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Learning English as a Foreign Language: finding the way and getting there

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INTRODUCTION

Taking this opportunity to state some thoughts on the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) may encourage people to respond by helping me towards a better understanding. This paper is about the work of others, whose findings and ideas seem to me important. The ideas are ones that I am beginning to use in my language teaching.

Rationale

Learning a language is like going to another country. It is different from the familiar landscape and one can feel lost. The learner has to develop an understanding of different systems and to become familiar with many new individuals—people and places in a new country, words and idioms in a new language.

There are some good new 'maps' for the English language. Here I concentrate on three of them: a big grammar by Biber *et al* (1999), Nation's (2001) book on vocabulary learning and a new student's dictionary by Sinclair et al (2002). These 'maps' or descriptions of parts of English can be useful to language teachers setting priorities in EFL courses.

A map indicates what there is in a territory, but travelling also requires strategic planning. For instance, although I would like to visit Hokkaidō, that island is far to the north of where I am now, so it is better to

postpone such a trip and try to see more of the island of Kyūshū instead.

The main part of this paper is about good 'maps' of English that can be used to plan language 'itineraries' for EFL learners, particularly at university level. We need good route planning because so many people spend time journeying towards English without reaching their goal. If they are going to start the journey, let them have sound advice on which way to head. A traveller needs to be fit too. Near the end of the paper there are some remarks about 'fitness training' for voyaging towards English.

English internationally

It is the widespread usefulness of English that attracts so many learners and education planners. The list in Table 1 is illustrative. From a 1997 book by David Graddol on the future of English, it attempts to summarise the domains of international communication that English is used in, generally as the dominant language.

Table 1. Major international domains of English.

1. International organisations and conferences
2. Scientific publication
3. International banking and trade
4. Advertising for global brands
5. Film, TV and popular music
6. International tourism
7. Tertiary education
8. International safety, e.g. 'airspeak', 'seaspeak'
9. International law
10. 'Relay language' in interpreting and translating
11. Technology transfer

To elaborate briefly, consider book publication, which is important in Items 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 of the list in Table 1. In recent years, around 28% of the World's book titles each year have been published in English. That is more than twice the percentage of titles in Chinese, the next biggest language for books. It is not just in English-speaking countries that books are published in English. More than 60 countries publish books in English (Graddol 1997: 9).

Altogether there are somewhere between 1,000,000,000 and 1,500,000,000 fluent speakers of English around the world—more than a billion and maybe as many as one quarter of the global population—but English is the first language for only 350-450 million people (figures based on Crystal 1997). The majority of English speakers have it as either a second language or a foreign language, which usually means they had to study English.

There is widespread awareness of the amount of time taken up by the study of English, but figures from a careful comparative study of language education (Dickson & Cumming 1996: 131) are salutary. Twenty-two of their 25-country sample are EFL countries. English is generally begun at the age of 10 years or younger and taken right through to the end of compulsory education (usually age 15 years), and by large proportions of each cohort of students (90% or more in 14 of the countries). In their last compulsory year, most of the students in the survey were getting at least two hours a week of English instruction. The world-wide total number of student hours given to English learning must be colossal. This is a practical reason for paying close attention to the planning of English study.

Longman, the publishing company, put a huge collection of British and American texts into computer readable form. They assembled 40,000,000 words of grammatically analysed texts, carefully chosen to be representative of American and British English. These texts include 333 complete academic research articles, long excerpts from 75 academic books, long extracts from 139 novels, huge samples from the *Wall Street Journal,* the *San Jose Mercury* and the Associated Press news service as well as from 11 British newspapers, together with transcriptions of recorded natural conversations. The body of data includes about 4 million words of British conversation and about 2¹/₂ million words of US conversation.

A team of linguists has been busy analysing the material. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al* 1999) is one of the substantial products from this research team. Table 2 is a small example of the modern kind of language 'map' presented in that grammar.

Table 2. Contrasting American and British usage of some politeness expressions.

	American English	British English
thank you (very much) / thanks	□□□□□□□□□□□□	□□□□□□□
please	□□□□	□□□□□□□
sorry	□	□□□□

□= 50 times in every million words of conversation

(excerpted from a table of Biber et al 1999: 1098)

The table is concerned with expressions of politeness in English.

Americans have often told me that British people seem very polite. Paradoxically there have been times when I have found Americans more polite than appeared necessary to me. The graphics show that both speech communities are polite, but in their own ways. Americans express gratitude more often. In American conversations, someone is thanked every 12 minutes, on average (estimate based on Biber *et al* 1999: 39), but the British are four times more likely to apologise than the Americans. Americans do not say *please* nearly as often as British speakers do, only a quarter of the British frequency.

The display that the material in Table 2 came from contains more information of a similar kind. For instance, in the Longman conversations, American speakers used the greeting *hi* about eight times more often than British speakers; the latter's more frequent greeting was *hello*. Americans made much more use than the British of the summons for attention *hey*. The book offers authoritative statistics on usage differences between these salient two varieties of English.

Register differences

I have just illustrated some distinctive usage patterns of US and British English, but Douglas Biber and his colleagues (1999: 21) found that another kind of difference was usually bigger than the differences between these two national varieties. Across registers there can be big changes. A register is a characteristic way of talking or writing that belongs to a situation. The language used in law courts is one register. The language used in casual conversation is another register. The work for the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* is mostly based on a comparison of four broad registers: conversation, fiction, print news and academic writing. They occasionally discuss two other registers, but I am not going to deal with those two here.

An interesting illustration of such register differences — only one illustration out of many that could have been given here — is provided by phrasal verbs. These are a very characteristic grammatical feature of English (and other Germanic languages). A verb and a particle work together, where some other languages might use a verb acting by itself. For instance, in *Check* this *over* please, the pair of words *check over* constitute a transitive phrasal verb, with the word *this* as its object; *check over this* and *check this over* are both grammatical in English. *Check over* means something like 'verify' or 'revise'. In the sentence *Don't worry, something will turn up*, the sequence *turn up* is an intransitive phrasal verb, meaning 'appear' or 'emerge'.

There are many dozens of phrasal verbs in English. Which should I teach? Data tabulated by Biber *et al* (1999: 408-10) provide some helpful and specific answers, depending on the purpose of the class I am teaching. For an academic writing course I should concentrate on transitive phrasal verbs, notably *carry out, make up* and *point out*. It is different in conversation classes. In conversation it is intransitive phrasal verbs that are much more frequent, especially *come on*.

Pronouns and prepositions offer another informative comparison across registers (Biber *et al* 1999: 92). Here there is a big difference between speech and the written media. Prepositions are not used much in conversation, but are used a lot when people are writing. On the other hand, pronouns are much more prominent in conversation than in writing. Fiction is interesting. Fiction is writing, but fiction often portrays speech. In terms of pronoun and preposition usage, fiction turns out to be intermediate between conversation and the newspaper and academic writing registers.

There are many prepositions in English. Which are the most important ones? A table in Biber *et al* (1999: 635) partly answers this question. (It is

a partial answer because the figures are only for preposition phrases used to postmodify nouns, and there are other uses of prepositions besides this.) Biber *et al* found that just six prepositions do 90% of the work in this construction: *of* (60-65%), *in, for, on, to* and *with.* That really does justify concentrating effort on those six, but especially on the versatile preposition of.

English vocabulary for academic purposes

A related topic is: what content words should a student of English learn? Here I shall rely heavily on the research of a New Zealander applied linguist called Paul Nation. He has done a lot of empirical work on vocabulary, concerning which words are used in which registers and texts, as well as on how learners can most effectively build their vocabulary in another language. Nation has written several books, but the latest that I know of is *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (2001). There are many things in the book. I want to talk about one aspect of it: strategic selection of vocabulary for courses that aim to teach academic English.

The problem is that there are huge numbers of words learners could try to learn, probably too many. It makes sense to ask which ones they really need.

The biggest English dictionary has around 400,000 entries, but very many of those words are archaic or so rarely used that there is no point in students for whom English is a foreign language wasting their time with them.

We could ask how many words a first-language English speaker knows. It is hard to measure the size of a person's vocabulary and individuals differ a lot, but there are ways of making estimates and a reasonable figure (Nation 2001: 9) is that an average mother-tongue speaker of English, at the point of

graduation from university, 21 or 22 years old, probably has a production vocabulary of about 20,000 words. *Words* should be understood here as meaning 'word families'. The word *do* is the headword in a family that includes its other inflectional forms: *does, doing, did* and *done*. The five inflectional forms would together count as only one of the 20,000.

Twenty thousand is much less daunting than 400,000, but still represents a very big task for an EFL learner. Average first language English speakers have had just over 20 years to build up to 20,000 word families. That means they will have added about 1,000 new word families to their production vocabulary every year. One thousand a year works out at between two and three a day, for 20 years. In their early twenties, most foreign language learners of English have had only half that number of years for learning English, and not nearly as many hours in each of the years.

Nation (2001: 9) advises that second and foreign language learners should not make it a priority to try to match the number of words of native speakers. It is better for them to have as their first goal the learning of just the words that are likely to be essential. Written English uses a wider vocabulary than conversation, so I am going to focus on academic reading. How many words are needed to read academic work?

Four points made in Nation's book are particularly relevant here:

※ There is a fairly small set of very hardworking words in English. The most frequently used 2,000 words account for around 80% of the words a reader will meet in average academic textbooks (2001: 17). The language may have reserves of a few hundred thousand, but the writers of academic books do about 80% of their communication by recycling a much smaller set.

※ Outside of the most popular 2,000, there are somewhere between

500 and 600 words that occur in writing on many different university subjects. *Clarify, framework, minimise, relevant* and *summary* are some of them (2001: 407-11).

※　In addition each academic subject has 1,000-2,000 words of its own, its technical vocabulary (2001: 12). Economics has *profit* and *revenue;* chemistry has *molecule* and *absorb;* medicine has *fever* and *antidote.*

※　The majority of English words are seldom used. Learning them is a luxury.

Figure 1 presents two paragraphs taken, almost at random, from a book on chemistry that I happen to own. I use this text as an illustration of Nation's points.

Figure 1. Example of an academic text. Frequency of use *within this text* of every word used in the sample text is tabulated at the foot of the figure.

The element that is most important is carbon, which is the basis of all the myriad of different molecules that make up the living cell. The amino acids, which account for most body tissue, are made up of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and sulfur, and again this explains why these elements come high in the list.

Many elements serve no known purpose, but they come with the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe, and our body absorbs them, perhaps mistaking them for more useful elements. As a result we find that the average adult contains significant amounts of aluminium, barium, cadmium, lead and strontium, and trace amounts of many others, including silver, gold and uranium.

(from Emsley 2001: 7)

10 the, 7 and, 5 of, 4 we, 4 is/are, 4 element(s), 3 that, 2 which, 2 body, 2 for, 2 carbon, 2 come, 2 most, 2 make/made up, 2 many, 2 them, 2 amounts,

plus one of each of the following words:

basis, important, myriad, different, molecules, living, cell, amino, acids, account, serve, tissue, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur, silver, gold, again, this, they, explains, why, these, high, in, list, no, known, purpose, but, absorbs, with, all, food, eat, water, drink, air, breathe, our, perhaps, mistaking, more, useful, as, a, result, find, average, adult, contains, significant, aluminium, barium, cadmium, lead, strontium, trace, others, including, uranium

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The first word in the sample text is *the*. *The* occurs twice more in the first line of text. Altogether, in this 121-word text, *the* occurs 10 times. The word *and* is used 7 times here; *of* appears five times and there are four occurrences of *we*. *The, and* and *of* are three of the most popular words of English.

Words such as *the, and, of, is, different* and *water* are among the very common words of English. Such words make up most of this text sample, as will be demonstrated quite soon. First let us note two other kinds of words in the text of Figure 1.

Element, significant and trace are words from the 500-600 that are used across many different academic subjects.

Figure 1 also has words from the technical vocabulary of chemistry, for example the names of chemical elements *barium* and *strontium. (Gold and silver* are the names of chemical elements, but everybody uses these two

words; they are part of the hardworking core vocabulary of English.)

At the time of writing, I do not have access to a list of the most frequent 2,000 words of English. However, the *Collins Cobuild New Student's Dictionary* (Sinclair et al 2002) uses a star to mark the 3,000 most hardworking English words and that will serve as a close enough illustration of how a smallish number of words is repeatedly drawn on for constructing texts.

I looked in Sinclair et al (2002) for each of the words in the sample text. If there was a star on the word—indicating membership in the top 3,000 of English—I applied grey shading to that word wherever it occurred in the text, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Emsley (2001) chemistry text with words from the 3,000 most frequently used English words (Sinclair *et al* 2002) shaded.

The element that is most important is carbon, which is the basis of all the myriad of different molecules that make up the living cell. The amino acids, which account for most body tissue, are made up of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and sulfur, and again this explains why these elements come high in the list.

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It turns out that 101 of the 121 words in the sample text (83.5%) are from the top 3,000 in English. The text is a technical one, but most—not all—of the words are very familiar ones. This is a finding that has been replicated many times by vocabulary researchers. It has important practical implications for second and foreign language learners. Someone with a basic knowledge of English syntax and who knows only the top 3,000 words of English should be able to read nearly 84% of the sample text (101 words out of 121). Learning the basic set of hardworking words must, therefore, be a very important first goal for learners of English who want to use their knowledge for serious reading.

Not demonstrated here, but well established by Nation (2001) and his co-workers, is the fact that the top 2,000 English words will generally cover nearly 80% of the vocabulary used in an academic text.

Another type of word that can be found in the sample text are words from general academic English (which are not also among the most popular 2,000). Nation's book contains Coxhead's (1998) list of 570 such 'academic words' (2001: 407-11). In Figure 3 all the words in Coxhead's list that appear in the chemistry text have been shaded. These general academic words account for another six of the 121 words in this particular sample text, a further 5%.

Figure 3. The Emsley (2001) chemistry text with words from the 570-item list of 'academic words' presented in Nation (2001: 407-11) shaded. Words from the technical vocabulary of chemistry are underlined.

The element that is most important is carbon, which is the basis of all the myriad of different molecules that make up the living cell. The amino acids, which account for most body tissue, are made up

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Molecules, amino and the names of substances such as *hydrogen* and *strontium,* as well as the others underlined in Figure 3, are words that people who use English to study chemistry get to know while studying chemistry. Academic subjects usually have between 1,000 and 2,000 technical terms. Knowledge of the technical vocabulary adds to the words that could be read from this text. Of course, *acids* (a word in the second line of this text) and *carbon* (which occurs twice) are also chemical terms, but, like *gold* and *silver,* their high frequency of use means that they were counted earlier as part of the core vocabulary of English.

Figure 4. The Emsley (2001) chemistry text with words from the 3,000 most frequently used English words, the 'academic words' and the technical vocabulary of chemistry shaded. Only one word remains unshaded.

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In Figure 4 all three kinds of words have been marked. Notice that all of the words in the text, except for *myriad*, have now been shaded. *Myriad* is one of the large set of rarely-used luxury words that an EFL learner can postpone the learning of.

Table 3 provides characteristic values that Paul Nation (2001) and his co-researchers have found from analyzing the vocabulary of numerous different academic texts.

Table 3. A limited number of well-chosen words accounts for around 95% of the words in an average academic text.

type of word	approximate coverage of academic texts
top 2,000 English words	80%
570 general academic words	10%
1,000-2,000 technical words	5%
Total	95%

(based on information in Nation 2001)

These are not quite the same as the percentages I found on the chemistry text used for illustrative purposes, but they are not far away from them. They show that somewhere between 3,500 and 4,500 judiciously chosen English words can enable learners to make sense of 95% of the words met in average English language academic texts. This is only a quarter of the estimated number of words that an average English native speaker has at the time of graduation from university. It is a manageable task.

GETTING FIT FOR TRAVELLING TOWARDS ENGLISH

The paper has been concerned with 'maps' of English. They can be used for charting out what there is to learn. It is surely wise to use good maps and I think there are now some good ones available. How about actually making the journey? Students need more than just knowledge of the language. They need to develop practice in its use. What I have read in applied linguistics (for instance Willis & Willis 2001), my own experiences as a language learner and what I have seen of other people learning language tells me that it is essential to practice the language in situations where the student uses it meaningfully. Fluency in the use of language knowledge comes only when students are trying to communicate with it. Successful communication is also highly motivating and students need motivation to survive all those hours of study. Thus lessons must involve transfer of meanings. 'Training runs' are needed to make the map knowledge readily accessible.

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