



## What Vocabulary Should EFL Teachers Focus on?

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### Abstract

Vocabulary is probably one of the most important areas to which English language teachers often pay particular attention, in addition to principal issues like grammar, pronunciation, and culture. For most EFL practitioners, making a decision as to which words need to be taught first apparently poses a daunting challenge. This paper is thus aimed at introducing reliable sources of information on word frequency and some useful word lists, e.g. *the Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000), as well as raising teachers' awareness of the potential benefits with which the word lists can provide them in their preparation of vocabulary teaching materials. Aside from word frequency, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) instructors should also highlight technical vocabulary, which will enhance learners' understanding of the major specialized concepts of the discipline they are studying.

**Keywords:** vocabulary frequency, word list, technical vocabulary, EFL teaching, ESP

### 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is of paramount importance in learning and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). It may hold true that the more lexical items learners master, the more fluently they use English. It is, however, noteworthy that to acquire all the words in English seems to be impossible for even native speakers of the language, let alone L2 English learners (Schmitt, 2010). Considering this fact, EFL teachers are supposed to be selective in what words should be prioritized in vocabulary lesson planning. That is, due to the time constraint in English vocabulary instruction, together with other essential skills to be included, e.g. writing, listening, speaking, etc., teachers need to be able to answer *Which words should be taught first?* This article therefore aims to address this particular issue by taking into account major factors determining vocabulary selection for EFL students.

### 2. Word Frequency

Frequency is one of the most crucial criteria for EFL textbook writers' vocabulary selection (Carter, 2012). As a matter of fact, not all English words have the same frequency of occurrence. Whereas there appear to be a small number of words that occur with very high frequency, it is clear that a good number of words in



the language are not used very often (Nation, 2013). For instance, if a text is chosen and all the words in that text are counted, the definite article *the* will almost always be among the topmost frequent words (O'Keefe, McCarthy and Carter, 2007). As noted by Nation (2013), "The word *the* occurs seven times in every 100 running words. That is, it makes up 7% of the running words in most texts" (p. 94). By contrast, words such as *soliloquy* or *limpid* tend to occur with far lower frequency in the same text.

**Table 1:** Coverage of text by a series of lists each containing 1,000 word families

| Vocabulary level                           | Coverage of text |
|--|------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> 1,000                      | 75.22%           |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> 1,000                      | 8.92%            |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> 1,000                      | 5.32%            |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 1.71%            |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 0.97%            |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 0.64%            |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 0.44%            |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 0.33%            |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                      | 0.24%            |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> 1,000                     | 0.18%            |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> to 25 <sup>th</sup> 1,000 | 1.25%            |
| The rest                                   | 5.42%            |

(Nation, 2013, p. 94)

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of the words in a text covered by a series of 1,000 word lists from the first 1,000 up to the 10<sup>th</sup> 1,000 and beyond.

Nation (2013) has revealed some interestingly useful facts that the most frequent ten words account for 25% of the running words in most texts; approximately 75% of the running words in most texts belong to the most frequent 1,000 words. Furthermore, over 80% of the words in written texts are covered in the list of the 2,000 most frequent English words, while nearly 90% of the vocabulary items in spoken texts are in the same list. The words listed in the 2,000 most frequent words are regarded as the high-frequency words of English. Such high-frequency words are the most basic and essential lexical items in a language, necessary for almost all communicative purposes (Schmitt, 2010).

High-frequency words are worth introducing to EFL learners first since L2 learners are shown to acquire more frequent vocabulary prior to less frequent lexis (Schmitt, Schmitt, and Clapham, 2001). This is also the case for L2 acquisition of



formulaic sequences, as well as single vocabulary (Tremblay, Baayen, Derwing, and Libben, 2008). In addition, Ellis (2002, p. 152), noted that:

For written language, high-frequency words are named more rapidly than low frequency ones..., they are more rapidly judged to be words in lexical decision tasks ..., and they are spelled more accurately ... Auditory word recognition is better for high-frequency words... there are strong effects of word frequency on the speed and accuracy of lexical recognition processes (speech perception, reading, object naming, and sign perception) and lexical production processes (speaking, typing, writing, and signing), in children and adults as well as in L1 and L2.

Apart from the words in the list of the most frequent 1,000 and 2,000 words earlier mentioned, many others are also frequent and widespread in certain specialized areas, e.g. economics, geography, and biology. EFL students with the aim of learning academic English successfully are required to be aware of 570 word families in *the Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000), which comprises words that are often used across a wide range of academic texts but are not in the first 2,000 words of English. *The Academic Word List* (AWL) was compiled from four different faculty areas, i.e. Arts, Science, Commerce, and Law, each of which covered texts from seven distinct sub-disciplines. It should be noted that most of the words in AWL are considered mid-frequency words. According to Nation (2008), the words listed in AWL "...are very important for learners who will use English for academic study either in upper secondary schools (senior high school) or in universities or technical institutes" (p. 9).

Based on the information in Table 1, Nation (2013) remarks that the mid-frequency words include the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> 1,000 words, a total of 7,000 word families. In comparison to the high-frequency words, the mid-frequency ones cover approximately 10% of the running words in most texts. Although learning mid-frequency words is apparently time-consuming, these words prove to be very important for L2 acquisition since a learner with a vocabulary of around 9,000 words plus proper nouns will know 98% of the running words in most texts except technical texts (Nation, 2006). This means a learner with mid-frequency word knowledge should be lexically-competent enough to read a text with ease without having to consult a dictionary for a very small number of unknown words.

The biggest group of words in terms of frequency is known as the low-frequency words. It is estimated that English has more or less 100,000 word families



belonging to the low-frequency vocabulary (Nation, 2008). Needless to say, native speakers of English do not know all of these words. To be more precise, they by and large have a vocabulary of approximately 20,000 word families. It has been discovered that the size of adult native speakers' vocabulary depends on their level of education and on the amount of what they are interested to read (Nation, 2013). The low-frequency words appear only around 2% in most texts.

All in all, frequency of word occurrences plays a significant role in teachers' selection of target words to be included in their lessons. Put simply, relying on a word list can guide EFL teachers' production of teaching materials as well as the appropriate design of vocabulary tests (Nation and Webb, 2011). A question at this point is *How do we know which words are high-frequency, mid-frequency, low-frequency, or academic words?* In fact, a number of lists of the first 2,000 words of English abound. Amongst the classic lists is *the General Service List of English Words* (West, 1953), which lists the most useful 2,000 words of English, whereas one of the most well-known lists of academic English words is *the Academic Word List*. There, moreover, are many computer programs that mark up texts at each of the 1,000 word levels and create lists of the vocabulary in the text. Examples of such useful programs are *the Range Program* (Nation and Heatley, 2002) and Laurence Anthony's *AntWordProfiler* (available online: <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>).

Another group of lexis worth mentioning is technical vocabulary, to be discussed in detail in the next section.

### 3. Technical Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary exists across a variety of disciplines. Such vocabulary that is closely related or specific to a specialized area is referred to as technical vocabulary (Nation, 2008). It is worth noticing that some technical domains can be related to other domains or can even be associated with everyday activities. For example, some technical vocabulary items in anatomy are simply ordinary words used in daily life, e.g. *neck*, *skin*, *heart*, which are very high-frequency words. Deciding whether a word is technical or not is dependent upon an expert's knowledge and opinion. Other factors determining its technicality deal with consulting a technical dictionary or looking for textual clues, e.g. highlighting and defining, which mark a word as technical (Chung and Nation, 2004).

According to Nation (2008), technical vocabulary "...is a type of high-frequency vocabulary for those working and studying within a specialized area" (p. 136). In contrast, this sort of vocabulary can be very infrequent in general English (Gardner, 2013). It is suggested that technical vocabulary should be presented as part



of learning the subject matter because learning the content matter is essentially learning the meaning of the technical vocabulary as well as the way this technical word is connected with others in that particular discipline. In fact, learners will not perfectly understand the real meaning of technical words until they become accustomed to the related concepts in the specialized field.

Learners in an attempt to master technical vocabulary are encouraged to employ the following strategies in coping with these words (Nation, 2008):

First of all, learners are expected to recognize definitions and learn those definitions within a text. Learners should be taught to look for definitions of technical lexis in a text, which are usually signaled by quotes, italics, bold-faced types, or the classic definition format:

(The thing defined) *is a* (class the item fits into) *that* (defining characteristics)  
e.g. (A superior costotransverse ligament) *is a* (broad band) *that* (joins the crest of the neck of the rib to the transverse process superior to it).

The second technique of learning technical vocabulary pertains to paying attention to word parts common in a technical area. Technical vocabulary in several specialized fields is based on French, Latin, and Greek. Such technical words are composed of roots, prefixes, and suffixes. For example, some technical vocabulary items in medicine begin with prefixes like *bi-*, *-tri*, *croncho-*, *lumbo-*, *lipo* or end with *-ectomy* and *-oscopy*. EFL teachers, especially those teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), can help students learn these technical words more easily by making a list of prevalent word parts, together with sample words containing them, in a specialized field. The word parts worth including in such a list are those occurring as an integral part of a number of technical words. Guessing unfamiliar word meaning from word parts is also supported by Gardner (2013), who mentioned “If learners recognize familiar morphemes in these words, they could use this information to form a hypothesis about the word’s meaning...” (p. 126).

The third technique of technical vocabulary teaching is concerned with relating technical uses of a word to its core meaning. It seems that certain technical vocabulary items are specialized uses of general words. For instance, although words like *income*, *margin*, *demand*, *supply*, and *consume* are apparently technical words in economics, these words also have a similar, but less clearly defined, meaning in general context outside economics. Teachers are supposed to concentrate on the areas of meaning overlap as well as the main distinction between the technical and non-technical uses of such words, explicitly pointing these out to learners so that they can see a connection between the meanings of the same word. Nation (2008) recommended a very useful learning activity “...to look at dictionary entries to see the



common core meaning that runs through all or most of the senses of the word" (p. 138). A clear example given by Nation is *a computer mouse*, as a technical word in Computer Science, receives such a metaphorical name because of its small size and long tail like a mouse.

All the aforementioned strategies are viewed as what learners should finally be able to apply autonomously, i.e. without teachers' assistance. A combination of these techniques should be promoted in order for learners to effectively deal with technical vocabulary. Put differently, successful students are to know how to recognize definitions of technical words in the text they are encountering and how to remember essential word parts of which technical words in a specialized area are made up, in addition to associating a technical lexical item with its core meaning. It is advisable that technical vocabulary in context be introduced to learners since it is context that helps them understand its meaning clearly.

#### 4. Conclusion

The central idea of this article is what vocabulary EFL instructors should particularly emphasize in their vocabulary lesson planning. It is evident that one of the fundamental reasons for target word selection is concerned with frequency of vocabulary occurrence. The first 2,000 most frequent words, which make up the high-frequency word list, are supposed to be introduced to learners first because a mastery of these most common words means learners' ability to comprehend most of the words in both written and spoken English. After students' acquisition of the high-frequency words, what follows appears to be the mid-frequency words, most of which are shown in *the Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000). Knowing the mid-frequency words in English, learners are entitled to their comprehension of around 98% of all the running words in a text, despite the fact that acquiring all those mid-frequency words is undeniably time-consuming. What seems to be less important for inclusion in the vocabulary lessons for beginning EFL learners is the low-frequency words, which account for only approximately 2% of words in most English texts. Finally, teachers with the aim of building ESP students' specialized lexical knowledge have to consider incorporating technical vocabulary in their lessons. A technical word in one specific discipline may be an ordinary one generally used elsewhere. EFL students should be encouraged to employ a variety of strategies to recognize and remember technical words. Taking frequency and technicality of lexis into consideration, EFL teachers should be able to create vocabulary lessons that prioritize words according to the order of usage frequency, which will help familiarize learners with what they are very likely to be faced with in daily as well as academic contexts.



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