Martin Sedaghat & Emily MacFarlane

The Younger Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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Young Learner-Friendly Wordlists

Chris Murty

I'd like to start this article with a word that I have spent a not insignificant amount of time teaching my young learners: "mud". The reason I have taught them this word is because it belongs in a story/chant called "Bear Hunt." I spend one month of every year acting out this story with my first-grade elementary students. It's a great story that introduces lots of useful prepositions, is very repetitive, and is about the right level for my young learners (YLs). If you are unfamiliar with the story, the protagonists go on a bear hunt, encountering tall grass, a river, and mud that they must cross in order to reach the bear's cave (see Figure 1). By the end of four classes spread over a month, my students have learned the target vocabulary of the story.

Figure 1

Students Encounter Makeshift Grass, River, and Mud

I am lucky that some of the students who study this topic stay in my classes for several years, as I am able to monitor which words they retain from previous topics and years of study. I can report that none of my students have retained the word "mud." They are, however, able to recall the word "grass." The reason for this, I believe, is simple: "grass" appears in another song. It is also what many animals eat, and has been discussed in that context. It is mentioned in the graded readers they use, as well. In my experience, it is a more common word than mud. Or, to put it in corpus linguistic terms, it is a high frequency word. According to Webb and Nation (2017), seven deliberate encounters with a word are necessary for acquisition to take place. These four encounters with "mud" in the space of one month were simply not enough.

Giving our students at least seven encounters with every word that we hope for them to acquire seems like a great deal of review. It is part of why homework and other activities, such as extensive reading, are recommended. But what happens if the words in your lessons don't appear in the graded readers or other level-appropriate material your young learners are accessing at home? How can we increase the chances of them encountering the words elsewhere that we have chosen to teach? One answer is by identifying the highest frequency words of English for inclusion in our lessons. The higher the frequency of a word, the more likely students are to encounter this word in other places. The data that tells us "grass" is used more often than "mud" is produced through corpus linguistics: the study of a collection of language (a corpus) to reveal facts about language use. By identifying the words that appear most often in a corpus, we are able to create lists of the highest-frequency words.

Perhaps you already know some well-known lists, such as the General Service List (West, 1953), or the more recent Oxford 3000 and 5000 lists (Moore et al, 2020). A lot of the well-known word lists are made from corpora based on the language of adults (Webb & Nation, 2017) and are therefore not entirely appropriate for children. They may not accurately tell us which words appear in content aimed at children. So, which wordlists are more YL-friendly in their selection?

YL-Friendly Wordlists You May Already Know About

You may currently be using a wordlist in the form of a textbook glossary or target vocabulary list. It may be a list suggested for passing a certain test, such as the STEP Eiken, or it may be the list compiled by the Japanese Ministry of Education for their school textbooks. In fact, awareness of any of these lists can be helpful when trying to give students more deliberate encounters with words. You may want to consider using such a list in some of the suggested uses of wordlists later in this article. However, research has shown that many YL textbooks' vocabulary content is lacking in high-frequency words.

There is also a lack of overlap between textbooks of different series when it comes to a core vocabulary (Alexiou & Konstantakis, 2009). This means we can't fully rely on published materials to give our YLs words that they may encounter with any frequency beyond the material in question. If we do want our students to go beyond this, with graded readers, secondary materials, classroom discussions, or even authentic content, how can we increase the chances of them seeing the words that we have studied in class? Perhaps a wordlist that makes use of child-specific corpora can give us some insight into which words YLs are more likely to encounter in a variety of contexts.

YL-Friendly Wordlists You Should Know About

1. New Dolch List

L1 English children have used sight-word lists for a long time at the beginning stages of their literacy instruction. The Dolch word list has been in use since 1936, providing a source of the most common words L1 children will encounter in their reading materials and is still in use today. It was created by Edward William Dolch using children's books of his time. Taking inspiration from this, the "New Dolch List" (NDL: www.newgeneralservicelist.com/new-dolch-list), created by Browne and Culligan (2020), is aimed directly at L2 English young learners. It claims to provide "90% coverage for most children's texts" (para. 5). It stands at 874 words (the original stood at 220 "service words", plus an extra 95 nouns), and the corpora used includes a lot of L1 English from picture books and YouTube, as well as L2 children's English from graded readers and textbooks.

There is a vocabulary profiler included on the website (https://ngslprofiler.com), which allows you to input text and receive feedback on where each word appears in terms of frequency according to

the list (see Figure 2). The profiler includes several word lists: select NDL 1.1 for YLs. This has fantastic implications for creating and editing texts for our YLs, allowing us to replace less common words with more frequent ones. However, it doesn't include my target word of "grass"! This word does appear at level 6 (words 2001-2400) on Browne and Culligan's (2020) Graded Reader List (select NGSL-GR 1.0 in the profiler), whereas mud appears at level 9 (words 3201-3800)—at least they concur that "grass" is more common.

Figure 2

Vocabulary Profiler

There are some drawbacks to this list. It should be noted that the NDL doesn't include compound words, such as phrasal verbs. "Pick up", for example, would not appear here—only "pick" and "up" as separate entries. Also, the words on the list are presented alphabetically with no option to group them thematically nor by parts of speech, which are very useful groupings for material creation.

2. Cambridge Young Learner Exams Wordlists

The Cambridge Young Learner Exams are a suite of three exams which take learners from pre-A1 to A2 level. Each exam has its own wordlist (www.cambridgeenglish.org/young-learners-word-list). The words are chosen because they are currently high frequency (to include recent or recontextualised words such as "tablet") and represent language that is "used naturally by this age group of English language learners" (Stevenson, 2018, p. 30). This second consideration does not always overlap with the first (high frequency vs. natural), which is evident in words such as "pirate," "roller skating," and

"circus" that appear on the Cambridge wordlists, but are not included in several high-frequency word lists derived from corpora, including the New Dolch List above.

These lists are grouped by level (pre A1–A2), by part of speech, and by thematic area. This is rather useful if you are designing your own materials, as it is easy to look up a topic and get some idea about which words YLs may or should know for that particular lexical field. The words are also presented by part of speech, and so you can make use of the list as a sort of learner thesaurus. Perhaps you have a text with some rather difficult verbs - consult the verb list and find one with a similar meaning that is more YL-friendly.

A recent study by Alexiou and Kokla (2018) found that 85% of the Cambridge exam's beginner level vocabulary (called "Starters") appeared in the popular preschool children's TV show *Peppa Pig* when the list was compared to a corpus of all available online episodes. This had positive implications for the use of wordlists in preparing our students for exposure to authentic materials. In this wordlist, "grass" appears in their A1 vocabulary list (called "Movers"), whereas "mud" is not included at any level, again indicating that grass is worth spending time studying at the beginner A1 level.

3. English Vocabulary Profile

The third recommendation, English Vocabulary Profile (www.englishprofile.org/wordlists/evp), is not aimed at children per se (see Figure 3). It is, however, drawn from a corpus of language learner output in the Cambridge Learner Corpus, as well as "other sources related to general English" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d., para. 1). It provides a list of words constituting "what learners do know, not what they should know" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d., para. 2). Here "grass" is considered an A1 noun, whereas "mud" comes in at B2, somewhat affirming the experiences I had with my students. Essentially, it is an online wordlist with advanced search functions, allowing us to create lists by part of speech (to include phrasal verbs), CEFR level, and topic. Separate entries are given to the different meanings of words, whereby the same word may appear at different levels according to its difficulty of usage. For example, "toast" (meaning grilled bread) is an A2 level word, but "a toast" (a speech given before drinks by adults at a party) is at the C1 level. You can produce very useful lists with this database, such as verbs known by A2 learners or animals known at A1. I use this to check if I am missing some important words from my current topic of study.

Figure 3

English Vocabulary Profile

Other Wordlists

It is surprisingly difficult to come by wordlists aimed at children or derived from corpora of children's language. There are other corpora based on children's language, which are used for research and by publishers but not made publicly available, such as the Oxford Children's Corpus, made up of children's L1 reading materials and written output. Hopefully in the future, as the YL field continues to grow, more YL wordlists based on large corpora of children's language will become available.

Wordlist Uses

Let's now recap and expand on the uses of wordlists in the classroom.

1. Creating Level Appropriate Texts

Whether you are writing your own text or editing an existing one, if you make use of a wordlist you can alter the vocabulary content to be more level and age appropriate. This can be done manually with relative ease for most YL material, if the word list and text are short. The NDL website includes a software profiler as mentioned earlier, which makes things easier if more words are involved. There are general purpose software profilers available, such as Laurence Anthony's AntWordProfiler (https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antwordprofiler/). However, you would also have to create a ".txt" file of your chosen wordlist in a certain format in order to use it with the profiler if you want to use one of the lists mentioned here.

2. Missing Words

Say you are planning a lesson on clothes for example, and off the top of your head you have thought of 10 common clothing items. If you check a wordlist—especially one that presents words thematically—you can check not only if your vocabulary choices are high frequency, but also if there are some high frequency words worth including that you had not considered.

3. Giving Homework

If you have a clear list of words that you want your YLs to acquire, you can use this list to create vocabulary and reading/writing-based homework. It could be as simple as writing out words from picture prompts—or audio prompts if you can arrange for students to access recordings—to give spelling practice, or more creative endeavours, such as asking students to write a story using several keywords from your chosen list.

4. Simplifying Teacher Talk

Since working with wordlists, I have tried to be more mindful of the words I use in the classroom. Rather than using a few different words for the same item (I used to switch between "bookshelf," "bookcase," and "cabinet," for example), I am now aware of the benefits of using one word consistently.

5. Preparation for Using Authentic Materials

There is a lot of authentic content that could be enjoyable for our YLs if they were able to understand a percentage of the language that is used. By introducing high frequency words from wordlists into our regular lessons, we can better prepare our learners for exposure to authentic content. In my school, I like *Peppa Pig* and *Dora the Explorer* YouTube videos. There are many L1 English picture books that are appropriate for YLs; *Winnie the Witch* (Paul & Thomas, 1987) is a favourite of my students (see Figure 4). Although the breadth of vocabulary found in authentic content is going to be a lot larger than in our learner materials, we can increase the chances of our target words appearing in L1 children's content by using a well-chosen wordlist.

Conclusion

Getting back to my own grass and mud, I still teach the word "mud" when we cover that particular topic. It is somewhat difficult to substitute the pictures of mud in the book I use, and it also makes a pretty good sound as we imagine walking through it! The difference, however, is that it is no longer

a learner outcome of my lesson; I don't review or test knowledge of this word in later classes. I have tried to use this strategy with a lot of words in my curriculum in order to be more deliberate about the words I teach. As I said, I am not aiming for complete adherence to a wordlist. There may be words that come up in songs, discussions, and stories that are not high frequency, but which are necessary in that context. Particularly with nouns, there is often no substitute. But I am also glad to make use of data that tells me when I should put down the flashcards and let some words drift on by, whilst others I may need to hammer home!

Figure 4

Winnie the Witch Picture Book

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Chris Murty is the owner and teacher of a children's English school based in Okayama, Sprouts English, which is in its tenth year of operation. He is currently undertaking an MA TESOL at the University of Sunderland. In a previous life, he was a musician, and he tries to bring music into the young learners' classroom as often as possible. His current research interests are the CEFR, vocabulary, and how the two intertwine.

[JALT PRAXIS] BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Taferner & Stephen Case

If you are interested in writing a book review, please consult the list of materials available for review in the Recently Received *column, or consider suggesting an alternative book that would be helpful to our membership.*

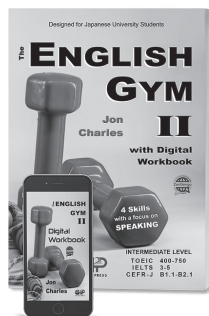Email: jaltpubs.tlt.reviews@jalt.org
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This month's column features Michael Lin's review of The English Gym II.

The English Gym II

[Jon Charles. Oak Hills Press, 2022. (Includes access to a digital workbook.) p. 140. ¥3,498. ISBN: 978-4-9909741-3-8.]

Reviewed by Michael Lin, Kindai University

The *English Gym II* is an EFL textbook designed specifically for intermediate Japanese university students, with a strong focus on practical communication skills, particularly speaking and listening. As the second book in *The English Gym* series, it presents 20 relevant topics that promote practical communication, helping students connect their studies to real-world situations. This review evaluates the textbook's structure, benefits, and overall suitability for Japanese EFL learners, offering insights into its effectiveness in supporting language development.

Lessons follow a logical progression, beginning with more accessible topics, such as fast food and smartphones, before advancing to more complex subjects such as Japan's declining population and volunteerism. Each unit starts with a title and an image to spark discussion, followed by a vocabulary section that introduces essential phrases. These sections are carefully scaffolded to gradually build students' confidence, allowing them to practice expressing their ideas through guided exchanges.

One of the most valuable features in each unit is the What's Wrong? activity, in which students collaborate to correct sentences containing common grammar errors or misused *wasei-eigo* (Japanese-made English). This activity focuses on language issues often overlooked in standard EFL textbooks, making it particularly relevant and engaging for Japanese students. Many students find it amusing when *wasei-eigo* expressions, such as "high tension" or "I want to challenge," are discussed.

The second half of each lesson includes a listening section featuring humorous or dramatic stories that highlight the unit's theme. Delivered by both native and japanese English speakers, these stories incorporate colloquial language to expose students to natural expressions and everyday conversations.