Relating Vocabulary in Mathematical Tasks to Aspects of Reading and Solving

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This paper focuses on relationships between vocabulary in mathematical tasks and aspects of reading and solving these tasks. The paper contains a framework that highlights a number of different aspects of word difficulty as well as many issues to consider when planning and implementing empirical studies concerning vocabulary in tasks, where the aspect of common/uncommon words is one important part. The paper also presents an empirical study where corpora are used to investigate issues of vocabulary in mathematical tasks. The results from the empirical study show that there are connections between different types of vocabulary and task difficulty, but the connections could be mainly an effect of the total number of words in a task.

Introduction

When using written tests to assess students' mathematical ability, one aspect of validity is whether tests measure mathematical competence and nothing else. However, there is always a possibility that the test also measures the students' reading ability. Some researchers describe language as separated from mathematics (e.g. Greenlees, 2010), and issues of language are then not supposed to add difficulty to mathematical tasks. However, it might also be reasonable to include a language component in the concept of mathematical knowledge, which is supported by the aspect of communication presented as a part of mathematical proficiency in several frameworks (e.g. NCTM, 2000). The complex relationship between language and mathematics described here is the starting point for several studies that we are currently carrying out or planning (see also Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012a, 2012b). The overarching goal of our research is to better understand and be able to describe the connection between reading and solving mathematical tasks. In this particular paper we focus specifically on connections between vocabulary in mathematical tasks and aspects of reading and solving such tasks. In particular, we discuss and examine different types of words: everyday words and mathematical words.

Background

Many studies highlight the importance of vocabulary, both in relation to aspects of reading comprehension and in relation to the solving of mathematical tasks, and several different methods are used to study aspects of vocabulary. *Counting letters and/or syllables* to measure word length is one. Using syllables to measure sentence length or word length is an important linguistic measure of readability, and the number of letters as a measure of word length is also part of some readability formulas (DuBay, 2004). When *judging word difficulty and/or familiarity,* experts sometimes judge the words (e.g. Shaftel, Belton-Kocher, Glasnapp, & Poggio, 2006). A third type of method is using different *lists of words* to compare with. For example, Hewig, Rozek-Tedesco, Tindal, Heath, and Almond (1999) define *word familiarity* using a list of words that contains information about grade level and percentage of students that correctly could identify the meaning of the word.

An alternative method is to *calculate frequencies in particular corpora* in order to characterize words as being familiar or not. This method is based on the assumption (supported by empirical results, see e.g. Breland, 1996) that more common words are also more familiar. In modern linguistics, a corpus can be defined as "a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research" (Sinclair, 2005, p. 23). Different corpora are composed to represent different types of language and therefore they consist of words from different sources of text, for example newspapers or scientific articles.

Many studies, including several of the ones mentioned above, use statistical methods to investigate the relation between linguistic properties of a tasks and the students' performance on the tasks. However, these methods have serious limitations. The information gained from statistical computations usually concerns to what extent different linguistic aspects of a task (e.g. the amount of long words) correlate with the difficulty of the task, but it does not inform us on *why*. For example, longer words can be more difficult to decode phonologically, an issue that relates specifically to aspects of reading ability, but perhaps mathematically complex concepts are usually represented by longer words, an issue that relates specifically to aspects of mathematical ability. Therefore, if we only rely on statistical correlations between variables describing a task and students' performance on the task, we cannot conclude that a language aspect is simply related to reading ability. Other methods have been utilized in order to overcome this issue, often by using data of students' results not only on a mathematics test but also on a reading test of some kind. However, methods that use correlations and regressions in different ways have problems with aspects of validity or reliability (Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012a). Based on our previous methodological analysis, we suggest an approach using principal component analysis to measure a task's demand of reading ability. This method is described in detail in a previous publication (Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012a) and is summarised in the section *Empirical study* below.

Purpose

This paper presents the first part of a study where the purpose is to increase the understanding of the connection between different aspects of the vocabulary of a mathematical task and other aspects of the task, in particular difficulty and demand of reading ability. First, we propose a framework for the study of *difficult vocabulary* in mathematical tasks, that is, we focus on properties that can be seen as potentially causing difficulty (of any kind) for students when reading and solving the task. The framework gathers different perspectives on vocabulary from prior research and also includes discussions of empirical methodology, issues we see as missing in prior research. Second, we present a pilot study that introduces an empirical method using corpora to investigate issues of vocabulary in mathematical tasks. The method explores benefits of combining information from different corpora and to not only use information about whether words are "universally" common or uncommon, as is usually done in previous research. Our research questions are:

- What factors are there to consider when issues of difficult vocabulary in mathematical tasks are to be studied?
- Is there a connection between the difficulty or the demand of reading ability for a mathematical task and whether the words in the task are common or uncommon in mathematical language and/or everyday language?

A framework for the study of difficult vocabulary

Here we describe a first version of a conceptual framework regarding the notion of *difficult vocabulary*. In this framework we include what can be seen as different aspects of difficulty regarding the words in mathematical tasks, together with perspectives on how to analyse these aspects in empirical studies. However, for the present paper we focus our attention on the one aspect of common/uncommon words.

The framework has been created based on issues highlighted in previous research (in particular, see the background in this paper) together with our suggestions of alternatives to the perspectives described in existing research literature. Such alternatives have been noticed as relevant and important while planning the empirical study described below. Presented here is a first version of the framework, which at this point primarily consists of a structured description of issues highlighted in previous research. Note that some parts of the framework are here described more briefly, due to space restrictions.

Analysing the difficulty of a word

Here we focus on the analysis of singular words. We include in our framework the following five aspects of word difficulty, of which we only elaborate on the fourth aspect in the present paper: (1) word length, (2) word form (e.g. verbs in a passive voice or nominalised verbs/adjectives), (3) word type (e.g. pronouns or modal verbs), (4) common/uncommon words (word familiarity), and (5) word meaning (e.g. complexity of a concept or a word's potential ambiguity).

We here include four issues to take into consideration regarding the notion of common/uncommon words, and thereafter we discuss the process of analysing these issues in empirical research.

1. When, where, how and who? When a word is labelled as common or uncommon, this needs to be in relation to a certain population or discourse community. For example, oral everyday language can be seen as specifying the language used in a certain type of situation (where) and in a certain form/modality (how). This issue also includes considerations of whose vocabulary is referred to (e.g. regarding age or ethnicity) and the question of when, since language changes continuously.

2. Discourse-specific vocabulary. This issue refers to a relationship between different discourses (or populations), regarding information about whether a word is specific to a certain discourse.

3. Derivations and lexemes. This issue highlights the question of whether to focus on a specific word as being common/uncommon or to focus on its components or *lexeme*. Lexeme refers to the set of different forms a specific word can have. For example, "stand", "stood", and "standing" are elements of the same lexeme. An argument for focusing on lexemes instead of words is that even if a specific word is relatively uncommon, a reader can perhaps directly see the word as a form of a more common word from the same lexeme. Thus, the word is not as difficult as could be believed from how uncommon it is (e.g. see Dempster & Reddy, 2007). However, a keyword in the above argument is "perhaps", that is, we cannot know if or when students make this connection between a word and its lexeme, in particular for more complex types of forms of words (also discussed by Dempster & Reddy, 2007).

4. The context. Since the same word can have different meanings in different contexts, it could be necessary to distinguish between different meanings of words when analysing how common/uncommon they are.

With these four general issues as a basis, we now turn our attention to more practical issues, regarding the planning and implementation of empirical studies about common/uncommon words in mathematical tasks. We focus on the use of some type of explicit reference material in the analysis, in particular word lists and corpora. We describe three steps in the analysis of how common/uncommon a word is using a reference material.

A. Choosing/creating reference material. A few questions can be asked regarding any type of reference material. First, we have the question of *what material to include*, which refers primarily to the first general issue; for the material to be representative of some specified population, situation, and time. For example, to have a corpus for "school language" we need texts from all subjects. Second, we have the question of *what type of meta-information to include*, if any. For corpora, different types of linguistic meta-information can be included. Word lists usually include only the most common words, possibly together with some type of meta-information, for example about frequency of words or about the fraction of students at different school levels who know the meaning of each word (Helwig et al., 1999).

B. Searching for words in reference material. When searching for a word in a reference material, you need to decide what to count as a word and what to count as the same word. Primarily this decision can be about issues number 3 and 4 above. For example, when a corpus includes lexical meta-information, it is possible to search for lexemes and not only specific words. Also, you might need to take into consideration some issues at a more practical level, such as hyphens and spaced words (e.g. if "lifestyle", "life-style", and "life style" are seen as the same word).

C. Characterizing words. The frequencies of words can be used in different ways to measure how common words are. In corpora, a relative frequency can be used as a direct measure, comparable between corpora, of how common a word is. It is also possible to use frequencies, absolute or relative, as a basis for ranking words, and the ranking would then be possible to compare between corpora. The words can also be labelled as common or not in different ways, not directly based on relative frequencies, but on whether a word is included in a given list of (the most) common words (e.g. Dempster & Reddy, 2007) or similarly, whether a word is included among the 1000 (or any chosen number) most common words in a certain corpus (e.g. Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012b).

Analysing mathematical tasks regarding difficult vocabulary

After analysing each word in a mathematical task, the next question is how to use the information about each word to characterize the task. Here we discuss two issues that were necessary to handle when planning the empirical part of this paper, and that need to be handled when planning this type of empirical analysis in general.

Characterizing the "amount of difficulty" in a task. This issue can be measured in several different ways, for example by focusing on: the mere existence of difficult words; the number of difficult words; the proportion of difficult words; the mean of some quantified word property (e.g. to calculate the mean of the frequency of all words); and the spread of some quantified word property (e.g. to calculate the standard deviation of the frequency of all words).

Different parts of the task text. Included here are decisions about whether and how to include certain parts of the task text in the analysis, for example regarding: sub tasks and the leading text (i.e. the part of the task text that is common for all sub tasks); background information and the prompt (i.e. the question or description of what to do); tables, diagrams, figures, and symbols; and the repeating of a word.

The questions concerning both these issues can be seen as empirical questions, regarding which method most truly captures a potential difficulty in a task. For example, the creation of separate difficulty variables for different parts of task texts could make it possible to examine whether a potential difficulty in the leading text of the actual question is of most importance for a certain set of tasks.

Empirical study

This *pilot study* has the purpose to examine whether and how the presence of common or uncommon mathematics or everyday words is connected to the demand of reading ability or to the difficulty of a mathematical task. At this point, details of the analysis and choices made should be seen as preliminary and the results as tentative.

Corpus analysis has been used in mathematics education research by for example Monaghan (1999) who argues for further corpus analyses in order to get a more thorough understanding of the mathematics register. The present study explores how corpora could be used in an analysis of the vocabulary in mathematical tasks. More specifically, our focus is on common/uncommon words, which is relevant since more common words are also more familiar (see Breland, 1996). An earlier study (Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012b) did not show a significant correlation between demand of reading ability and frequency in test tasks of common words in any of two corpora. We therefore simultaneously use information from the two different corpora, in order to examine the existence of different types of words, in particular technical vocabulary, that is, words that are common in mathematical texts (especially textbooks) but uncommon in everyday language.

Method in the empirical study

We utilize results from PISA in order to have access to data from many students and many tasks, both mathematical tasks and reading tasks, which is crucial for our analysis of the demand of reading ability. Since the same mathematical tasks were used in 2003 and 2006, we combine results from these years in our analyses.

Our analysis consists of three steps. First, values for the variables *demand of reading ability* and *difficulty* are calculated for each mathematical task. Second, two different corpora are used to determine how common the words in the mathematical tasks are in two contexts (mathematics and everyday contexts). Third, correlations between the information from the first and second steps are analysed, and based on the results we discuss what the presence of words common/uncommon in different contexts means for the difficulty or demand of reading ability of the tasks.

In order to measure a mathematical task's *demand of reading ability*, a principal component analysis (PCA) is used. This method is presented and discussed in more detail in previous papers (Österholm & Bergqvist, 2012a, 2012b) and only briefly described here. In this study, all Swedish students' scores on all PISA mathematics and reading tasks from 2003 and 2006 are entered into the PCA, from which the first two components are extracted, which are expected to correspond to mathematical ability and reading ability. For each mathematical task, the loading value on the reading component is taken as a measure of the demand of reading ability.

As a measure of *task difficulty* we use the percentage of credited responses for the task (the p-value), which means that if the sum of all credits that the students get are 75 % of all possible credits, the p-value for that task is 0.75.

In order to determine how *common* or *uncommon* particular words in the mathematical tasks are in different contexts, we use two different corpora. The corpus we use to represent everyday language (of society in general) is composed of 58 novels (about 4.7 million words) and newspapers from the years when the PISA tests were distributed (i.e. 2003 and 2006; about 42 million words) [1]. To represent mathematical language, we use a corpus consisting of two mathematics textbooks intended for year 8 students (the same age group as the students that take the PISA tests; about 70,000 words), which are part of the OrdiL project (Lindberg & Johansson Kokkinakis, 2007). Since a purpose with this pilot study is to explore the use of corpora, we have at this point chosen the corpora partly based on easy access, and not created any new corpora specifically for the present study.

We analyse the words in the PISA mathematical tasks by searching for them in both our corpora, and retrieving the *frequency of each word in each corpus*. The search is made on the specific form of each word, and not on lexemes (see the framework), mainly due to non-existing meta-information in the corpora. When words contain a hyphen, the hyphen is included as part of the word during the search. Due to technical limitations in the search procedure, words with "strange" mixtures of upper and lower case letters (e.g. "woRd") are treated as separate words, but "Word", "word", and "WORD" are treated as the same word. All words in the mathematical tasks, also from tables, diagrams and figures, are included in our analyses, but “words” that consist of or include symbols, numbers, or punctuation marks (except hyphens) are excluded, for example labels such as “P5”. Words consisting of only one letter are also excluded since they sometimes denote variables.

Based on the information on word frequency in each corpus, we sort the words into *four categories*, by labelling each word as common or uncommon in each of the two corpora. Separately for each corpus, based on the frequencies, we divide the group of unique words into two groups of equal size, so that half of the words are labelled common and the other half of the words are labelled uncommon. The words with zero frequency are excluded in the creation of the two groups since these words are seen as representing a flooring effect in the data, but they are thereafter included in the group of uncommon words for the continued analysis.

For the mathematical tasks, we define *four different variables*, as the number of words in the task in each of the four categories of words. Sometimes a group of tasks are preceded by a common introductory text. In those cases, we include the words in the introductory text in each of the tasks, since at this point no analysis of the need of the leading text for the understanding of each task is done.

To determine whether the types of words used in the tasks are related to the demand of reading ability and/or the difficulty, two-tailed non-parametric correlations are used (Spearman R coefficient), with a significance level of 0.05. Besides the four different types of words described above, the total number of words in tasks is also added as a variable in the correlation analysis. This variable is included in order to examine whether any significant correlations to the number of certain types of words in tasks could be an effect of the total number of words in tasks.

Empirical results

Vocabulary property	Demand of reading ability	Difficulty
Uncommon both	r = -0.071 (p = 0.578)	**r = 0.366 (p = 0.003)**
Uncommon math, common everyday	r = -0.230 (p = 0.070)	**r = 0.451 (p = 0.000)**
Common math uncommon everyday	r = -0.142 (p = 0.267)	r = 0.059 (p = 0.648)
Common both	**r = -0.275 (p = 0.029)**	**r = 0.497 (p = 0.000)**
Total number of words	r = -0.232 (p = 0.068)	**r = 0.442 (p = 0.000)**

Table 1: Correlations between the number of words of different types in tasks and the tasks’ demand of reading ability and difficulty (N=63).

Table 1 shows that the total number of words in the tasks correlates in a significant way with difficulty and almost significantly with demand of reading ability. These results make it difficult to draw conclusions about any relationships between the number of *different types* of words in the tasks and difficulty or demand of reading ability. All correlations to difficulty are positive, while the correlations to demand of reading ability are all negative. That is, tasks with more words tend to be more difficult but also tend to have lower demand of reading ability, and the opposite is true for tasks with fewer words. However, there is also a significant negative correlation between the difficulty of a task and its demand of reading ability ($r = -0.589$, $p = 0.000$), making it even more difficult to interpret the correlations in Table 1.

Conclusions and discussion

Our empirical analyses show that there are clear quantitative connections between aspects of vocabulary and task difficulty, but these connections could be mainly an effect of the total number of words in a task and not different *types* of words. Connections between vocabulary and demand of reading ability are generally weak, but existing tendencies may also be an effect of the number of words in general, rather than of any specific types of words. More studies are needed in order to handle the uncertainties in these conclusions.

Our result showing that the effect of the total number of words might be primary, questions the results from other studies where the number of “difficult” words has been included as an important factor without considering the effect of the total number of words. However, Shaftel et al. (2006) use regression analyses to examine both the total number of words and several different aspects of difficult vocabulary, with task difficulty as independent variable. Their results show a non-significant regression coefficient for the total number of words, but significant coefficients for several other vocabulary properties, including the feature they label as “Math vocabulary”. However, in their study they use expert judgments for which the description of “Math vocabulary” is somewhat unclear: “unusual or difficult but specific mathematics vocabulary words” (p. 126). More in-depth analysis is needed in order to explain the discrepancies between their study and our results.

Through the presented framework we have created a structured description of factors to consider when analysing issues of difficult vocabulary in mathematical tasks. In future development of our framework we will include relationships to theories of reading comprehension in order not to limit the framework to *describing* practical aspects of empirical research but also to include an explanatory dimension, for example to include *why* and *how* different properties of vocabulary can be seen as causing difficulty for students when reading and solving a mathematical task.

Note

1. From the Swedish Language Bank (http://spraakbanken.gu.se/korp/): the part with novels is labelled *SUC-romaner* and the parts with newspapers are labelled *GP 2003* and *GP 2006*.

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