

## How to select vocabulary for more effective language teaching

### What this research was about and why it is important

Instructional materials are expected to reflect the latest research findings, but reality is often different. To promote evidence-based materials development and more effective language teaching, we empirically evaluated the chosen vocabulary (191 target words) in a dedicated vocabulary course of an Intensive English Program in North America. We retrieved word frequency (how often a word occurs in the language) from two American English corpora and collected ratings of usefulness (to what extent a word is worth teaching students who are preparing to enter an American university) and difficulty (how advanced a word is) from 76 experienced instructors. Results showed that the target words could be divided into five groups, from the highest to the lowest priority for teaching, and that perceived word difficulty (as rated by the instructors) added valuable information beyond word frequency counts. We then proposed a five-step protocol for effective vocabulary selection in diverse educational contexts.

### What the researchers did

- Retrieved the frequency of 191 target words (165 single words and 26 multi-word phrases) from the freely accessible COCA-Academic corpus, and if not found, continued to search the larger COCA corpus (also free) for word frequencies.
- Recruited 76 teachers who had taught English at university level in North America for ~12 years on average.
- Had the teachers rate the usefulness and difficulty of each target word from 1 to 7 in an online survey.
- Examined the relationships between the words' frequency, usefulness, and difficulty.
- Modeled the target words in a three-dimensional space that yielded clusters of words with similar frequency, usefulness, and difficulty.
- Identified five word clusters, representing different priorities for teaching.
- Proposed a five-step protocol that language teaching professionals could apply in their own teaching contexts.

### What the researchers found

- The target words were generally frequent words and were regarded as useful and of medium difficulty.
- Teachers rated frequently occurring single words as useful and difficult words as less useful (all medium-strength relationships). Words that occurred in the English language less often were perceived as more difficult.
- Teachers rated frequently occurring multi-word phrases (e.g., *take issue with*) as useful (a strong statistical relationship). How they rated the phrase's difficulty was unrelated to either phrase frequency or phrase usefulness.
- Taking all three criteria into consideration, the target words could be divided into five groups:
  - 1) Words with the highest frequency and usefulness and the lowest difficulty, such as *consequence*;
  - 2) Words with the second highest frequency and usefulness and the second lowest difficulty, such as *ethnicity*;
  - 3) Words with medium frequency and usefulness and the highest difficulty, such as *erosion*;
  - 4) Words with the second lowest frequency and usefulness and medium difficulty, such as *skyrocket*;
  - 5) Words with the lowest frequency and usefulness and the second highest difficulty, such as *incinerate*.
- Teaching priority decreased from Group 1-5. Group 5 could be replaced by more frequent and useful vocabulary.
- A step-by-step protocol for evidence-based word selection:
  - 1) Select high-frequency words from existing word lists, corpora, or other teaching materials;
  - 2) Choose a representative corpus and retrieve the frequency count for each word;
  - 3) Have these words rated by teachers for their usefulness and difficulty;
  - 4) Model the words' frequency, usefulness, and difficulty or, as a simpler alternative, inspect the data visually;
  - 5) Identify word clusters to prioritize for teaching, starting with high-frequency/high-usefulness/low-difficulty vocabulary and working your way down to low-frequency/low-usefulness/high-difficulty words.

### Things to consider

- Online word lists and corpora can support materials writers and teachers to perform Steps 1 & 2 of the protocol.
- Steps 3 & 4 will more likely fall on curriculum designers, materials writers and publishing companies who have more resources and thus greater responsibilities to promote evidence-based instructional materials development.
- Individual teachers may still complement word frequency with their judgment of word usefulness and difficulty.
- The protocol can be employed to adapt vocabulary lists in diverse instructional contexts for various purposes.

Supplementary materials available from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tesq.483>

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