

The Selection of Vocabulary for EFL Lower-primary School Textbooks

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An educated native speaker has a lexicon of about 20,000 word families (Nation & Waring, 1997), 10-15 % of which is sufficient for L2 students to communicate effectively with native speakers (Laufer, 1992; Nation & Waring, 1997; Nation, 2001). Yet, since 'in terms of usefulness, all words are not created equal' (Nation & Gu, 2007: 20) the question remains: which 2000 word families should students learn. Though there seems to be a general agreement that frequent vocabulary is useful for learners and that it should have a salient position in textbooks, resorting to corpora does not provide a straightforward answer. The 2000 most frequent words do not have to be linked to a set of clear and interesting themes, whereas good textbooks, especially for beginners, need thematic content (Milton, 2009).

The presentation focuses on the results of a corpus analysis of the linguistic material contained in 15 selected English language course books for lower-primary school (5 book series with three yearly parts each). English textbooks from a variety of publishers were analysed for word families and types by frequency. The analysis revealed high idiosyncrasy of the textbooks, especially year 1 books. Though there was a group of items common to all books for a given year, the vast majority of the common words were functional and even target vocabulary was sparsely harmonised across publishers. Similar results were obtained in previous studies concerning English textbooks (Rixon, 1999; Alexiou & Konstantakis, 2007 as described in Milton, 2009: 202-203; Alcaraz, 2009).

It was observed that books varied in the order of introduction of particular semantic fields. That fact might have contributed to only so few word families common to particular years. The analysis between series that followed revealed some similarities across books. The analysis of vocabulary range showed that the distribution of words with respect to frequency ranks (first 1000 most frequent words, second 1000 most frequent words, academic words and off-list words) was almost the same for each series analyzed. Interestingly, though words belonging to the category of 1000 most frequent words constituted the biggest proportion of vocabulary in each book and each series, the number of word families common to all series was still small. In order to shed some light on the low similarity in the choice of lexis by different authors some further analysis was conducted. Firstly, in order to verify that the books addressed children's needs, the vocabulary from textbooks was juxtaposed with the Dale-Chall list. It is a list containing 3,000 words which are understood by more than 80% of 4th grade students in the USA. Secondly, in order to obtain information about the difficulty of vocabulary from a particular textbook series, the words from books were compared with the list of words that students at A1 level (as described by the Common European Framework of Reference) should know according to the Common English Lexical Framework (CELF) (Eldridge, Neufeld & Hancioğlu, 2010). Though CELF was developed mainly for the needs of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) its primary aim was to produce a lexical syllabus and such a syllabus could be used not only in the CLIL context. The analysis provided evidence for differentiation of course book series that are more and less linguistically challenging for students.

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