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An opaque engineering word list: Which words should a teacher focus on?

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ABSTRACT

Word lists have become influential in the last twenty years, but do not help teachers identify which words to explicitly focus on in the classroom. In this paper, I argue that words chosen for an explicit classroom focus should be words that students are likely to have problems dealing with autonomously, and that these are polysemous words where the meaning required is not the usual meaning; in other words, opaque words. The paper shows how to create a list of opaque words for teaching engineering English at a Thai university by comparing the meanings of words in the context against the main meanings given in the online dictionaries that students often rely on. The resulting list shows that most opaque words are high-frequency words with unusual meanings.

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The last twenty years has seen the publication of several influential word lists derived from corpora. Based on the assumption that the frequency with which a word is used is an indicator of its utility for learners, these lists primarily aim to help teachers "to set goals for their students' vocabulary learning" (Coxhead, 2011: 357). While the lists are clearly useful in setting targets for vocabulary assessment, in analysing text difficulty, and in modifying reading materials (Gardner & Davies, 2013), since most lists consist of 2,000 or so items, it is difficult to see how they can be used by teachers to select vocabulary for explicit teaching on a course. This paper shows how an initial word list of 500 words generated from a corpus of engineering textbooks can be filtered to produce a list of the most useful words to teach on the basis that words with opaque meanings (i.e., meanings that students are likely to have difficulty accessing by themselves) are those words where an explicit classroom focus is likely to be of most benefit.

1. Introduction

1.1. A brief history of word lists

The earliest major word list which is still influential is the General Service List or GSL (West, 1953; see Gilner, 2011 for a history of its development). This list aimed to identify the 2,000 most frequent words that are useful for students. Since the list reflects its age (e.g., by not including any of the technological innovations of the last 60 years), a New General Service List has been developed by Brezina and Gablasova (2015).

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While the General Service Lists aim to describe general English use, more recently a plethora of more specific word lists have been developed. The best known of these is Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) which aims to identify the most frequent and widely used words in academic English which are not on the GSL (perceived weaknesses in the AWL have led to two further lists of academic words by Gardner & Davies, 2013 and Paquot, 2007). In the same way that the AWL is more specific than the GSL, there are also several word lists more specific than the AWL, including word lists derived from corpora of engineering textbooks (e.g. Mudraya, 2006; Ward, 2009) and discipline-specific word lists such as the one for environmental science of Liu and Han (2015).

Nearly all of these word lists are generated based on the criteria of frequency, range and dispersion of words through the corpus. Some lists also use stopwords, or words that are necessarily excluded from the list (e.g., the AWL specifically excludes all words on the GSL). While there is little criticism of the idea of word lists in general, there have been numerous criticisms of the decisions made in constructing word lists. These include:

- Criticism of the composition of the corpus used to construct the word list (e.g., Hyland and Tse (2007) argue that the corpus underpinning the AWL does not give full coverage of the range of academic disciplines).
- Criticism of the criteria for identifying words to include on the list (e.g., Gardner and Davies (2013) in designing the New Academic Vocabulary List or New AVL question the decision to use the GSL as stopwords in constructing the AWL).
- Criticism of the nature of items to use as words. For example, the AWL is a list of word families, the new GSL uses lemmas, and Ward's (2009) engineering word list gives word types, with articles about these lists each criticising the choices of the others.
- Criticism of the use of surface forms as the basis for distinguishing between words. This includes issues of homonymy (Ming-Tzu and Nation (2004) found that homonyms are a minor problem in the AWL, but Hyland and Tse (2007) argue that words in the AWL take on different meanings in different disciplines) and how words are used (Hancioğlu, Neufeld, and Eldridge (2008) argue that lexico-grammatical patterns of use should be considered in word lists).
- Criticism of the number of words included in a word list (e.g. Ward (2009) argued that lists of 2,000 words are too long for practical use).

This final point is central to the arguments I will make in generating an opaque word list, but all of these criticisms are considered in generating the various word lists in this study.

1.2. The usefulness of word lists for teachers

As mentioned above, word lists are based on the assumption that frequency of use is taken as an indicator of a word's utility for learners. While this may be true, from a teacher's perspective, what is needed is a list of words for which spending valuable classroom time teaching will yield the greatest benefit. These two principles will not necessarily lead to the same list of words.

The language to teach "has to be specified along two parameters: in terms of the objectives to be eventually achieved, and in terms of the process that has to be activated to get there" (Widdowson, 2003: 115). Word lists provide targets for eventual achievement, but say nothing about how those targets are to be reached. When word lists are at least several hundred words long and when classroom time is a scarce resource, teachers need to decide which words to focus on in the limited time available and how much time to spend on each word. These decisions are likely to aim to "provide the best *investment* for learning" (Widdowson, 2013: 11, italics in original). The existing word lists, then, can provide a very long-term goal for vocabulary learning, but in any particular course the teacher needs to choose items from a relevant word list to prioritise for the greatest learning benefit (even for a purposefully short list such as Ward's (2009) 299-word engineering list).

1.3. Prioritising items from a word list

In choosing items from a word list to focus on in teaching, there are two main considerations: how many words to choose, and on what basis they should be chosen. The number of words clearly depends on the amount of time available. For effective learning, each word needs to be focused on explicitly and needs to be retrieved several times (Folse, 2011) with three focused exposures likely to ensure learning (Edwards & Collins, 2013). Given that most courses have numerous objectives in addition to vocabulary learning, we might expect to ensure a word is learnt every hour or two on average (with retrievals and focuses spread over a greater length of time, but with several words ongoing at the same time).

There are several possible bases for choosing words to teach. The most obvious basis for choosing words is the same basis that forms the rationale of word lists, namely, frequency. The AWL, for example, is divided into ten sub-lists in decreasing order of frequency, so perhaps the teacher should focus on those words in the highest frequency sub-list first. However, the actual sequence of words by frequency is an artifact of the exact corpus used to generate the word list and a different corpus will give a different sequence even if the criteria for building the corpus are the same. It is also unclear whether the highest frequency words in a list are those which provide the greatest investment for learning.

An alternative basis is to focus on words with high learnability (i.e., words that are easier to learn) and teachability (i.e. words that can be easily taught) (Thornbury, 2002). Words with similar forms and meanings in English and in the learners' L1 are generally easier to learn, and concrete nouns are generally more easily taught than other vocabulary items. The rationale here is efficiency, with classroom time spent on vocabulary leading to the greatest vocabulary gains.

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