How do word characteristics affect Spanish native speakers' ability to recognize English academic words?

What this research was about and why it is important

Knowledge of academic words (that is, words used in tasks done at school and university without being specific to any academic discipline) is valuable for students because it can predict performance in academic tasks from primary school all the way to higher education. Therefore, examining what makes some English academic words easier to learn than others can help improve English academic vocabulary instruction and, indirectly, boost students' chances of academic success in educational settings where English is used as the medium of instruction. This study examined how well lexical characteristics predict academic vocabulary knowledge, that is, knowledge of words used in academic writing and speech without being specific to any discipline. University students who were native speakers of Spanish with upper-intermediate/advanced English proficiency level ticked the English words that they knew out of a selection of words from the most frequent 1,000 words from a list of English academic words. The distribution of percentages of correct answers for these words was predicted mainly by word frequency (that is, the frequency that a word has in a large collection of electronic texts), then by cognateness (that is, whether a word is similar in terms of form and meaning to a word in another language) and finally by a frequency by cognateness interaction whereby word frequency was a more important factor for non-cognate than cognate words.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 38 Spanish university students who were studying various subjects at two universities in Spain. According to an online vocabulary test that participants did first, 18 were advanced, 19 were upper-intermediate and one was a low-intermediate learner of English.
- Participants filled in an English Yes/No vocabulary test, where they had to tick all the English words that they knew out of a list. This list consisted of 26 English words which have Spanish cognates (e.g., *university*, which is similar to the Spanish word *universidad*), 26 English words without Spanish cognates (e.g., *growth*), and 35 strings of letters which looked like English words but were not real words (e.g., *snurley*).
- Before filling in the English Yes/No vocabulary test, they filled in a Spanish Yes/No test. This test was conducted to make sure that the participants were familiar with the Spanish words which are cognate to the English cognates tested in the English Yes/No test.

What the researchers found

- Out of the lexical characteristics we were interested in (word frequency, cognateness, word length), word length did not affect English Yes/No test scores.
- Scores in the English Yes/No test were affected the most by English word frequency.
- Word frequency played a bigger role in the English Yes/No test answers for words which did not have Spanish cognates (e.g., *growth*) than for words which had Spanish cognates (e.g., *university*).

Things to consider

- The finding that cognateness can offer an advantage even to advanced-level EFL learners with Spanish as their first language indicates that helping EFL learners identify cognates is worthwhile.
- Studies like this one with EFL learners who have different native languages and proficiency levels are necessary.
- Studies like this one which use different kinds of vocabulary tests are necessary.