

# Harsh Words

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## English Words for Chinese Learners

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香港大學出版社



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The image shows the Chinese characters for 'HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS' (香港大學出版社) rendered in a highly stylized, square-format calligraphic style. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is vertical, reading from top to bottom.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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# 1

## *Introduction*

### **The Importance of Vocabulary Teaching and Learning**

One of the most difficult challenges for language learners is to learn the meanings and use of the words they need to master if they are to be able to understand and communicate in a second or foreign language. While grammar is also important, words are the building blocks to communication.

Beginners can often make themselves understood with basic content words (such as nouns and verbs) and gestures, even though the grammatical rules are lacking. A two-year-old can look jealously at her new-born baby sister in her mother's arms, point to the baby's bed and shout 'Baby — cot!' and clearly make her point, without using any grammatical niceties such as 'Please Mum, put the new baby down and give me a cuddle.'

In a similar vein, are visitors to a foreign country more likely to carry a dictionary/phrase book or a grammar book? Which is more likely to provide a quick solution when struggling to convey a basic meaning?

This does not mean, however, that grammar is an insignificant part of language learning. Knowing the meanings of words in a text allows the reader to have a general idea of what a passage is about, but knowledge of the grammatical structure could be the key to understanding the nuances and subtleties, following an argument and appreciating the style.

### **Who Should Read This Book?**

This book is intended for all those who would like to know more about English vocabulary teaching, whether they are trainee teachers, taking postgraduate courses in teaching English as a second or foreign language, or simply looking for new ideas.

It is also written particularly with the Chinese learner in mind and will focus closely on the kinds of errors frequently made by students whose first language is Cantonese or Putonghua. The main theory and practice, however, are applicable to all students regardless of their mother tongue.

This book does not set out to be an all-encompassing research study of everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know about vocabulary. Several excellent works have already been written with the research postgraduate student in mind. This one is written for a more general audience who will appreciate some basic theoretical framework on which to hang simple and effective vocabulary teaching and learning techniques and strategies.

### **Background to the Teaching of English Vocabulary**

A language course needs to have a balanced coverage of the four main skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Vocabulary teaching is an essential component of all four of these and so learners need to have the opportunities to develop their vocabulary receptively through listening and reading for meaning. For this they need to be aware of the pronunciation of words used in isolation and in context. They need to be given the opportunity to practise what they have learned through speaking and writing, by using their vocabulary productively in a variety of situations. Lastly, learners need to develop fluency in their use and understanding of words by becoming confident and competent in all four skills.

### **English Vocabulary Teaching in Hong Kong**

Government statistics show that approximately 98% of the population of Hong Kong speak Cantonese. This means that there is little opportunity or incentive for Cantonese speakers to speak English outside of the English class. Some students report feeling embarrassed if they speak English or fear that their peers will think they are showing off. There is even less opportunity for many learners in mainland China to speak English and so most students feel more comfortable with reading and writing English than with listening or speaking.

All too often, students report that they have spent little time at school learning vocabulary. Secondary school students from Form One to Form Three are often given lists of English words with their Chinese translations selected from reading texts by their teachers. They may be asked to check the part of speech in the English-Chinese dictionary and they are then tested on the words

through dictation. Students interviewed about their vocabulary learning strategies noted that they use rote learning methods to memorise the written form of the word, writing it down repeatedly. This habit of matching English words with their Chinese equivalents focuses the learners on a direct translation of one meaning of single words rather than on the variety of meanings gleaned through meeting the words in context. While this direct method of vocabulary learning can be useful for more advanced learners, for example those about to embark on academic study and who quickly need to develop a more specialised vocabulary, it appears to be less successful with lower level students.

By Forms Four to Six, teachers often report that the word lists are no longer provided and students are encouraged to note down newly learned words in vocabulary notebooks. In their written assignments they commonly confuse words that have similar meanings, but are used in the wrong context, for example *'We lived (stayed) in a hotel for a week'* and *'I want to train (practice/improve) my English grammar'*. Words that sound or look similar are also confused: *'If I have a change (chance), I want to come here again'*.

Most 'new' or unfamiliar words that are encountered in English comprehension texts are discussed in Cantonese, with the result that the learners seldom *hear* the English words spoken or learn how to pronounce them. By the time students reach the Certificate of Education Examinations candidates are often unable to form questions in the role-play task because they neither know the meaning nor the pronunciation of the words used in the probes.

A lack of awareness of pronunciation of words is apparent in oral presentations at university, when a student may suddenly stop mid-sentence unaware of how to say a newly learned word found in their research. A student who wanted to describe how a dinosaur would hold objects paused and resorted to saying *'don't know how to say "c-l-a-w"'*. She could say 'law', 'saw' and 'jaw' but could not work out the pronunciation of *claw* until the link was explained to her.

Few students relish the opportunity to improve their vocabulary, seeing it more as a chore than a fun activity. With some creative ideas, perhaps they can be encouraged and motivated to work on their words and increase their vocabulary in an interesting and challenging way.

This book is designed to be an introduction to teaching English vocabulary to Chinese learners. It will explain how English is learned by native speakers and by Chinese learners. It will focus on how we store words in our mind so that we can find them again. It will also suggest which words we should teach our students and which strategies our learners might adopt to help them

remember new words as they come across them. Ways of presenting 'new' or unfamiliar words in class are suggested and some useful web sites and IT related studies are described.

Each section begins with some simple theoretical background, describing studies that have been conducted in Asia and beyond. Some practical ideas for presentation of vocabulary follow, and at the end of each chapter there are tasks for teachers, as well as some suggested activities for classroom use. An answer key is provided at the end of the book. Relevant books and articles that will provide further information are listed at the end of each chapter and a full list of references is included at the end.

### Task

Do you learn words by sight (spelling) or by sound — or both?

How many words do you know that end in *-ough*?

Here are some examples: *rough, tough, cough, bough, enough*

Now try this with a timer: Give yourself 30 seconds to write down as many words as you can think of that end in *-ight*.

A list of words is given in the Answer Key. How many did you write down? Chinese students usually produce about 5 or 6 words ending in *-ight* while English native speakers average 6 or 7. This is partly due to the fact the native speakers have a larger vocabulary and might think of some less frequently used words.

### Task

How many words do you know by sound?

The word *bough* means a branch of a tree. It rhymes with *cow* and *now* and *how*, although the spelling of *bough* is quite different.

Using a timer, how many words can you think of in 30 seconds that rhyme with **eight**?

How many did you find? Some examples are given in the Answer Key and there are many more.

Native English speakers (known here as first language users or *L1*) can usually recall more words by sound than by sight. Chinese speakers (second language users or *L2*), however, find this task considerably more difficult than

the first one. The more proficient Chinese speakers are able to recall two or three words and some less proficient ones are unable to produce any words that rhyme with *eight*.

This simple experiment shows the importance of sound, or pronunciation, in producing English words, because the more advanced the learner, the more words are recalled by sound. Naturally the native speaker has the advantage of a much larger vocabulary from which to draw the matches, but the contrast between the ways of processing words by sight and by sound is quite clear.

Evidently the more emphasis we can put on linking the meaning, written form and spoken form of words as we present them to students, the more effective their vocabulary learning will become. In addition we need to point out how to use the words effectively and which strategies learners can use to help them learn words more efficiently. However, in many Chinese classrooms, less emphasis is put on the spoken form of English words and more is given to reading and writing.

Lastly, why *Harsh Words*? *Harsh* has taken on its own meaning in Hong Kong and is both overused and misused, often as a substitute for *difficult*, or *bad*. It actually means *rough* as in *harsh texture*; or *unpleasant to the senses*, as in *harsh voice*, or *severe* as in *harsh climate*, or *cruel*, as in *harsh punishment*. It is also an infrequently used word, whereas it has become a very popular word among Hong Kong students to describe their teachers, homework and life in general. More examples are given on p. 131. *Harsh Words* in the original sense are cruel or hurtful words, but to our learners, they seem to be difficult words.

## Further Reading

Some key books on vocabulary teaching and learning include:

- Nation, I. S. P. (1990) *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2000) *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornbury, S. (2002) *How to Teach Vocabulary*. Essex: Longman.



# 2

## *Word Collecting*

### **Introduction**

This chapter deals with collecting words: knowing what a word is, what it goes with and why they can be difficult to learn. It also looks at word frequency lists and which words are most useful to teach.

### **What Is a Word?**

A word can be described as the smallest unit of speech that has meaning and can stand alone. In its written form, a word is separated from another word by a space. We could also say that a word consists of one or more **morphemes**, or units of meaning. Are *book* and *books* one word or two? We'd probably count them as one word, because if we know the meaning of *book* and that 'book + s' is the plural form, we know the meaning is *more than one book*. *Books* has two morphemes, 'book' and '+ s' which gives it the plural meaning. *Unhelpful* has three morphemes: un/help/ful, with *help* being the root, or main part.

We can clearly see that *book*, *sit* and *bank* are three words, or **lexical units**, but can we consider *sit*, *sits* and *sitting* as knowing one word or three words? In '*Please take a seat*' and '*Please be seated*', are *seat* and *seated* considered as two different words or different forms of the same word? Most researchers would count them as different forms of the same word, as they share the same basic root *seat*.

There appears to be a close connection between these words to the extent that even elementary level learners of English would be able to recognise that they are based on the same root and so we would consider them as part of the same **word family**. Can we consider *bank* as in the Hang Seng Bank and a river *bank* as one word or two different words? Here the spelling and sound

are the same but the meanings are clearly different. Now we have one word form but two meanings and we would count these as two words, just as they would be given two separate entries in a dictionary.

Words can also be classified by their role in a sentence and so we have different parts of speech or **word classes**. These are:

Nouns	table, chair, honesty
Adjectives	green, bright, old
Verbs	sit, eat, think
Adverbs	quietly, fast, smoothly
Pronouns	he, she, them
Prepositions	to, from, for
Conjunctions	and, but, so
Determiners	a, an, the

The first four *nouns*, *adjectives*, *verbs* and *adverbs* are **content words** and they give us the basic meaning of a sentence and are often used in newspaper headlines, advertisements and notes: *Russian nuclear sub sinks*.

The remaining four *pronouns*, *prepositions*, *conjunctions* and *determiners* are known as **function words** and carry grammatical features. Fortunately for English language learners there is a fairly limited set of about 300 function words and they have remained unchanged for a very long time. Examples include *I*, *no*, *someone*, *first*, *such*, *others*, *once*, *now*, *and*, *until*, *enough* and *few*.

Content words, however, tend to increase with new words and meanings being added to dictionaries every year. Words whose meanings have changed or taken on additional meanings in the past fifty years include *gay*, (merry, homosexual) and *file* (box or holder for papers, computer information stored on a disk). New words recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary include *cyberspace*, *rave*, and *grunge*.

A **lemma** consists of a key word plus its add-ons or **inflexions** that are the same part of speech, as in *act*, *acts*, *acting* and *acted*. A separate lemma would be needed for *action*, *actor* and *actors*. Changes can also be made to the end of the word depending on the way it is used in a sentence and so **affixes** are the parts fixed on at either end. At the beginning of a word, as in *react*, they are known as *prefixes*, and at the end, as in *action*, they are called *suffixes*. Most dictionaries would treat them as sharing the same basic root *act*, but having different endings or inflexions according to grammatical forms.

In the word *disagreement* we have a prefix *dis-*, a root or stem *agree* and a suffix *-ment*. When words are derived from the basic word in this way, they are known as **derivatives**. A word family consists of the basic word plus its inflexions and most common, or closely related, derivatives as in:

agree, agrees, agreed, agreement, disagree, disagrees, disagreed, disagreement.

The size of a word family will increase as a learner's proficiency increases, and so less common derivatives such as *agreeable* and *disagreeable* could be included in a more advanced word family.

Are the following classed as words?

*Phoebe, Mandarin, Guangzhou*

What would your learners need to know when they meet them? They would need to know that they are names (of a girl, a hotel and a place) and so need a capital letter at the beginning and are used as proper nouns. They would also need to know that Mandarin can be used to mean *Putonghua*, the language, or a senior official in Imperial China, or the name of a hotel group. They need to know their pronunciation and this is especially difficult with words that have come from a different language, such as Phoebe, which is a Greek name pronounced 'feebee'.

Other types of English words are **compound nouns** such as *cyberport*, and *restroom*. Neither of these words really carries its original meaning. The *cyberport* in Hong Kong has no port, although there was a port in the original design plan and words beginning with 'cyber' usually mean something to do with technology and computers, such as *cyberspace* and *cybercafe*. A *restroom* is hardly a place where one would want to lie down and have a rest, especially if it's in a public building, but at least it would contain a toilet and water, so one might go there to freshen up. Compound nouns are sometimes hyphenated e.g. *rice-cooker*, or may be written as two separate words. When two words are abbreviated to form one word, such as *brunch* (breakfast + lunch) they are known as **blends**.

Multiword units are groups of words that go together, usually in a set sequence, such as *to and fro*, *in and out*, *in a nutshell*, *put it on* and *give it back*. They have to be learned as if they are a single unit and are usually listed under the key word in a dictionary. If you look up *nutshell* in a dictionary, the idiom *in a nutshell* is usually listed, after the basic meaning of *nutshell*.

## Task

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In English some words can be used in many different contexts and one word can have multiple uses and meanings.

How many uses and meanings of **save** can you think of?

Some examples are given in the Answer Key.

How many Chinese words would you need to use to cover all these different contexts? Which of the words can be used with both **waste and lose**? What is the difference in meaning?

Since words can be classified into word families and have multiple meanings, it is difficult to say *exactly* how many English words we know.

## What Is Involved in Learning a Word?

When we learn a word, we need to know its meaning, pronunciation and how to use it correctly in a sentence. These three elements could be subdivided into many more related aspects such as spelling, part of speech, level of formality, associated words and frequency of use which will be dealt with later. In the meantime, let's go back to the word *save*. If we know the word, we should also know that it can mean to rescue (a life), and to keep (money), to prevent waste (time, energy, electricity, water), to keep for later (food), prevent the other side from scoring a goal, store a file on a disk, etc.

We also need to know that *save* can be used in a **multiword unit**, such as *save the day*, and that it is a **verb** that can take an object, as in *She saved his life*. It can be followed by 'from' as in 'She saved him from drowning' or can be followed by 'by' as in '...saved by the bell'. *Save* can also be used as a preposition to mean 'except' as in *She answered all the questions correctly save one*.

Its pronunciation follows fairly regular spelling-to-sound rules so it rhymes with shave, cave, Dave, gave and wave (unlike *have*).

Learners, however, are unlikely to be able to process all these meanings and uses in one lesson and so they gradually build up their vocabulary step by step and add to the basic meaning as they encounter words in new contexts.

## Why Are Some Words Harder to Learn than Others?

Students face many problems when learning unfamiliar English words, such as their form, structure, grammatical behaviour of words, their meanings and

relationships with other words. Here we will focus on the difficulties that Chinese learners commonly face and then try to devise ways to help them learn English words more easily.

### *Written form*

Form refers to whether the words are written or spoken, and there are different problems associated with each. The written form of English words is very different from Chinese characters, being made up of letters of the alphabet, which individually, or in combinations, represent a sound. There are basic general spelling rules to guide the learner, for example:

### Comparatives and superlatives

Add *-er* or *-est* to the end of the adjective, for example:

- soft            softer            softest
- full            fuller            fullest

Exceptions:

If the adjective ends in:	Do this:	Add:	Example:
consonant + -y <i>happy</i>	change the -y to an -i	-er, -est	happy, happier happiest
consonant + -e <i>safe</i>	remove the -e	-er, -est	safe, safer, safest
consonant + vowel + consonant <i>big</i>	double the last letter	-er, -est	big, bigger, biggest

### Verbs ending -ing and -ed

Take the basic verb form and add -ed or -ing:

- walk    walking    walked
- play    playing    played

But

- love    loveing    loved
- try    trying    tryied
- ship    shipping    shipped

Exceptions:

If the verb ends in:	Do this:	Add:	Example:
consonant + -e <i>save</i>	remove the -e	-ed, -ing	save, saving, saved
-ie <i>lie</i>	change -ie to -y	-ing, -d	lying, dying lied, died
consonant + <b><i>stressed vowel</i></b> + consonant <i>stop</i>	double the last letter	-ed, -ing	stop, stopping, stopped

### Is it ie or ei?

This is a common spelling error and one that can be quite tricky. The simple rule is:

I before E  
Except after C  
If it rhymes with bee

Examples include:

believe, brief, priest, chief, grief, thief  
ceiling, receive, receipt, deceive, deceit

If the word rhymes with 'say' it takes 'ei' :

beige, feint, eight, freight, neighbour, vein, weigh, weight

Other common words with this spelling pattern include:

either, foreign, height, leisure, seize, weird and their

### *Similar forms*

Learners frequently confuse words that have similar written forms, or sound similar, such as *cute/acute*, *board/broad* and *quite/quiet*. The teacher needs to be aware of words that can easily be confused and make a conscious effort to help

the students to separate these words, possibly by demonstrating their use in sample sentences or different contexts, such as *The cute baby had an acute tummy ache.*

### *Spoken form*

In spoken form, words can be tricky to pronounce because of their length or difficult combinations of sounds, or stress pattern, for example *catastrophe*, [catastrophy], *crisps* [crisps], and *mechanism* [mekanism]. Learners in general tend to avoid using words orally if they are difficult to pronounce or they are unsure of the correct pronunciation. Similarly, they may misunderstand the speaker if they confuse the pronunciation of similar sounding words.

An example of this happened to a friend a few years ago in France. Arriving late one evening at a small family hotel, she rang reception to ask for some *soap* as there was none in the bathroom. After some time a waiter appeared at the door carrying a tray with *soup*!



### *Structure*

Words may be confusing if they have the same root but different affixes (prefixes or suffixes), for example *industrious* and *industrial*; *flammable* and *inflammable*; *exhausting*, *exhaustive* and *exhausted*. Their word form may be misleading because of the **morphology**, or structure, because the individual parts, or morphemes, put together may have a different meaning from the one expected, such as *infallible* which could be wrongly guessed as 'unable to fall'. Others might have irregular derivations leading to misunderstandings. *Oversee* and *overlook*, for example, are not interchangeable. Chinese learners frequently apply sensible logic to illogical English words, after all, why should *invaluable* and *priceless* not mean *worthless*? Such words need to be carefully explained when presented.

### *Grammatical behaviour or syntax*

Learners frequently have difficulties with verbs such as *concern* and *to be concerned about*, or *to be concerned with* something. Similarly the grammatical

structure 'It is difficult for him to do this' causes a great deal of trouble for many Chinese learners who instead write *He is difficult to do this*. Other confusions lie with phrasal verbs, such as *put on clothes* but we cannot *put off clothes*. We don't *on the light*, or *off the TV*, nor do we *open the aircon* or *close the radio*.

### Meaning

Often one word might be used in one language whereas several words may be needed to convey the meaning in a second language, for example, *She birthed a baby* would be inappropriate for *She had a baby*, or *She gave birth to a baby*. Similarly, we cannot say *I borned in Hong Kong*.

Idioms and metaphors are a rich source of problems. Even if a learner knows all the individual words, the meaning of the complete phrase or multiword unit may be completely different or unexpected.

Improper use of idiomatic English caused an awkward silence at the end of a formal banquet one evening in Beijing. The host, who had spoken perfect English throughout the evening, brought the dinner to a close with 'Well, I've eaten so much I'm really fed up'. He meant to say 'full up'.

Similar confusions with phrasal verbs are caused with *throw up* and *throw out*. If a child vomits, he *throws up*, but we *throw out* the rubbish. Chinese learners frequently confuse *take* with *eat*, *drink* or *have*, translating 'yum cha' literally as 'take tea'. Similarly Chinese *cook* water while English *boil* it.

Another source of difficulty occurs when distinctions are made in English that may have no equivalent in the learner's language, such as *thin*, *slim*, *slender* and *skinny*. Chinese learners associate *slim* with *fit*, and *unhealthy* with *unfit*. Some concepts may not exist in Chinese, making it harder for the learner to comprehend ideas such as a *rosy outlook*. This is particularly difficult if the learner confuses *outlook* with *appearance* (look like on the outside). Some words may be culturally unusual and have no direct equivalent in the learner's language as with *kettle* or *quilt*.

Learners also need to be able to distinguish between formal and informal or colloquial language that is appropriate to the situation, such as *relax* and *chill*, or *psychiatrist* and *shrink*.



Abstract words are usually difficult to learn because the concept itself may be unfamiliar to the learner, even in their own language, such as *erudite*, *snobbish* or *sluggish*.

### *Relationship with other words*

While a word may go with or **collocate** with another such as *strong tea*, or a *strong woman*, we would be unlikely to find *strong* used with *engine*, and so learners need to know in what circumstances a word can be used with other words in a sentence. Similarly, we might hurt our arm, but not hurt a picture.

<b>Task</b>						
<i>Collocations</i>						
Tick the boxes in the grid below to show which adjectives collocate, or can be used, with which nouns. Check the Answer Key to see if you are correct.						
	pace	progress	learner	journey	motion	coach
slow						
leisurely						
unhurried						

Having identified difficulties that Chinese learners often encounter in learning English words, we need to be aware of these problems and help them avoid making simple mistakes.

### **Which Words Should Students Learn?**

We need to look at ways to make vocabulary learning a little more manageable by deciding which words students most need to learn. It would seem logical to make sure that learners know the words that they are most likely to come across in everyday spoken English, in most general reading texts as well as the words needed during the lesson such as *page*, *blackboard*, *timetable* etc.

The table below shows the twenty most frequently occurring words in spoken and written English, taken from research on word frequencies at the University of Lancaster in the UK. What do you notice about these lists?

<i>Spoken English</i>	<i>Frequency Number</i>	<i>Written English</i>
the	1	the
I	2	of
you	3	and
and	4	a
it	5	in
a	6	to
's	7	is
to	8	was
of	9	it
that	10	for
n't	11	that
in	12	with
we	13	he
is	14	be
do	15	on
they	16	I
er	17	by
was	18	's
yeah	19	at
have	20	you

First of all, seven of the top ten words occur in both lists: *the*, *and*, *of*, *a*, *it*, *to* and *is*/'s. The speaker tends to refer to himself more frequently (*I* is in 2nd place), than to the audience (*you* in 3rd place), whereas in writing, *he* is in 13th place, *I* appears 17th and *you* in the 20th place. So what happened to *she*? Well, *she* is down in 30th position...

Although there is a close relationship between written and spoken English, we tend not to write shortened forms, at least in formal writing, as words that *do not* occur in the written list include *n't*, *yeah* and *er*. It could be argued that the last example is not even a real word, but a sound of hesitation, although *er*, *erm*, and *um* frequently occur in speech.

We have seen how certain words occur more frequently than others. The first 1,000 words and their families are naturally the most important ones for students to learn.

Here are some more examples taken from the University of Lancaster's research into the 1,000 most frequently used words that learners would

probably need to know at a fairly elementary stage. Most course books and basic readers are designed with these words in mind and tend to use the words in many different contexts so that the learners can become familiar with them from the beginning of their course.

<i>Nouns</i>	<i>Adjectives</i>	<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Adverbs</i>	<i>Conjunctions</i>
time	other	be	so	and
year	good	have	up	that
people	new	do	then	but
way	old	will	out	or
man	great	say	now	as
day	high	would	only	if
thing	small	can	just	when
child	different	get	more	than
Mr	large	make	also	because
government	local	go	very	while
work	social	see	well	where
life	important	know	how	although
woman	long	take	down	whether
system	young	could	back	before
case	national	think	on	since
part	big	come	there	so
group	right	give	still	though
number	early	look	even	until
world	possible	may	too	after

Why not focus on the first 500 words? Many of these are function words, like *I*, *will*, *can* and *from* rather than content words like *apple*, *see* and *walk*, so we tend to look at the bigger picture, though, of course, the most commonly used words should generally be taught first. Learners with a specific interest in a particular area like banking, might look at a different set of words than a general learner. We will look again at word lists in chapter 5.

The next most useful words to learn are the words in the 2,000 list, which, together with a good grasp of grammar, should allow general fluency in conversational English, and 87% coverage of academic texts. The first 2,000 words can be covered explicitly in class, as they are considered fundamental to language learning.

## How Many Words Should Students Know?

The answer will vary greatly depending on several factors such as English proficiency, age, personal or family background, education, motivation etc. By the age of around 20, a native English speaking university level student knows around 20,000 word families, which means absorbing around 1,000 words a year until adulthood. (Goulden, Nation and Read, 1990; Nation, 2001). This might seem an impossible goal for many second language learners, but those who set themselves a target of 30 to 50 words per week should be able to master enough words to enable them to read general texts without too much difficulty.

While no firm figures are available for vocabulary levels of students in Hong Kong schools, government sources suggest that by the end of primary school education, children have encountered around 4,000 English words in text books and readers. What percentage of these words are *known* by the students is a very different matter as researchers estimate that learners have to meet a word 7 to 10 times or more before they are likely to understand its meaning and usage. A rough estimate of word knowledge of children leaving primary school might be 500 to 1,000 words.

In secondary school learners should be absorbing more words as they consolidate known words and learn new ones. With public exams approaching, their vocabulary levels should be closer to 2,000 words which is probably a *minimum* goal for HKCEE level students. Those who wish to continue on to A levels and university will still need to learn many more words.

Students at English medium universities need to be able to read and understand a variety of newspaper articles and texts in English. For 'minimally accepted comprehension', researchers recommend a knowledge of 95% of the words in a text or around 4,000 word families. These would include the first 2,000 words plus the Academic Word List of 570 words and an additional 1,000 'technical words, proper nouns and low frequency words' (Nation, 2001, p. 147). For 'adequate comprehension' 98% of the words must be known and this could mean a vocabulary size closer to 7,000 or even 10,000 word families for university students to read and understand academic texts.

## Which Words Should We Teach?

This will depend very much on the level and interest of the learners. It makes sense first to teach the words that learners will meet and use most, so the words from the first 1,000 level word list are crucial in any language course. Learners will need to know the words used in instructions, such as *Clean the board, please,*

or *Pass me the microphone*, if it's a large class. Course books will probably be the main source of words, though students may pick up a surprising number of words and phrases from movie titles and advertisements on the MTR and buses.

The next most frequently used words are those in the 2,000 word list, but after this stage the frequency of occurrence drops considerably. Teachers should then focus on the roots of words and the words that are most likely to be needed for a particular purpose, such as academic or vocational study. These more formal words appear on lower frequency lists and are often derived from Latin and Greek words, and so a knowledge of word structure can be helpful.

The *Academic Word List* (1997) was compiled by Averil Coxhead who profiled the words from a cross section of general academic textbooks and sorted the words by frequency. She removed the first 2,000 most frequently used words and then identified those that learners are most likely to come across in their studies at university. The list contains 570 head words, i.e. the word that would appear in a dictionary, plus the members of their word families, amounting to over three thousand words. Students are strongly advised to be familiar with these key words and their usage.

Beyond this level, students should concentrate on technical or discipline-related words used in specific contexts, for example physics, law or engineering. Technical words used in vocational studies such as cooking or plumbing would be dealt with in English courses for specific purposes.

We have seen that frequency is an important factor, but there are other points to be considered when choosing which words to teach. Coverage and range are important because it is helpful first to present words with a broad coverage, such as *bird*, before *owl* or *crow*, and those that would be found in a wide variety of texts rather than specific words.

It is also sensible to present words that are:

- easier to learn, and more widely used, before progressing to the more difficult levels, such as *walk* before *saunter* or *stroll*,
- frequently used by native speakers, taking into account the cultural background, such as *fried rice*, or *fish and chips*, *salt and pepper*,
- relevant to the teaching activity, such as *slide* or *transparency* for use in oral presentations, even though these words are not frequently used in general English, and
- topic related, such as *elector*, *voting* and *ballot box* if the discussion topic is elections.

In short, we should think of our learners' needs when choosing the words to present to them. Ways of presenting words will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have defined what we mean by a word and looked briefly at how words are built. Knowing the meaning of a word is important, but we also need to know the pronunciation, spelling, grammatical usage of a word and the words that they go with or *collocate* with. It is helpful to know whether a word is formal or informal, whether it is frequently used or a rare word so that we can use it appropriately.

School students should aim to learn the 2,000 most frequently used words so that they can communicate and read general texts. Once the foundation is established, if they wish to pursue academic study they should aim to master the Academic Word List and prefixes, roots and suffixes. Alternatively, they should learn the technical words that will be most useful for vocational study.

**Revision questions**

1. What do we mean by knowing a word?
2. Why are some words difficult to learn? Give four examples of words *your* students find difficult and explain why.
3. Which words do *your* students need to know?
4. Suggest three sources of words that your learners will find useful.

**Further Reading**

- Coxhead, A. (2000). A New Academic Word List. *TESOL Quarterly* 34, 2: 213–238.
- Goulden, R., P. Nation, and J. Read (1990). How large can a receptive vocabulary be? *Applied Linguistics* 11, 4: 341 – 363.
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- Laufer, B. (1997). The lexical plight in second language reading. In J. Coady and T. Huckin (eds), *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lorge, I. and J. Chall (1963). Estimating the size of vocabularies of children and adults: An analysis of methodological issues. *Journal of Experimental Education* 32, 2: 147–157.

# Appendix 1

## Business and Economics Words Frequently Used in Hong Kong and China

absorb	bet	conglomerates	devalue
accelerate	bonus	conservative	differential
acceleration	boom	consolidate	diligent
accreditation	boosting	consumer	disaster
accredited	borrow	contractual	disclosure
advantageous	bourse	convergence	discount
affiliates	broker	corporate	discrepancy
ailing	budget	correlate	discriminatory
alleged	bull	corruption	disputes
alleviate	bullish	counteract	dissipate
amalgamation	bureaucratic	counterfeiting	divert
analysts		coupon	dividends
annuity	campaign	crackdown	downturn
antitrust	capitalism	credibility	drastic
arbitrage	cartel	crisis	durable
assert	cash		
assets	chartered	dampen	earners
auditing	circulation	debentures	ease
auditor	clients	default	economic
autonomy	collaboration	deficits	economise
	collusion	deflationary	efficiently
bankruptcy	commission	denomination	embargo
barriers	competitive	deposit	endowment
barter	compliance	deteriorate	enduring
battered	concessions	deterioration	enforce
benchmark	conducive	devaluation	engage

ensure	imminent	massive	pervasive
enterprise	impetus	mediocre	pessimistic
entitled	implemented	merchandise	plummet
entrenched	imprudent	merger	portfolio
entrepot	increment	merit	postulate
entrepreneurs	incur	middlemen	pragmatic
equilibrium	incurred	mitigate	predatory
equity	indebtedness	mobilization	premium
executive	indices	momentum	pressure
exempt	inefficiency	monetary	prevailing
expand	inflation	monopolise	preventing
expansionary	influx	moratorium	profit
expenditure	insolvency	mortgage	prohibited
exports	insurers	multinational	prominent
	interim		promotional
fake	intersect	negligible	propaganda
financial	interventionist	negotiate	proposition
fiscal	inventory	nervous	prosperity
flagship	inverse	nominal	provincial
fluctuations	investors	nonperforming	prudent
forecast		normative	
forego	jitters		quadruple
forum	judiciary	obligation	quantitative
fraud		obscure	quotas
frustration	launch	offshore	
fundamentals	layoffs	optimistic	rally
	lease	outperforming	ratings
	leverage	outright	ration
global	levied	overdraft	rebound
gloom	levy	overwhelming	recall
goods	liability		recession
greenback	liquidity	pace	reckon
gross	lobbying	panic	recruitment
	logistics	payoff	reinvent
hampered	looming	peaks	rental
harsh	lottery	pecuniary	repay
haven	lucrative	peg	resilience
hedge		penalties	resilient
huge		perpetuity	restrictions
humanitarian	managerial	pertinent	retail
	marketplace		



retailers	tremendous
retaliation	trend
risk	troughs
robust	trustee
	turmoil
scant	turnover
sectors	
sentiment	undertaking
shareholders	underwriting
shortcomings	unsecured
simultaneously	upgrade
slashed	urban
slowdown	
sluggish	valuation
slump	vault
soared	venture
sovereignty	vested
speculation	viable
spontaneous	vocational
stake	volatility
stance	vulnerable
statutory	
stimulate	weighted
stockbroker	wholesale
stockmarkets	windfall
streamlined	workforce
stringent	
subscribe	
substantially	
supervisor	
surplus	
swap	
switch	
tariff	
taxable	
teller	
tier	
tradable	
transact	

## Appendix 2

### Idioms and Phrasal Verbs Using Parts of the Body

#### Arm

a babe in arms  
a shot in the arm  
cost an arm and a leg  
give my right arm for  
long arm of the law  
twist my arm  
up in arms

#### Ear

all ears  
bend your ear  
can't believe my ears  
coming out of our ears  
ear to the ground  
ears are burning  
fall on deaf ears  
in one ear and out the other  
keep your ear to the ground  
music to my ears  
play it by ear  
still wet behind the ears  
up to my ears  
an earful

#### Eye

a fresh pair of eyes  
a sight for sore eyes  
all eyes  
an eye for an eye (a tooth for a tooth)  
apple of his eye  
bat an eye  
beauty is in the eye of the beholder  
black eye  
can't believe my eyes  
catch your eye  
cry your eyes out  
eagle eyes  
eye of the storm  
eye to eye  
eyes glaze over  
feast your eyes on  
give her the eye  
give my eye teeth  
have my eye on  
in the wink of an eye  
in your mind's eye  
keep an eye on  
keep an eye open

keep an eye out  
 keep your eyes peeled  
 lay eyes on  
 my eye  
 out of the corner of my eye  
 pull the wool over your eyes  
 raise an eyebrow  
 right before my eyes  
 roll their eyes  
 see eye to eye  
 sight for sore eyes  
 there's more to this than meets the  
     eye  
 turn a blind eye  
 with the naked eye  
 without batting an eyelid

**Face**

at face value  
 blue in the face  
 egg on my face  
 face facts  
 face the music  
 face up  
 fall flat on my face  
 fly in the face of  
 in your face  
 keep a straight face  
 make a face  
 make faces  
 poker faced  
 pull a face  
 save face  
 straight face  
 till you're blue in the face  
 wipe that smile off your face  
 written all over your face

**Feet/Foot**

back on your feet

drag your feet  
 get cold feet  
 get your feet wet  
 itchy feet  
 land on your feet  
 sweep you off your feet  
 take a load off your feet  
 foot the bill  
 put my foot down  
 put your best foot forward  
 put your foot in it  
 put your foot in your mouth  
 set foot  
 shoot yourself in the foot  
 wait on you hand and foot  
 footloose and fancy free

**Fingers**

butter fingers  
 can't put my finger on it  
 cross your fingers  
 keep your fingers crossed  
 lift a finger  
 point a finger at  
 work my fingers to the bone  
 wrap around his finger

**Hand**

a bird in the hand is worth two in the  
     bush  
 a firm hand  
 a free hand  
 a helping hand  
 an old hand at  
 at the hands of  
 can't put my hands on it  
 change hands  
 eat out of the palm of your hand  
 firm hand  
 first hand

from hand to mouth  
 give me a hand  
 got my hands full  
 hand down  
 hand in  
 hand in hand  
 hand me down  
 hand out  
 hand over  
 hand over fist  
 hand to mouth  
 hands are tied  
 hands down  
 hands on  
 hands up  
 hat in hand  
 have it in hand  
 have to hand it to you  
 hold your hand  
 in good hands  
 in hand  
 lend a hand  
 out of hand  
 out of our hands  
 shake hands  
 the upper hand  
 time on your hands  
 try your hand at  
 wait on you hand and foot  
 wash your hands of it

### **Leg**

a leg up  
 break a leg  
 cost an arm and a leg  
 last legs  
 leg work  
 pull your leg  
 shake a leg

tail between his legs  
 the first leg

### **Mouth**

bad taste in my mouth  
 born with a silver spoon in his mouth  
 butter wouldn't melt in his mouth  
 by word of mouth  
 don't look a gift horse in the mouth  
 down in the mouth  
 from hand to mouth  
 hand to mouth  
 loud mouth  
 make your mouth water  
 melt in your mouth  
 put your foot in your mouth  
 put your money where your mouth is  
 shoot your mouth off  
 shut my mouth  
 straight from the horse's mouth  
 by word of mouth

### **Neck**

breathe down my neck  
 neck and neck  
 put my neck on the line  
 stick my neck out

### **Nose**

as plain as the nose on your face  
 cut off your nose to spite your face  
 hold your nose  
 keep your nose clean  
 keep your nose to the grindstone  
 look down your nose at  
 no skin off my nose  
 put someone's nose out of joint  
 pay through the nose

powder my nose  
turn up your nose at  
under my nose  
win by a nose  
hard nosed

**Shoulder**

chip on his shoulder  
give you the cold shoulder  
head and shoulders  
look over your shoulder  
rub shoulders with  
shoulder the blame  
shoulder to shoulder  
straight from the shoulder

**Toes**

on your toes  
step on their toes  
toe the line  
twinkle toes

**Teeth/Tooth**

a sweet tooth  
a tooth for a tooth  
armed to the teeth  
as scarce as hen's teeth  
by the skin of their teeth  
cut my teeth on  
fight tooth and nail  
long in the tooth  
give my eye teeth  
set your teeth on edge

**Tongue**

a sharp tongue  
a slip of the tongue  
bite your tongue  
cat got your tongue  
hold your tongue  
on the tip of my tongue  
roll off the tongue  
tongue in cheek



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