

Problems in Treatment of Vocabulary in Approved Jr. High School Textbooks: Informing Teachers

by Michael Bowles

Over several years of teaching senior high school EFL learners, I noticed a broad and consistent pattern among 1st year students of different levels of academic ability and interest in English: they simply did not know many of the most common words of English and their most common meanings and uses. This fact was puzzling, given that they had just completed three years of EFL study in junior high school. One day I told a senior colleague how surprised I was than none of the students seemed to know a certain basic English word, and he remarked, "it probably wasn't on the list." I then became interested in "the list" as one possible factor in students' unfamiliarity with basic English words.

This inspired me to examine the recommended list of 507 words¹ for junior high school and how this list affects the vocabulary in Ministry of Education (MEXT)-approved textbooks. As the first step, I constructed lists of the words found in first-year MEXT-approved textbooks used in junior high schools. This process took months. Afterwards, I analyzed and compared these lists with published corpus² studies and my own searches of the University of Birmingham's "Bank of English," a 500 million-word on-line corpus. The information and recommendations presented here are based on findings from that study (for an explication of its background, methods, and findings, see Bowles: 2000 and Bowles: 2001).

What about MEXT's word list itself?

In terms of how many very common and useful words are included, the Ministry's list is quite good. Ninety-two percent of the words on the list are among the 1,900 most frequent words of English. The remaining lower-frequency words are either necessary in the classroom [*pen, dictionary, notebook*], useful to

talking about the world [*afternoon, snow, sick*], or otherwise necessary or useful [*hers, good-bye*].

Unfortunately, in MEXT-approved textbooks, the most common meanings and uses of words may be left out of the textbooks or included less often than uncommon or even rare uses. Furthermore, prescribed words may appear only as parts of phrases (multi-word items—MWIs) that are similarly written but are completely unrelated in meaning (e.g., *look out for out*). Why is this?

Meaning Priorities and Reliance on the Written Form of Words

The two basic reasons are (1) there are no meaning priorities (the meanings most commonly used with a word) in the Ministry's Guidelines to go with the words on its list, and (2) textbook writers may rely on the written forms of words, disregarding meaning, when including prescribed words in the textbooks. Meaning priorities for words are essential in EFL instruction because English is full of polysemous words (words with multiple meanings and uses). For example, the word *back* has many meanings and grammatical functions. Simply seeing *back* on the Ministry's list does not tell us (or textbook writers) anything about which uses and meanings are meant for teaching.

There are many examples across all level-one textbooks of the negative effects of these two factors on the inclusion the most common meanings and uses of words. Consider the example of the word *like*, a lexical/"full" word (not a grammatical/"empty" word, such as *a, the*, etc.) occurs often in the textbooks. It may surprise readers to know that computer studies of *like* clearly show that its two most common meanings are: (1) "similar to"; "same way as" (*Koji is like his father / Hold the bat like this*) and (2) "such as" (*I play sports*

like baseball). *Like* meaning, "to enjoy" (*I like sushi*) is far less common than these, and somewhat less common than *would like*. In the textbooks, however, almost all the uses of *like* refer to "enjoy." Five of the seven books omit the most common use of *like*. (*New Horizon* includes it five times and *New Crown* twice.) Six textbooks omit the second most common use of *like*. (*New Crown* includes it once.)

Of course, *like* "to enjoy" is important and very helpful to students for talking about things they enjoy. However, omitting the more common uses is clearly problematic. This pattern is very worrying, considering how many times this single sense of *like* occurs in the textbooks—*Total English*, 87 times; *Sunshine*, 67; *One World*, 43; *Columbus*, 23, etc. Such unbalanced reinforcement of single senses of words seems to create strong resistance in students' ability to learn other meanings and uses of words when taught later. I've observed this fact in my own teaching of the word *like*.

Sometimes, the most common meanings of words may not be appropriate for beginning learners. Some uses may require difficult grammar or syntax. Including less common meanings may also be useful if they are psychologically central or familiar to learners because of similar uses in the L1. However, it is clear that the absence of many of the most important meanings and uses of words in the textbooks cannot be justified by such claims.

While common uses are sometimes left out, rare ones are occasionally included. One of the more surprising examples of this is found in *One World's* use of *over*. *Over* is not on the list of prepositions (pg. 87) but is included five times in a very unusual, sense of "ending a

radio communication and waiting for a reply" (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* [CCED]: over #3.8). When senses that are far more useful are not included and reinforced, such rare uses are difficult to justify. Furthermore, including such rare uses opposes one of the basic principles of "general" EFL instruction, namely, that learners should be exposed to language which is typical of the language as a whole.

Textbook writers' reliance on written similarities between words when including prescribed words in textbooks is another problem. For example: *Everyday English* (pg. 32) includes the MWI *take off* (CCED: "an airplane takes off"). The meaning of *take off* is unclear by just looking at the two words that make up the MWI. *E.E.*, in its own index of words, lists *take off* as representing MEXT's prescribed words *take* and *off*. However, it doesn't represent either. If *take off* is illustrated for learners in the books or translated into Japanese for them by their teachers, it has nothing to do with the core meanings of either *take* or *off*. At the same time, *E.E.* omits the most common uses of *take*. Also, the textbook omits *off* from its list of prepositions. Adverbial and phrasal uses of *off* are omitted as well. Similar treatment of MWIs is seen in *Sunshine* (pg. 66) and *One World* (pg. 101) with the MWI *give up* (CCED: # 1, 2 "quit"). Both books list this MWI as representing MEXT's prescribed word *give*, although the meaning of *give* has nothing to do with the idea of "quit." *Give*, in its core sense, is not included in either textbook.

In brief, the research strongly suggests that for many prescribed words in the first-year books:

1. The most common meanings and uses may be omitted
2. The most common meanings and uses may occur less often than uncommon ones
3. The words may be replaced by multi-word items unrelated in meaning
4. The words are not included systematically across textbooks
5. The profiles (meanings and

uses of words) are not consistent across textbooks

6. Recurrence (repetition) is not consistent (therefore, their reinforcement is not consistent)

What can teachers do to address these problems?

Practical Suggestions for Teachers

To begin, setting meaning priorities for all of MEXT's words is a very big project, beyond the scope of individual teachers or English departments. The scale of such a project means that the issue will have to be addressed at the level of curriculum design by the Ministry. Teachers, therefore, need to appeal to MEXT through teachers' associations, local boards of education and whatever means available to have the Ministry include meaning priorities in its guidelines. When these are included, prescribed words will be developed properly and consistently across textbooks.

Until then, we need to appreciate that textbooks differ widely in their treatment of the Ministry's word list. Their differences are not simply cosmetic or thematic. This means that far more time and effort need to go into the selection of which Ministry-approved textbook we choose. Also, since the inclusion of words and the grading of words is not consistent across textbooks, a change of textbook after the first year should be avoided. Such a change could mean that learners will not see some prescribed words at all.

In the classroom what can teachers do? First, teachers need to be more confident that their own English language ability can improve on textbooks' treatment of words from the Ministry's list. Teachers should take the initiative to question textbook language and be prepared to develop and use supplementary vocabulary materials. While it is impossible for teachers to set meaning priorities for all the word-forms on MEXT's list, the more obvious flaws in the textbooks' treatment of words are not so difficult to find. Some general advice on where to look for them and how to address them follows:

1. If uses of words seem odd or

unusual, they are worth a closer look. Some uses of words found in the textbooks will need to be omitted and replaced with more common and useful ones. (The previously mentioned case of *over* is one such example.)

2. If a single sense of a word appears repeatedly, then it, too, is worth a look. Some uses of words, such as *like* "to enjoy" will have to be reduced and supplemented to include other more common uses.

3. All MWIs in textbooks need to be looked at to make sure these have not been mistakenly substituted for prescribed word-forms. (Teachers can check the textbook's index of words to see if such MWIs are supposed to represent Ministry word-forms.) If so, teachers must decide if they want to teach those items or not. In any case, supplementary materials will be needed to include and exemplify the actual meanings and uses of prescribed words that have been left out of the books by mistake.

To help us chose the most important senses of words, the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* is a valuable tool. It gives us frequency information about words and their most common meanings and cites only authentic English examples. Longman has also published a dictionary which includes information on the frequency of words. There are also a number of resources on-line and available on CD ROM to research vocabulary and to develop supplementary vocabulary materials.

Two other important areas for teachers to look at concern verbs. Delexical use of important verbs is a major feature of English. Delexical uses refer to when some common transitive verbs (*give*, *have*, *take*, *make*) carry nouns, which can usually be transitive verbs themselves. Native speakers regularly make such use of verbs. For example, they more often say "have a bath" instead of "bathe"; "take care" instead of "be careful"; "give advice/information" instead of "advise/inform," etc. Such uses are

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ERROR NOTICE: In the previous issue, the Pakos article in the junior high school section had a large number of textual errors. This was an editorial mix up of two versions of the piece and not the author's fault. We regret the errors. Our apologies go to the author and all readers. The correct article is now available online at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/etj/files/pakos.html>

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found occasionally in some of the textbooks. Teachers can confidently supplement their vocabulary teaching with delexical uses of these verbs, knowing that they are very common in the language and highly useful to learners.

The inclusion of important irregular verbs is another point. Textbooks show little attention to the grading of verbs. Mindt (1997) shows that irregular verbs are far more useful than regular ones. His research shows that the following ten verbs make up 45.6 percent of all irregular verb patterns in his study: *say, make, go, take, come, see, know, get, give, find*. The top three (be, have, and do) are omitted because they have to be learned at very early stages. All of these verbs are on MEXT's word list. However, not all are

included in the level-one textbooks, although all the books include less useful verbs. First-year teachers can develop supplementary materials using these verbs and be sure that they will be highly useful to their students.

These suggestions mean more work for already overworked teachers, I know. That is why at the top of the list of what we can do is to appeal to the Ministry to include meaning priorities in its *Guidelines*. If this succeeds, textbook writers will have a clear understanding of what meanings and uses ought to be included in textbooks. Then, future editions of books will be far better resources for our students, which will make our jobs as teachers a lot easier.

References:

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Endnotes

1 The 507-word list discussed was in force from 1989 to 2001. The new 100-word list for 2002 can be found at <http://www.monbu.go.jp/news/00000317/t-gaiko2.html>.

2 A corpus is a collection of materials; in this case, of spoken and written English for analysis.