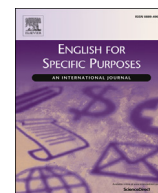




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The most frequent BNC/COCA mid- and low-frequency word families in English-medium traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) textbooks



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ABSTRACT

This research set out to examine the vocabulary used in English-medium traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) textbooks and aimed to establish a TCM English word list (EWL) as a reference for English for Chinese Medicine purposes. The researcher built a 13-million-token TCM Textbook Corpus and measured the vocabulary levels of the books from within along the word-frequency scale of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Results show that knowledge of the first BNC/COCA 10,000 word families plus proper nouns would provide 98% lexical coverage of a TCM text. The first 3,000 word families were not considered for inclusion in the TCM EWL, but the next 605 most frequent word families were selected to form the word list. The TCM EWL accounted for 11.42% of running words of the corpus and encompassed various technical vocabularies—crypto-technical, lay-technical and sub-technical words. For Chinese medicine students, it can provide a window to the TCM English register, and for *English for Chinese Medicine* teachers, it can serve as a guide in curriculum preparation, particularly in setting vocabulary goals at the initial phase of medical English instruction.

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1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) or Chinese medicine has an over two millennia history and unique bodies of theory and clinical experience. TCM approaches include various forms of acupuncture, acupressure, tuina (therapeutic massage), herbal formula, cupping, regimen, qigong (qi exercise to restore and balance the flow of vital energy in the body) and moxibustion (burning herbs above the skin to apply heat to acupuncture points). In the past two decades, TCM research has been growing in visibility in international medical journals. A major factor contributing to this growth is the number of Chinese medicine research articles listed in the Science Citation Index (SCI), which serves as an assessment indicator for Chinese medicine professors/doctors aiming to earn a promotion or research grants. Chinese medicine professors/doctors at medial universities with their own teaching hospitals and large-scale medical centers need English mainly for academic purposes such as referencing, research and publication. With more and more exchanges between Western medicine and Chinese medicine, English has inevitably become central to international academic activities, which goes against the general impression that English is not needed in the TCM context.

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Within English language learning, one challenge for learners is its huge vocabulary. Nation (2006) estimated that an educated native English speaker has, approximately, a vocabulary of 20,000 word families. Knowledge of the first 9,000 word families plus proper nouns may provide 98% lexical coverage of most written texts (Nation, 2014). Although 9,000 word families as a vocabulary goal may seem small compared to an adult native English speaker's 20,000 word families, reaching this goal is still daunting for TCM students. Fortunately, not all English words are equally important in terms of learner needs. One shortcut to attaining a lexical threshold is to consider word lists. Targeting a restricted vocabulary with relatively high frequency of occurrence to achieve greater lexical coverage may be more practical in this regard.

This is an important issue, as Coxhead (2000) noted that one of the most challenging aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning is to make principled decisions about which words are worth focusing on during limited class sessions. In response to this need, she developed the Academic Word List (AWL) derived from 28 academic subjects across four disciplinary areas so that the AWL is relevant to all areas of academic study and can help English teachers set vocabulary goals for their students with academic English needs. Since the AWL, a number of discipline-specific vocabulary lists have been developed to address the needs of particular learners (see Literature review). Nevertheless, very few have been created exclusively for the learning of specialized vocabulary in the field of Chinese medicine. One exception is Lu and Durrant (2017), who investigated the usefulness of the AWL and AVL (Academic Vocabulary list) (Gardner & Davies, 2014) as well as the top 100 off-AWL and off-AVL words in terms of the coverage they achieve in Chinese medical research articles.

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, TCM students read specialist textbooks written mainly in Chinese. TCM departments, however, have recognized the need for specialized English education and provide *English for Chinese Medicine* courses, which aim to prepare TCM students for their possible need to read or communicate in English at some point in their career.

For college-level *English for Chinese Medicine* courses, this study did not target research articles (hereafter RAs) as a corpus source for identification of the most frequent TCM words for two reasons. First, RAs by their nature address very specialized issues, while textbooks are first and foremost materials of core knowledge and therefore reflect the most commonly-used lexical items that are the core vocabulary of the field. Second, TCM RAs are published mostly by Chinese-speaking professionals. In consideration of lexicogrammatical accuracy, this study used English TCM textbooks that target non-Chinese speakers learning Chinese medicine as a basis of analysis. For EFL Chinese medicine students, the core vocabulary derived from the corresponding English specialist textbooks can provide a window to the TCM English register.

In an effort to contribute to a data-driven approach to teaching TCM terminology, the main purpose of this research was to develop a TCM English Word List (EWL) that covers the most commonly-used vocabulary in textbooks across different sub-disciplines in Chinese medicine. The TCM EWL established in this study may serve as a guide for *English for Chinese Medicine* teachers in curriculum preparation, especially in developing vocabulary learning activities as well as for learners in setting attainable vocabulary goals during a particular phase of English learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Word lists as vocabulary goals

Word lists have long been used as a means of vocabulary learning (Beglar & Hunt, 2005). Much research concerning word lists has been conducted over the past several decades, especially those studies that have produced seminal word lists, such as West's (1953) GSL (General Service List), Xue and Nation's (1984) UWL (University Word List), and Coxhead's (2000) AWL (Academic Word List). In recent years, more up-to-date general and academic word lists have been developed using different methodologies, e.g., Browne's (2013) New General Service List (NGSL), Brezina and Gablasova's (2015) New General Service List (new-GSL), as well as Gardner and Davies's (2014) Academic Vocabulary List (AVL). The GSL, NGSL and new-GSL are relevant to all English learners, as they represent the most frequent vocabulary for general purposes. In contrast, the UWL, AWL and AVL are most helpful for learners pursuing academic study at the tertiary level.

Some researchers maintain that for learners with academic interests, the vocabulary learning sequence should begin with general words, followed by academic words, with the sum of both sets of vocabulary being the minimal vocabulary needed to start reading academic texts proficiently (Coxhead, 2000; Xue & Nation, 1984). General words refer to either the GSL, which covers around 80% of most English texts, or a new GSL, which accounts for 80.1%–81.7% of four language corpora of 12+ billion words, or the first BNC 2,000 word families (Nation, 2006), which make up 86%–90% of a diversity of written texts.

Subsequent to general words is the learning of academic words. These are the words that occur relatively frequently in academic texts, but do not occur as commonly as general words. For instance, Xue and Nation's (1984) 836-word UWL covered nearly 10% of the words in academic texts and Coxhead's (2000) 570-word AWL registered roughly 10% text coverage. Critical of the AWL due to its exclusion of the GSL, Gardner and Davies (2014) contended that general words with academic meanings that occur in academic English more frequently than in general English should be taken into account rather than be excluded. Accordingly, they created a new Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) with 3,000 lemmas, equivalent to 2,000 word families. A random selection of 570 word families out of the AVL was claimed to cover close to 14% of the words in each of the COCA-academic and the BNC-academic corpora.

Although together general vocabulary and academic vocabulary contribute to a large amount of text coverage, some researchers see more value in a restricted, discipline-based lexical repertoire rather than a general academic vocabulary (e.g., Hyland & Tse, 2007). Previous research has approached discipline-specific vocabulary mainly in three different ways. One is to

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