do to teach foreign languages, and it seems unfair to single out word lists in this way.” (Meara, 1995)

Paribakht & Wesche (1996) note that research has demonstrated that the process of incidental word learning is slow and gives no control over the words that are being learnt nor of the degree to which the words are known. In fact, research seems to point towards the idea that decontextualized learning tasks tend to be as, or more, effective than contextualized tasks in terms of developing knowledge of meaning and form (Webb, 2007). Laufer & Shmueli (1997) found that words presented in lists or sentences were remembered better than words introduced through text. Sökmen (1997) notes that bilingual list-learning has proven to be a successful way to learn a large number of words in a short period of time and even to retain them over time. Van Benthuysen (n.d.) and Griffiee (1997) found noticeable increases in their students’ vocabulary learning thanks to the use of word lists. In fact, even Schmitt (2000, p.145) suggests that word lists might be an efficient tool for vocabulary learning: “... teaching new words in class may not be the most efficient way of handling vocabulary. It is probably more productive to assign students homework that introduces them to new words, such as word

lists or reading, and then elaborate, expand and consolidate these words in the classroom.”

To sum up, an overview of the literature on the subject of word lists seems to provide numerous solid arguments in favor of their use.

5. Description and Discussion of the CLA Glossary

5.1. Structure

Each of the 14 sections of the glossary is dedicated to one of the themes covered in *IELTS Foundation Student's Book*. Grouping words by themes rather than presenting them in an unassociated way is a long-standing approach to vocabulary teaching in the ELT classroom. Schema theory (see Cook, 1997 for a brief but concise synopsis) would seem to provide support to this approach, and most international market course books and vocabulary-learning materials published over the past years organize their contents by topics. Furthermore, lessons developed around a theme is a well-established practice in ELT (see Thornbury, 1999). Support for a thematic presentation of new vocabulary is also to be found in the research. Applied- and psycholinguistics have sustained a long-standing argument against semantic clustering (the organization of vocabulary in sets of semantically similar words – e.g. eye, nose, mouth, ear) for the learning of new L2 vocabulary (Higa, 1963; Tinkham, 1993; Waring, 1997; Nation, 2001; Finkbeiner & Nicol, 2003; Folse, 2004). Thematic clustering, on the other hand, has been put forth (Tinkham, 1997) as an approach that seems to facilitate this activity over the learning of unassociated words. Hashemi & Gowdaeiassi (2005), have usefully summarized the findings in psycholinguistics that support the use of topics to organize vocabulary learning: arranging the target vocabulary in clusters of words sharing a common topic, though not semantic features, will make the task of learning it easier, as they help the learner visualize a general concept that will serve as a context for the new words.

Each main theme in the CLA glossaries is broken down into sub-themes, with the lexical items listed alphabetically within each of these subgroups. There were several reasons for this choice. On one hand, grouping or classifying new vocabulary is beneficial to learning it (Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001). On the other hand, the sub-themes reflected the order of presentation of the vocabulary in the lectures. Furthermore, the sub-themes often reflect specific topics that appear in IELTS tasks and the authors of the glossaries wanted to draw the students' attention to them. Unfortunately, the sub-themes were not as obvious to the learners as they were to the authors of the glossaries, and proved confusing. A student feedback questionnaire showed that this ordering of the words was not user-friendly, as the students often found they had to read through the entire glossary in order to find the word they were looking for. A necessary improvement to the glossaries is, then, to make them fully alphabetical, leaving sub-themes to be presented during the lectures. This was consistently the principal modification requested by the students in the questionnaire collected in academic year 2007/08 (see section 6 below).

5.2. Length

Each of the 14 glossaries has a maximum length of 2-3 pages. However, there are significant differences in length between glossaries, which vary from the 50 words in Glossary 1 (*IELTS exam vocabulary*) to the nearly 145 words in Glossary 7 (*Crime & Punishment*). Inevitably, more words were found for certain topics than for others: *Globalization, business & commerce* (Glossary 9 – 68 words) or *Computers, communications & the Internet* (Glossary 12 – 78 words) proved to be some of the shorter themes, while *Crime & Punishment* (Glossary 7 – 144 words), *Jobs & Work* (Glossary 6 – 134 words), and *Transport* (Glossary 3 – 127 words) were the longest.

By academic year 2007/08, the second year the glossaries were used, part of the teachers involved felt that the students would benefit from shorter lists, suggesting a maximum length of around 80 words per list. Other teachers supported the idea that the glossaries should be substantial, well-stocked sources of vocabulary for each topic, and seemed hesitant to shorten

them, although they agreed that the contents could be reviewed. This initially inadvertent disparity of views as to the purpose of the glossaries would prove to have undermined the entire project from the outset, as will be seen below.

5.3. Word Presentation: Individual Words, Collocations and Derivatives

A number of influential word lists, such as the GSL (General Service List, West, 1953) and the AWL (Academic Word List, Coxhead, 1998), present their contents in lists of single words. The CLA authors, on the other hand, decided to include collocations and phrases as well as individual words in the IELTS 5 glossary, on the grounds that “multi-word expressions are an important component of fluent linguistic production and a key factor in successful language learning” (Hyland, 2008, p.4).

Another feature of the glossaries is a table of derivatives or Word Families, listed at the end of each glossary. Knowledge of word families is crucial to improving inferencing skills in reading, as well as relevant to success in the Speaking and Writing tests, where lexical variety and avoidance of repetition award candidates points, together with lexical accuracy and appropriacy. It was felt that the systematic inclusion of derivatives would strengthen the development of this important, often underdeveloped, sub-skill. Presentation in table form seemed more straightforward and useful than listing the various forms of the words within the glossary, yet another difference with the AWL.

5.4. Meaning

It was decided that the most efficient way of conveying meaning – in terms of economy of space and straightforwardness - was through translation into the majority L1, Italian. Learning L1-L2 word pairs has a long tradition in language learning, although the lingering influence of the Direct Method, which excluded the use of the L1 in foreign language teaching, has somewhat tarnished the reputation of this technique. The advent of the

communicative approach, with its promotion of contextualized language learning and strong opposition to anything that resembled rote learning (see section 4 above), determined the banishment of translation and learning word pairs from the ELT classroom for many years (see Brown, 2000, for a good overview of these developments). This attitude was further exacerbated by the uncritical exportation to monolingual contexts of British ELT teacher-training, which was originally developed with multilingual classes in mind, where translating was often a practical impossibility. The abundance of what is known as ‘TEFL teachers’ who teach abroad without ever quite learning the local language has consolidated this approach (Harbord, 1992). As Swan put it: “Communicative methodology stresses the English-only approach ... that is such a prominent feature of the British EFL tradition. (Perhaps because this has made it possible for us to teach English all over the world without the disagreeable necessity of having to learn other languages?)” (Swan, 1985, p.85).

In spite of the consolidation of this stance in ‘orthodox’ ELT, teachers working in monolingual contexts and scores of learners have continued to use the L1-L2 word pairs technique. That learners use their native language in order to acquire a new one is an obvious truth that is not often discussed in ELT literature. Swan (1997), with his suggestions for exploiting what is obviously positive transfer, is a welcome exception, as is Stern’s (1992, p.298) pioneering defense of the use of the L1 for the verification of meaning. Bilingual lists are a very economical and straightforward technique for vocabulary learning, the rationale for which is very neatly summarized by Webb (2007): “...in an EFL setting learners may not always have the resources or be able to devote the time needed to acquire vocabulary incidentally... Since tasks such as learning word pairs or learning glossed sentences are relatively fast, there is little reason why they cannot be incorporated into a vocabulary learning programme along with incidental learning tasks.” (p.78).

Research into learning bilingual pairs of words has produced findings that support this practice. Myong (1995) found that L1 glosses resulted in better vocabulary learning. Laufer & Shmueli (1997) found that words glossed in L1 were always retained better than those glossed in L2, and words presented in lists and individual sentences were remembered

better than those embedded in a text. They go as far as to suggest that "... the mental elaboration which is claimed to affect retention may not necessarily take place when words are encountered in texts. On the other hand, bilingual lists may be conducive to such elaboration." (p.89). Finkbeiner & Nicol (2003), although more tentative, also support this view: "It may well be that the strong lexical link between L2 words and L1 words arises when L2 vocabulary is taught via translation... Much more research along these lines is clearly necessary." (p.379).

In order to facilitate finding the words presented in the lectures, we chose to list the entries in L2 – L1 order (English – Italian). Griffin & Harley (1996) found that the inverse order (L1 – L2) was more appropriate if both production and comprehension of the new lexis was required. In this instance, practical constraints outweighed the insight provided by research findings.

5. 5. Compilation Procedure

The production of the 14 glossaries was distributed among the five members of the CLA English team. The first step involved going through the unit of *IELTS Foundation Student's book* that corresponded to each lecture and identifying any vocabulary that seemed relevant in terms of topic match and estimated usefulness to our students. More obvious Latin cognates were ignored, as they do not present difficulty for our students, while basic but frequently misused words like 'job' and 'work' were included. The next step was to expand this list by looking through the IELTS materials available at the Language Center in search of further suitable lexis, in order to guarantee that a sufficient sampling of typical IELTS vocabulary was provided. The CLA has a well-stocked library of up-to-date IELTS materials, all of which are included in the IELTS website list of published books and materials

(http://cambridgeesol.org/teach/ielts/publish_list.php).

This broader search involved identifying IELTS Academic reading and listening passages that could be linked to the theme of the glossary, and combing through them in search of potentially relevant lexis. IELTS

Speaking and Academic Writing tasks were also perused. Here we considered both the vocabulary present in the questions and the lexis believed necessary to answer the questions at a 5.0 level. One staff member oversaw all the glossaries with the aim of maintaining consistency in the structure and length of the 14 lists.

5.6. Sources

The glossary writers began their search through materials pitched at a similar level to *IELTS Foundation*, as well as in books of practice tests to ensure that 'real' exam lexis was included. The scarcity of course books at IELTS level 4.5 – 5.0 soon became apparent, and made it necessary to resort to books aimed at higher levels. As a result, we can no longer be sure that the words listed in our glossaries reflect the vocabulary a Band 5 candidate should know. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the content of the CLA glossaries is affected by an unresolved disparity of views regarding their purpose. Some of the authors felt that all the words in the glossaries - or as many as possible – should be taught in the lectures. Other authors, on the other hand, believed each glossary should constitute a comprehensive compilation of words for each of the topics, it being irrelevant whether the words were presented in the lectures or not. This led them to include words taken from dictionaries such as the *Longman Exams Dictionary*, as well as words each of these authors associated with the topic, based on his or her own judgement. The teacher supervising the glossaries adhered to the first viewpoint, and tended to lighten the glossaries of words not presented in the lectures. However, a reluctance to interfere with the work produced by her colleagues reduced the effect of these intentions. The result is a somewhat inconsistent selection of words that are not guaranteed to be essential to passing the exam at a Band 5.

The corollary is that the glossaries are in need of a complete overhaul to ensure that the lexis included is effectively IELTS vocabulary.

As long as there is no official vocabulary syllabus to refer to, it would seem safer to exploit only published IELTS material and texts of the sort used in the exam (from *Science*, *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, *The Economist* among others). An urgent improvement needed is to write an introduction explaining the aims of the glossaries and what sort of vocabulary they include. Here it would be possible to clarify that they do not and cannot intend to be exhaustive and include only words identified as typical and useful for IELTS with a Band 5 in mind.

5.7. Content

A common criterion for the selection of the vocabulary to introduce in a course is frequency. For our glossaries, this criterion was applied only in relation to frequency in IELTS texts and tasks. Other standards for inclusion in the glossaries were coverage, again only in terms of the type of texts and tasks to be found in IELTS, and above all, relevance to IELTS topics. As a result, both quite wide-coverage, cross-topic vocabulary is present, together with words that are very topic-specific. For example, wide-coverage words in Glossary 5 (*Intelligence, evolution and animal behaviour*) include: *accurate, insight into, misinterpretation, premise*, while more topic-specific terms are *mate, captive breeding, gifted* or *maze*.

In a review of the glossaries it might be appropriate to reduce the presence of very detailed, topic-specific lexis to a small sampling of relevant words that would provide the learners with an idea of the degree of specificity they will encounter in the exam. In this way, the glossaries would have an awareness-raising function and could avoid including excessively detailed vocabulary that could never be exhaustive in any case. For instance, Glossary 5 might keep the words *species, breed, mate, trait*, while words that could be deleted from this glossary might be *chick, monkey, mosquito, mouse, rat*.

Any further discussion of the content of the glossaries makes reference to *Vocabulary for IELTS* necessary. This book, published by

Cambridge University Press in 2008 and written by experienced IELTS exam writer Paulene Cullen, was not available at the time of writing of the CLA glossaries. However, Cullen's access to the Cambridge Learner Corpus and to authentic IELTS materials, and the thematic word lists included at the end make it the most exhaustive and the most authoritative IELTS vocabulary book on the market, and thus fundamental to the revision of the CLA glossaries.

A contrast of the *Vocabulary for IELTS* word lists with our glossaries reveals that these contain around 20% of words from Cullen's book. How should this be interpreted? Is this low percentage due to the fact that the book targets a higher level of proficiency than our glossaries (B2 – C1 on the CEF)? Were our selection criteria and compilation procedure seriously flawed? Leaving aside the entries from non-IELTS sources, the majority of the words in our glossaries were found in IELTS course books and practice tests. Are there some incongruities in published IELTS materials?

6. Intended Use and Actual Use

The glossaries were designed to support the lecture course and provide the students with a list of useful words to learn in order to pass IELTS with a 5. The idea was, then, to create a tool. The finished course reveals a number of major flaws in this scheme, however. On one hand, conflicting information was given in the lectures as to the purpose of the glossaries. On the other hand, very few indications were provided regarding how to use them. A few general vocabulary-learning techniques were presented in the first lesson (though never followed up in the subsequent lectures), but no link was made between these techniques and the glossaries. Progress in learning the glossary vocabulary was never checked more than very superficially. Every lesson began with two or three slides that revised lexis from previous lessons, but this cannot be considered enough to either encourage or check learning. Finally, there was an inconsistent exploitation of the glossary vocabulary in the lectures, which weakens the claim that they support lesson content and again makes the purpose of the glossaries unclear. As has been

suggested above, this situation reveals an underlying lack of agreement within the writing team as to the purpose of the glossary.

A revised version of the glossaries should be supported by an introduction explaining their content and purpose, as well as a list of suggestions for learning the words in them. This list should indicate how much time to dedicate to the glossaries in each self-study period, suggest daily or weekly study aims, such as how many words to try to learn in one study period, and revision strategies.

A student questionnaire was collected in the spring of 2008 in order to gain insight into how the glossaries were perceived and used by the students. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions subdivided into three areas: the perceived usefulness of the glossaries, their ease of use and how and how often they were studied. The questionnaire was circulated in Italian to ensure full comprehension on the part of the students. 55 students from both lecture courses anonymously answered the questionnaire.

The students' replies show a generally positive perception of the glossaries' usefulness: 85% of the students found them globally useful, and 73% felt that the glossaries would help them obtain a better score in IELTS. The glossaries were also largely found to be easy to use by 89% of the students. However, this positive view of the glossaries is contradicted by some consistently negative data regarding how much the glossaries actually helped the students improve their language skills. The majority of the students rated the improvement of their language skills brought about by the glossaries as average (3 on a scale of 5, where 5 is the highest ranking). A revealing 30% ranked the improvement of their listening skills due to the glossaries as a two (2). Likewise, 40% of the respondents ranked the improvement of their speaking abilities due to the glossaries as two. It would begin to seem that the glossaries are not so useful as the answers to the questions on perceived usefulness indicated. There are striking contradictions between the students' perception of the glossaries on the one hand, and the use they made of them and the results they obtained from them, on the other. In fact, the answers to the last section of the questionnaire essentially show that the students hardly studied the glossaries, and that if they did, it was in a very superficial and unsystematic way. It

would seem, then, that the glossaries had high face value for the students, while the low level of practical results must be attributed to some degree to the fact that they were hardly studied.

51% of the students looked through the glossary during the lecture rather than before class (3%). However, 34% of the students claimed they referred to the glossaries in order to do reading and writing work for the course, which means a third of the students actually did, to some extent, study the glossaries outside of class. Again, some contradictory answers, which may well indicate flaws in the structure and wording of the questionnaire.

Question 9 asks how the glossaries are studied. Students chose from six options, where five were common list-learning techniques and the sixth was open. 22% of the students did not choose any answers, which must be interpreted as meaning that they did not study the glossaries at all. Of the 78% that did choose some answers, as many as 22% claimed to make “a mental note” of the new words and 25% “read through each glossary and made a note or mark in the margin” next to new words/words they did not remember. This means at least part of the time a considerable proportion of the students did very little in terms of serious studying of the glossary contents. 44% of the students claimed they used the approach of covering the Italian or the English column of the glossaries to try to recall the opposite column. Some more questions would be needed here to probe further into this answer, as it would be interesting to know how often this technique was used and with what results. Replies to further questions were also revealing of the students’ poor study habits and little awareness of the task of learning a new language. They also again highlight our failure to give the students guidance in their vocabulary learning. In fact, 41% of the students stated that they would begin to study the glossaries toward the end of the course and 21% of the students intended to begin learning the glossaries after the course was finished. As the questionnaire was collected at the end of the course, this data shows that an alarmingly large number of students remained unaware of the size of their task even after completing a full IELTS course and having worked with 14 glossaries that add up to 1267 words. Another 21% of the students claim to review the glossaries “every few weeks”. It would have been interesting to probe this reply with questions such as “What do you do

when you study the glossaries every few weeks?” and “Has this approach given you good results?”

To sum up, the results of the questionnaire reveal a striking disparity between perceived benefits of the glossaries and real benefits, and show that the students do not use the glossaries as the lexicon-building tools they were intended to be. The conclusion that must be drawn from this is that the students need to be provided with clear indications as to how they can go about learning the vocabulary in the glossaries. The fact that the glossaries were generally seen as useful and well-designed means they have good face value, a feature that should not be allowed to go to waste.

7. Validity

In 2006/07, out of 543 potential students, around 200 attended the lecture courses during the month of October (and so came into contact with the glossaries). This number dwindled to about 100 in February and fell to about 60 by May. Only 29 of these students took the end-of-course test, a mock IELTS test that determined whether they could enrol for the exam. 23 passed the mock exam, and 20 sat IELTS in July 2007, with the following results:

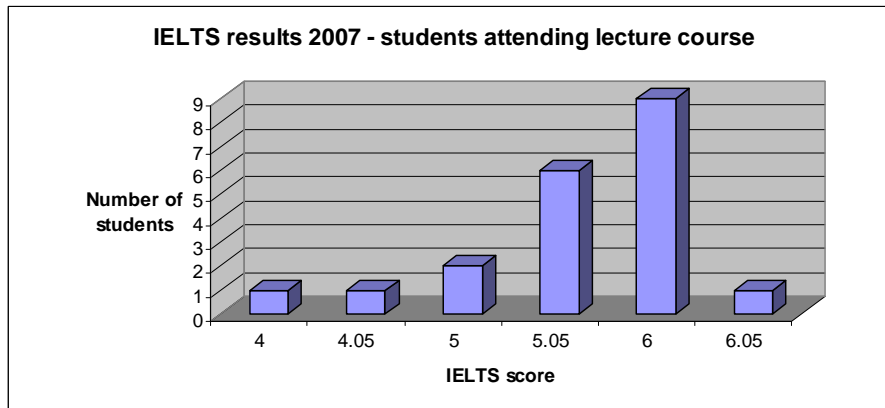


Figure 1. IELTS results 2007 (students attending lecture course).

380 students that did not attend the lecture course sat the end-of-course test (70% of students in the Intermediate level). 319 of these students passed the mock exam. 182 students from this group sat IELTS in July 2007 with the following results:

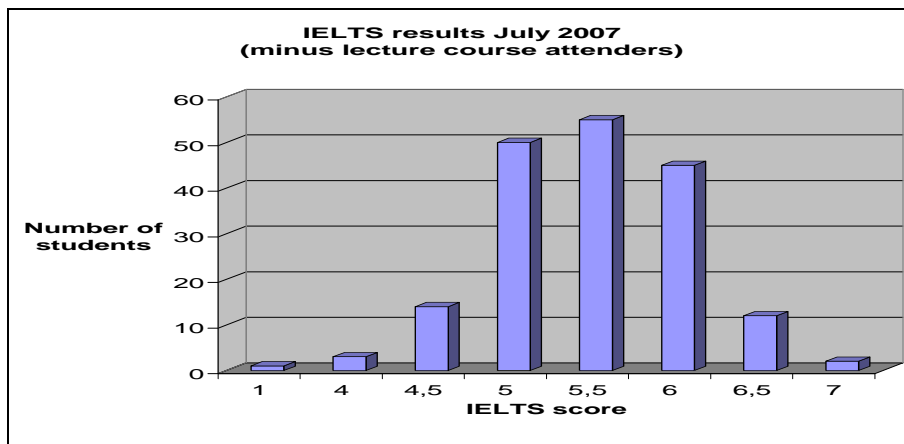


Figure 2. IELTS results 2007 (minus lecture course attenders).

It is evident that these student numbers are too low for any useful conclusions to be drawn about the validity of the glossaries. In any case, as no part of IELTS specifically tests vocabulary, the students' scores give us little direct evidence of the success or failure of the glossaries as facilitators for attaining IELTS Band 5. That the students who attended the lecture course generally obtained IELTS scores that were above the required mark of 5 (80% achieved scores between 5.5 and 6.5) can be read to confirm what we already knew - that these were good students. They showed perseverance and a responsible attitude by attending the full course (lessons in small groups plus lecture course), taking the final test and sitting IELTS in the session immediately after the course was finished. What role, if any, the glossaries may have had in their success is not evident from their exam results.

It would seem that the evaluation of the CLA glossaries has to be on their intrinsic assets, as evidence of their effects is too scanty. The following is a list of their positive features, in no particular order:

- The glossaries are user-friendly in that they are brief (maximum three pages), straightforward (words in English with their translation into Italian) and clear (dedicated to specific topics).
- Each glossary covers a common IELTS topic, thus ensuring that the learner can access vocabulary for most of the topics they may meet in the exam.
- They facilitate autonomous learning in that they are fully self-contained (the words needed are listed with their translations) and can be referred to at any time and in any place.
- They have good face value in that they effectively contain a finite list of words selected because of their usefulness towards IELTS.
- The glossaries are perceived as useful course material, as the answers to the questionnaire show.
- A frequent argument against word lists is that they present words devoid of a context that will facilitate learning (see Waring, 2000). For our glossaries a context is readily at hand in the lectures where the vocabulary is introduced and practiced. Furthermore, the students can download the slides with the full lecture content in pdf format after the lesson and thus retrieve the context for the vocabulary.
- Learning vocabulary in a foreign language is a daunting task, if only because of its sheer volume. A glossary restricts this task to an attainable goal, with a finite number of words to learn.
- The CLA glossaries include collocations and word families, which makes them more than a simple list of words.
- The words in the glossaries can largely be trusted to proceed from IELTS materials, thereby guaranteeing that they are appropriate for studying for IELTS.

The discussion of the glossaries in this paper has also shown that they contain a number of negative aspects. Some are inherent to glossaries as a concept. Others are points that can be improved. They are listed below, as before, in no particular order.

- As we have seen, a common criticism of word lists is that they are fixed and cannot be manipulated (Nation, 2001, p.297).
- The division of each glossary into sub-themes is unclear and this was pointed out by more than half of the students who answered the questionnaire.
- Some glossaries may be too long (up to 144 words). 80 words seems a more reasonable length.
- There was insufficient standardization of the word selection process, which was excessively subjective and idiosyncratic. As a result, the glossaries include words that did not come from IELTS texts and tasks and others that were taken from course books aiming at IELTS scores higher than 5.0.
- No guidelines were given as to how to learn the vocabulary in the glossaries.
- The glossary entries sometimes suffer from an excess of information (British English vs North American English, synonyms, different possible parts of speech) that makes for untidiness and lack of clarity.
- The mismatch between the words in the glossaries and the content of the word lists in *Vocabulary for IELTS* is so great as to merit careful attention. Is it due to poor selection criteria on our part or are published IELTS materials not as reliable as they should be?
- There is an inconsistent treatment of derivatives throughout the glossaries, despite the fact that word families were considered of high importance for the purposes of the course.
- There was a serious mismatch between the intended and the actual use of the glossaries.

Now that the positive and the negative features of the glossaries have been identified, the original questions need to be returned to: are the glossaries valid learning tools? Can they improve students' possibilities of attaining IELTS Band 5? On the basis of the research literature on word lists, and the critical review of the glossaries performed in the evaluation, the conclusion seems to be that they could become useful learning tools if the improvements outlined in this paper are implemented. These are namely: creating a user's guide with suggestions for how and why to learn the vocabulary; making the glossaries more user-friendly by making them fully alphabetical and reducing the information given for each entry to a minimum; finally, pruning the glossaries of non-IELTS vocabulary and excessively detailed, low-coverage words.

With regard to the second question, this evaluation has not been able to ascertain whether the glossaries improve the students' possibilities of obtaining a 5 in IELTS. The students who came into contact with the glossaries were too few to produce relevant statistics and in any case, the only objective assessment for which we have results – IELTS – can give us no specific information about our students' knowledge of vocabulary. Assessment such as regular vocabulary progress tests as well as reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks that would reveal whether progress was being made with the glossary lexis would have been difficult to implement given the fluctuating course attendance and the means at the Language Center's disposal.

A hypothesis can be advanced, however. The students that used the glossaries obtained good marks in IELTS, overall. Although it has already been recognized that these students were doubtlessly good students apart from and beyond the potentially beneficial effects of our course, it is possible that the glossaries may have improved the students' receptive skills and increased their confidence with their productive skills. The glossaries may not quantifiably have increased the students' vocabulary by the end of the course, but they may ultimately have raised their awareness of common IELTS themes and improved their overall proficiency, thereby facilitating pass marks of 5.5 or more. This was not the intended function of the glossaries and should stimulate some careful reflection on our aims and priorities. At the same time, it is not an altogether negative outcome. With

the necessary adjustments, the glossaries will become useful tools for learning vocabulary; if they also make the students more aware of the various IELTS topics and lead to a general improvement in proficiency, these can only be welcome additional assets.

8. Conclusion and Future Inquiry

It is possible that using the CLA glossaries, combined with a regular IELTS course, could contribute to improving lower intermediate students' global level of achievement in IELTS. The glossaries probably reinforce the students' receptive skills and increase their confidence when using productive skills, thus contributing to improving their overall level and ability to cope with IELTS. It is our task to make the necessary adjustments identified in this evaluation in order to ensure the glossaries are also the vocabulary-learning tool we intended them to be. Research has shown that word lists can be an efficient instrument of learning. After a thorough review bearing in mind all the points brought to light in this evaluation, the CLA glossaries could become useful learning tools.

A number of issues have been uncovered in this paper that could be matters of future inquiry. A question that remains unanswered is exactly which words are necessary in order to achieve a 5.0 in IELTS. How large is an IELTS 5.0 lexicon? Research of the Cambridge Learner Corpus might cast some light on this difficult issue. This paper has also questioned the taboo placed on rote and decontextualized learning by current SLA theory and communicative ELT teaching. A related issue is looking into how making the best of culturally-bound learning styles (rote learning, list learning – see Tinkham, 1989), can be beneficial to learning.

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Appendix: extract from Glossary 8 Agriculture & the Environment

AGRICULTURE	AGRICOLTURA
People / Persone	
Farmer	<i>agricoltore, allevatore</i>
landholder	<i>proprietario terriero</i>
Crops / Coltive	
breed <i>n C / v.</i>	<i>varietà, razza n / procreare, allevare v</i>
grow (past pple: grown) <i>v.</i>	<i>crescere</i>
growth <i>n C</i>	<i>crescita</i>
harvest <i>n C</i>	<i>raccolto</i>
Ripe	<i>maturo</i>
Seeds	<i>semi</i>
Soil	<i>suolo, terreno</i>
Livestock / Bestiame	
feed (animals) on (sth) <i>v.</i>	<i>alimentare a base di...</i>
milk <i>v.</i>	<i>mungere</i>
Activities / Attività	
clear land <i>v.</i>	<i>disboscare</i>
land clearance <i>n U</i>	<i>disboscamento di un terreno</i>

replanting trees	<i>riforestazione</i>
Problems and solutions / Problemi e soluzioni	
Aid	<i>aiuto, aiuti</i>
Disaster relief	<i>aiuti forniti a seguito di un disastro</i>
famine relief	<i>aiuti forniti alle vittime di una carestia</i>
Funds	<i>fondi</i>
mismanagement	<i>cattiva gestione</i>
sustainable management	<i>gestione sostenibile</i>
FISHING AND THE SEA	LA PESCA E IL MARE
catch <i>n C</i>	<i>il pescato</i>
declining fish population	<i>diminuzione della popolazione marina</i>
illegal trawling	<i>pesca illegale con rete a strascico</i>
oil/gas rig	<i>piattaforma di trivellazione (in mare)</i>

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