

# SYSTEMIC ONLINE STUDY OF FREQUENCY LIST VOCABULARY

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## ABSTRACT

The intentional study of vocabulary is an effective way for learners to improve their language skills in their target language. Word frequency lists offer learners to chance to focus their vocabulary study on the most useful words. Furthermore, word frequency lists offer material writers the chance to make informed decisions about the particular words they include in textbooks, readers, and other language learning materials. Finally, the worldwide web offers numerous exercises for students to study vocabulary intentionally, as well as sites that inform learners, teachers, and material writers of word frequency lists, related programs, and related activities.

## BACKGROUND

Many researchers have pointed out the usefulness of intentional learning of vocabulary (writing unknown words in a notebook, for example) (Laufer 2005, Hunt & Beglar 1998, Nation 2001, etc.). Word frequency lists give teachers and learners an idea of the most useful vocabulary to study. Students may feel bewildered to encounter a text with numerous unknown words, not knowing which words to study. For students at the beginner and lower intermediate levels, becoming aware of “high frequency words,” the most common 2,000 words in English, informs them of which words are most useful. Knowing the most common 2,000 words allows readers to comprehend 80% of the average text (Nation (2001).

Furthermore, word frequency lists have informed material writers of bands of words to include in textbooks and extended readers for second language learners. “Graded readers” in particular have made use of word frequency lists, creating series of readers at levels as low as 500 headwords, on up to advanced level texts using 3,000 or more headwords. These readers offer students appropriately leveled materials, allowing them to enjoy reading while, ideally, comprehending approximately 97% of the text (Waring 2001).

Academic Word lists can enable students to build on their vocabulary knowledge foundation of the low frequency words (the most common 2,000). Students who are considering studying abroad, for example, would find these words particularly useful. Perhaps the best known academic word lists are those developed and promoted by Averil Coxhead of Massey University and are available online at <http://language.massey.ac.nz/staff/awl/index.shtml>.

## APPLICATION OF STUDY WITH WORD LISTS

It is not always readily apparent to learners and teachers exactly how to best utilize word lists. Certainly, simply becoming aware of words and their relative usefulness gives

learners a certain advantage. In this way word frequency lists can give students their first exposure to various words. However, the main purpose of this paper is to identify online resources for utilizing word frequency lists, in some cases online exercises, created by the writer, of frequency vocabulary.

### **ASSESSING STUDENT LEVELS FOR FREQUENCY WORD STUDY**

At least two online resources exist for assessing a student's knowledge of vocabulary organized by frequency. For example, by taking an online assessment quiz, users learn which list—high frequency, academic, technical, or low frequency—is most appropriate for study, and which words should be focused on within that list. The first is a zip file package of vocabulary learning files available on Paul Nation's website, retrievable at <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation/nation.aspx> (then click, at the lower left, "Click here to download..."). A second, which requires no downloads (but users must create a (free) user name and password) offers a simple, reliable, vocabulary assessment quiz, retrievable at <http://www.lexxica.co.jp/index.html?PAGELANG=EN>.

### **FREQUENCY WORD STUDY WITH HOT POTATOES ONLINE QUIZZES**

"Hot Potatoes" is software (free for educational institutions) which allows users to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill online exercises. I created a number of vocabulary quizzes for word bands ranging from 1000<sup>th</sup> most common word to the 2500<sup>th</sup> most common word, the range which covers most of the words Japanese university students need to study. For the fill in the blank "Hot Potatoes" quiz, students first download a list of vocabulary from a particular band (words in groups of ten), then choose a particular word to finish the sentence. For the matching, students simply choose the definition/synonym. In both cases quizzes are automatically graded, with wrong answers marked "X." This page is retrievable at <http://globalstories.net/wordquest2.htm>.

### **FREQUENCY WORD STUDY WITH THE WORDCHAMP WEBSITE**

WordChamp is a free website offering numerous ways for language learners to study vocabulary and read websites in foreign languages. It also allows educators to create cyber classrooms where assignments can be assigned and monitored (see sample page

below).

The screenshot displays the WordChamp website interface. At the top left is the WordChamp logo with the tagline 'learn language faster'. To its right are language options 'English español' and a user login status 'logged in as globalstories' with links for 'account settings' and 'logout'. A 'Bookmark this page!' button with social media icons is on the top right. A navigation bar below contains links: 'home | My WordChamp | browse | my flashcards | learn vocabulary | web reader | student page | course management | my scores | help' and a search box. A 'Legend' box on the left explains icons: a blue checkmark for 'completed on time' and a red flower for 'not completed or overridden answers'. The main content area is titled 'Class Details' for 'Global Stories 101'. It includes buttons for 'Return to Course Management Screen' and 'Create Homework Assignment'. Text fields show 'Comment: Learn English to become a responsible global citizen', 'Start date: 2006-12-14', 'End date: 2007-06-14', and 'Invitation Code: 383060313'. Below this is a 'Homework Assignments' section with tabs for 'Most Difficult Words' and 'Overall Class Performance'. A date selector shows 'Feb-11 - Feb-17' with 'previous week' and 'next week' navigation. A message states 'There are no homework assignments due the week of Feb-11 - Feb-17' with a large red circular button labeled 'Create Homework Assignment'. The footer contains copyright information for GlobalLinguist, Inc. (2004-2007) and mentions the use of JMDICT and CEDICT files for translations.

The vocabulary drill page offers a number of activities including word translation, listening, reading, flashcards, etc. Users can access lists that have been created by other users, or they can create their own lists. Lists may be Eng-Eng, or they may be L1-L2. To access files for study which the author created on WordChamp (WC), the following steps should be followed:

1. Go to <http://www.wordchamp.com>
2. To access all files created on WC, choose “browse” from top menu bar.
3. Search for the user “globalstories” to access my lists. Then choose “academic word list 1.”
4. Before drilling, students should first peruse the list, noting unknown words (even writing the words in a notebook).
5. The flashcards are organized as follows: the first line labeled “English Words” is the definition or synonym; the second line, “English synonyms” is the single word to be studied. Surveys with students indicated that, whenever possible, students would prefer a definition to a single word synonym.
6. Words that are well known can be deleted from list. Conversely, more words can be added to the list by any user.
7. To drill on WC, choose “Practice Flashcards.”

8. After practicing, students may see statistics and a list of words (see sample below for the author’s study of Japanese *kanji*).

The screenshot shows the WordChamp website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links like 'home', 'My WordChamp', 'browse', 'my flashcards', 'learn vocabulary', and 'web reader'. The main content area is titled 'Performance Charts' and features tabs for 'Hourly', 'Daily', 'Weekly', 'Monthly', and 'Details'. The 'Details' tab is selected, showing 'Detailed results from the vocabulary drill'. The statistics include: Vocabulary list (kanji fifth grade), Date and time (2007-Feb-09 0:05), Drill type (Chinese characters (Japanese)), Total elapsed time (45 minutes, 16 seconds), Average time / question (6.8 seconds), Number of flashcards (218), Total number of times flashcards were viewed (397), % answered correctly the first time (68%), % answered correctly (76%), % answered incorrectly (24%), % overridden (6%), and % skipped (19%). Below the statistics, there are buttons for 'practice again' and 'change drill type'. A 'Drill History' section shows a list of drills, with the first one being 'kanji fifth grade'. A legend indicates that red bars represent 'Times a word was missed' and yellow bars represent 'Times a word was overridden'.

For the academic word lists I created, four drills are available. Students may test all drilling methods, which include audio. However, the lists were designed to be studied by choosing the “Synonyms” drill. If students did not review the list beforehand, guessing the precise English word from the synonym or definition is indeed difficult (even for native speakers). However, flashcards answered incorrectly are returned to the deck (unless the user chooses “override”) and can subsequently be recalled much more easily.

Focusing on frequency word vocabulary is just one option for language teachers and learners. Such words are, by their nature, useful to all language learners. However, teachers and students can also create their own lists, which might be even more useful. Lists can be created pertaining to a particular course or textbook. Similarly, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) lists can be created by teachers and/or learners (learners might find it easier to create L1-L2 definitions).

## WORD PROFILERS

Concordance programs allow another application of word frequency lists. With concordance programs the user inserts a single word or phrase and the program displays lines where that word/phrase is found within a particular body of texts (corpus). “Concordance is a screen display or printout of a chosen word or phrase in its different contexts, with that word or phrase arranged down the center of the display along with the text that comes before and after it (McCarthy 2004).”

Concordance programs are based on a particular corpus. For example, with the link below users can choose a number of corpus to base their search on: Brown (1,000,000 words); UK News (84,000) or even Anne of Green Gables (103,000), etc. The user types in a keyword, and the program will display all occurrences of that word (in the selected corpus). This allows users to read the keyword (which they are studying or researching) in context and see collocations. Such programs can help students with *Noticing*, *Familiarizing*, and *Searching for Extended Concordance Display*, all key vocabulary learning steps noted by Kirkgöz (2006).

[http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers/concord\\_e.html](http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers/concord_e.html)

With Vocabulary Profilers the user inserts an entire text and the program re-displays the text color coding the words to show where they occur in terms of word frequency lists. Vocabulary profilers analyze a text (which users can simply paste in a box) for word frequency. Such programs are particularly useful for EFL material writers. The link below is based on Laufer and Nation's Lexical Frequency Profiler and outputs the text color coded showing words in the 0-1000, 1001-2000, AWL (academic word list words) and off-list words. <http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/>

A simpler site which analyzes core academic vocabulary in a text (based on Avril Coxhead's AWL) is at:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/awlhighlighter.htm>.

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