Harsh Words
English Words for Chinese Learners

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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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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:


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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>table, chair, honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>green, bright, old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>sit, eat, think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>quietly, fast, smoothly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>he, she, them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>to, from, for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunctions</td>
<td>and, but, so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiners</td>
<td>a, an, the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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:

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

**Verbs ending -ing and -ed**

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

- walk walking walked
- play playing played

But

- love loving loved
- try trying tried
- ship shipping shipped
Exceptions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the verb ends in:</th>
<th>Do this:</th>
<th>Add:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>consonant + -e save</td>
<td>remove the -e</td>
<td>-ed, -ing</td>
<td>save, saving, saved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ie lie</td>
<td>change -ie to -y</td>
<td>-ing, -d</td>
<td>lying, dying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consonant + stressed vowel + consonant stop</td>
<td>double the last letter</td>
<td>-ed, -ing</td>
<td>stopped</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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*, [catastrofy], *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!](image)

**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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collocations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pace</th>
<th>progress</th>
<th>learner</th>
<th>journey</th>
<th>motion</th>
<th>coach</th>
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<td>slow</td>
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<td>unhurried</td>
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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?
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Adverbs</th>
<th>Conjunctions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>be</td>
<td>so</td>
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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 textbooks 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


Appendix 1

Business and Economics Words Frequently Used in Hong Kong and China

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

Face

at face value
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

Fingers

back on your feet

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
get 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
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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