

Reflections on Vocabulary Size of Chinese University Students

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College English teaching in China aims at developing students' communicative competence, in which vocabulary size plays an important role. According to Basic Requirements in the College English Syllabus (1999), Chinese university students' vocabulary size should be 4,200 words. From investigation and a study of the research literature, the author finds that the deficiency of College English teaching in China lies in its small vocabulary size due to the very few words that students absorb in each period of English class in both universities and high schools as well as how intensive reading classes are taught in universities. The author argues that vocabulary size has become a hindrance for Chinese university students in both inputting and outputting information in English and that to enlarge Chinese students' vocabulary size is therefore critical to the teaching of English in China. The paper concludes with suggestions for dealing with this issue from both a macro and micro point of view.

Vocabulary size, College English teaching, productive and receptive words, reading, university students in China

INTRODUCTION

College English teaching in China refers to the teaching of English to Chinese university students whose majors are not English. There are six bands for them: College English Band 1 (CE 1) to College English Band 6 (CE 6). According to the College English Syllabus (1999), CE 1 to CE 4 belong to Basic Requirements, while CE 5 to CE 6 relate to Higher Requirements. As a result, College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) and College English Test Band 6 (CET 6) are carried out as national tests to determine whether teaching of College English has already met the Basic or Higher Requirements. Because CE 4 is compulsory, almost all Chinese university students have to pass CET 4 by the end of the second year of their English learning at universities. According to the Basic Requirements in the College English Syllabus (1999), students at CE 4 should be able to recognise 4,200 words, of which they are required to know the correct spelling and the usage of 2,500 words. According to Gairns and Redman (1986, pp.64-65), the 4,200 and 2,500 are receptive and productive words respectively.

West (1953) suggests that a minimally adequate vocabulary is 2,000 words for communication. This seems to indicate that Chinese university students' productive vocabulary size is satisfactory. Fox (1979), however, believes that while such a vocabulary size might be adequate for productive purposes, a learner also needs a receptive vocabulary.

The instrumentalist view regards vocabulary knowledge as a major prerequisite and causative factor in comprehension (Anderson and Freebody, 1981). Words are to learners what money is to our life: the more the better. In places where L2 has no function in the society, a foreign language should be taught (Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1995; Long, 1983), and vocabulary instruction should be emphasised (Becker, 1977; Marzano and Marzano, 1988; O'Dell, 2002, pp.260-262). It is true of China.

It is common for Chinese university students to have been learning English for 10 or more years. After learning English for such a long time, where is their English and where is their vocabulary size in comparison with native English speakers? Is Chinese university students' vocabulary size large enough? What can be done? This paper tries to answer these questions of importance to the teaching of English in China.

WHERE ARE CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT IN THEIR ENGLISH?

As a College English teacher for 19 years, the author has often been asked by his students: 'I've been learning English for over 10 years since I was in primary school. Where am I now in comparison with a native English speaker?'

Two documents are very helpful in answering this question. One is the *South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSAF)*, which has been in use since 2001 to guide the teaching at primary and high schools in South Australia (South Australian Department of Education, 2003). The second document is the *College English Syllabus (CES)* (1999), which has been guiding College English teaching at universities in China.

Now let us make a comparison between *SACSAF* and *CES* to see where Chinese university students are at in their College English. Of the five standards for pupils and students from Year 1 to Year 10 in *SACSAF*, focus here is on Standard 1, which is designed for pupils toward the end of Year 2, and Standard 2, which is designed for pupils toward the end of Year 4. *CES* basically consists of two requirements: Basic Requirements and Higher Requirements. Being compulsory for Chinese university students, the Basic Requirements are the principal focus. A comparison is made in four areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that, compared with the underlined and boxed parts for *SACSAF* and *CES*, we see that Chinese university students' English in listening is roughly between Standard 1 and Standard 2 in South Australia. However, 'with simple sentence structures' and '130-150 words/minute' indicate that Chinese university students cannot understand when English is complex in structure or when it is spoken to them faster. This means that English has to be controlled in both structure and speed. For Australian primary pupils, however, there seems no problem in their understanding English spoken to them at a normal speed and in normal structure.

When we compare the underlined and boxed parts for *SACSAF* and *CES*, we see that Chinese university students' English in speaking is also roughly between Standard 1 and Standard 2 in South Australia, but the italicised part in the Basic Requirements in *CES* may indicate that there are still some difficulties for Chinese university students to express themselves clearly when they speak in English, whereas there is no problem for Australian pupils to speak in English.

If we compare the underlined and boxed parts for *SACSAF* and *CES*, we see that Chinese university students' English in reading might not be much higher than that between Standard 1 and Standard 2 in South Australia.

Again, comparing the underlined parts for *SACSAF* and *CES*, we see that Chinese university students' English in writing might not be much higher than that between Standard 1 and Standard 2 in South Australia. However, comparison of the italicised parts suggests that Chinese university students may still have some difficulties when they write in English.

From the four sets of comparisons, presented in Table 1, we may conclude that in terms of reading and writing, Chinese university students' English may not be much higher than that between Standard 1 and Standard 2; whereas in terms of listening and speaking, their English is still between Standard 1 and Standard 2 for primary pupils in South Australia.

Table 1. Comparison in listening, speaking, reading and writing

Listening	Standards 1 and 2, SACSAF	Basic Requirements, CES
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listens to a range of texts to identify <u>feelings, main ideas and events</u>. 2. Listens to <u>a range of texts to identify specific information about familiar topics</u> and to <u>respond to others' views</u>. 	<p>Listens to teachers' <u>instructions in class, short and simple dialogues, interviews, reports and presentations in English at the speed of 130-150 words/minute</u> on familiar topics, <u>with simple sentence structures</u> and basically without new words and grasps <u>main ideas, key points and concerning details as well as the speaker's opinions and attitudes</u>.</p>
Speaking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Produces a range of spoken texts that describe <u>familiar procedures and events, and experiments with adjusting own speaking to communicate with different audience in a variety of familiar contexts</u>. 2. Produces a range of spoken texts about <u>topics and events of personal and community interest for different school and some community audiences and purposes</u>. 	<p><u>Asks and answers questions</u> on teaching materials and suitable listening materials, produces a range of spoken texts on <u>daily conversations, makes simple and short speeches after preparation on certain familiar topics</u> and <u>basically can be understood by others</u>.</p>
Reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reads and views <u>a range of texts containing familiar topics and language and predictable text structures and illustrations</u> and <u>recognises the ways that texts are constructed to represent real and imaginary experiences</u>. 2. Reads and views <u>a range of texts containing familiar topics and language features</u>, and <u>identifies symbolic meaning and stereotypes</u> 	<p>Reads materials smoothly that are <u>not too difficult and on common topics</u> and <u>grasps main ideas</u> and makes certain inference and <u>judgment</u> on the basis of certain facts and details.</p>
Writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Composes <u>a range of texts that include topics of personal interest and some related ideas</u>, and that <i>can be understood by others</i>. 2. Composes <u>a range of texts that include interrelated ideas and information about familiar topics and shows awareness of different audiences, purposes and contexts</u>. 	<p>Makes notes when reading materials similar to classroom texts; answers questions and writes outlines; <u>composes within 30 minutes a range of texts of 100 to 120 words on certain topics and outlines; composes short letters and notes</u>. The texts thus produced are <i>without big linguistic errors and can be understood by others</i>.</p>

VOCABULARY SIZE OF CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

As stipulated in the College English Syllabus (1999), Chinese university students should meet the Basic Requirements, where their vocabulary size should reach 4,200 words. According to reports from the CET Committee, the average passing percentage of CET 4 in key universities in China in 2000, 2001 and 2002 was 52.2 per cent, 51.0 per cent and 50.7 per cent respectively. This shows that almost half of the students in key universities failed to meet the Basic Requirements in the College English Syllabus. However, when all universities in China are taken into consideration, we can see that, roughly speaking, most university students failed to meet Basic Requirements in the College English Syllabus during those three years. It might be the case that many Chinese university students in fact do not have a vocabulary size of 4,200 words.

As early as in 1986, it was stipulated in the College English Syllabus that the teaching of English should aim to develop students' communicative competence, and since then this has been a goal of College English teaching. 'Communicative competence', according to Hymes (1997), includes four aspects: (a) systemic potential; (b) appropriateness; (c) occurrence and, (d) feasibility. While 'systemic potential' refers to knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of language, 'appropriateness' is indispensable to paradigmatic relations, which, at the risk of oversimplification, deals with choice of words. Obviously, a person's large vocabulary size might help him or her to develop strong communicative competence. If we suppose that every Chinese

university student has met the Basic Requirements where vocabulary size is 4,200 words, how should we look at this vocabulary size?

IS SUCH A VOCABULARY SIZE LARGE ENOUGH?

When explaining stages in first language acquisition, Dai et al. (1986, pp.136-137) declare that at the age of two a child can name most things familiar to him; six months later, the child can understand almost everything said to him, and at the age of three, his or her vocabulary size is about 1,000 words.

According to Moskowitz (1993), by the age of five most children have completed the greater part of the basic language-acquisition process in spite of the fact that subtle refinements are added between the ages of five and ten.

Marzano and Marzano (1988, p.16) have made an interesting discovery that in English speaking countries 7,320 words are commonly used in textbooks in elementary schools. Nation and Waring (2002, p.7) believe that a five-year-old native English speaker has a vocabulary of around 4,000 to 5,000 words, of which 2,000 to 3,000 words are productive vocabulary (Richards, 1976). This might actually be the threshold of vocabulary size in elementary schools in English speaking countries.

In terms of vocabulary size, we might see that a Chinese university student is similar to an English child at the age of five. However, Chinese university students do not usually communicate with children, but with adult native English speakers, whose vocabulary size, according to Golden et al. (1990), is around 20,000 **word families**, excluding proper names, compound words, abbreviations and foreign words.

Based on daily lives in China, the *Chinese-English Visual Dictionary of Chinese Culture* (Koshimizu, 2003) involves the use of about 20,000 English words, which is very helpful for introducing Chinese culture to the rest of the world. With a vocabulary size of 4,200 words, Chinese university students may face two embarrassing questions.

- 1) Can they have real communication with native English speakers whose vocabulary size is **20,000** word families?
- 2) Can they introduce Chinese culture to others involving the use of **20,000** English words?

McCarthy (1990, p.viii) argues that people cannot communicate in a L2 in any meaningful way if they do not have words to express a wider range of meanings. "Knowing words is the key to understanding and being understood" (Vermeer, 1992, p.147). It seems that Chinese university students have difficulties in both inputting and outputting information in English and their vocabulary size is far from being enough for communication with native English speakers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

McCarthy (1997, p.64) argues that vocabulary is the largest single element in dealing with a new language and teachers therefore should take the responsibility of vocabulary instruction in their teaching. How to deal with the issue of small vocabulary size seems to be critical at the moment in the teaching of English in China. We have to consider this issue from a policy-making point of view in both high schools and universities. However, it usually takes time to make policies. From a methodological point of view, College English teachers could do a lot in terms of their vocabulary instruction. In other words, we can deal with the issue from both a macro and micro point of view.

A MACRO POINT OF VIEW

Enlarging high school students' vocabulary size

According to the College English Syllabus (1999), university students should meet the requirements of College English Band 4, where their vocabulary size is 4,200 words. Given the fact that students are required to have a vocabulary size of 1,800 words when they enter university, university students will have to have a net increase of 2,400 words within two years of their English learning. In most universities in China, students have four periods of English classes each week: one is a listening class, the other three are intensive reading classes. Every semester, students have at least 50 periods of intensive reading class. This means that they learn only 12 new words in each period of their intensive reading class. Such a vocabulary size seems to be small.

However, vocabulary size for each period of English class at high schools is even smaller. English is taught in junior and senior high schools for 12 semesters. After such a long time of English learning, high school students are required to have 1,800 words to enter a university. This means that they enlarge their vocabulary size at the rate of 150 words each semester. Students at high schools usually have five periods of English class each week and 90 periods of English class each semester. This means that high school students learn on average only **1.6 words** in each period, which seems unbelievable. By comparison, it could be seen that there is imbalance in vocabulary size between high schools and universities.

In fact, high school students could have a **larger** vocabulary size, for they are usually aged 13 to 18 years, when memorising is easiest. It seems therefore necessary to enlarge high school students' vocabulary size. In doing so, we need to consider the following three points.

- 1) The gap in vocabulary size cannot be too big between Chinese university students and native English speakers.
- 2) Vocabulary size at high schools in China should be close to that at elementary schools in English speaking countries so that Chinese university students' vocabulary size could be close to that of adult native English speakers' later on when further efforts are made in universities.
- 3) Vocabulary size has to be enlarged gradually.

Based on the above three considerations as well as his own teaching experiences, the author makes the following suggestions.

Suggestions for increasing vocabulary size at junior high school

In the first semester, let students learn only one new word in each period, for it would be very difficult for students to learn a language which is totally different from their own. Then, in each of the following five semesters, make students acquire 2, 3, 4 and 5 words in each English class period respectively. Thus their vocabulary size would be increasing at the rate of 90, 180, 270, 360, 450 and 540 words in each semester of 90 periods, as shown in Table 2. Thus, vocabulary size at junior high school could reach **1,890** words.

Table 2. The increase of vocabulary size at junior high school

Semester	Words/semester	Words/period
1	90	1
2	180	2
3	270	3
4	360	4
5	450	5
6	540	6

Suggestions for increasing vocabulary size at senior high school

At senior high school, vocabulary size could be enlarged to **5,130** words as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The increase of vocabulary size at senior high school

Semester	Words/semester	Words/period
1	630	7
2	720	8
3	810	9
4	900	10
5	990	11
6	1,080	12

If such an increase in vocabulary size were possible, when students graduate from a senior high school, their vocabulary size should reach **7,020** words, which is close to the vocabulary size of 7,320 words commonly used in elementary school textbooks in English-speaking countries.

Enlarging university students' vocabulary size by reading

Since 2000, the author has attended over 80 periods of classroom College English teaching and interviewed nearly 100 College English teachers from all over China and finds that most College English teachers usually adopt explicit instruction of vocabulary, explaining and analysing structures, meanings and uses of new words. In other words, College English teachers focus their vocabulary instruction on productive words without paying much attention to receptive words. Besides, in intensive reading classes, teachers usually take one passage or text as their priority in each of their teaching units. Consequently, a teacher completes only about ten passages each semester and at most finishes 40 passages in four semesters of teaching.

The method of vocabulary instruction as well as the small amount of reading involved greatly limits Chinese university students' vocabulary size. How many words should Chinese university students have? Let us have a look at Table 4 which shows the relationship between vocabulary size and text coverage put forward by Francis and Kucera (1982).

Table 4. The relationship between vocabulary size and text coverage

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1,000	72.0%
2,000	79.7%
3,000	84.0%
4,000	86.8%
5,000	88.7%
6,000	89.9%
15,851	97.8%

From Table 4, it can be seen that knowing about 4,000 **word families** provides 86 per cent coverage of written text. However, the coverage of Chinese university students' vocabulary size must be lower than this level, for their vocabulary size is counted **in words** rather than word families.

Laufer (1989) argues that only 95 per cent coverage of a text would be sufficient for reasonable comprehension. This means that Chinese university students should have vocabulary size of around 12,000 word families, which in terms of the present situation of College English teaching in China, seems to be an astronomical and completely unrealistic number.

Richards et al. (2002, pp.178-179) believe that English in China is a foreign language, for it is not used as a medium of instruction in schools nor as a language of communication within the country. In their opinion, the objective of learning English as a foreign language is either for communication with native English speakers, or for reading printed materials in English.

Do Chinese university students learn English to communicate with native English speakers or to read printed materials in English? Let us now examine the English language environment on university campuses in China. It is reported that there were 77,715 international students in China in 2003, but native English speakers accounted for only seven per cent, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Students from English speaking countries in China in 2003

Countries	Degree and Non-Degree Students
United States	3,693
Australia	918
United Kingdom	657
Canada	557

Source: <http://csc.edu.cn/gb/downloaddoc/2004/2003lhtj.doc>

According to the *People's Daily* (2004), there were about 2,500 teachers of native English speakers working in elementary, junior and senior high schools and universities in China in 2001. There are 1,517 universities in China (Ministry of Education of Peoples' Republic of China, 2003). Even if all the 2,500 English teachers were working only in universities, each university could have fewer than two teachers. In fact, there are no international students or teachers of native English speakers at all in some universities in China.

The English language environment on university campuses in China shows that (a) it is very hard for Chinese university students to find enough native English speakers to communicate with on campuses; and (b) that to take reading as an objective of English learning would be practical for Chinese university students.

Nation and Waring (2002, pp.43-45) believe that reading provides favourable conditions for vocabulary learning, both in repetition of vocabulary and decreased density of unknown words in texts. Of such skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing, reading is stipulated as the priority of teaching in the College English Syllabus (1999). However, Gui (2004) criticises intensive reading classes in China, for they have not actually trained students to have real reading ability in China. Gui is right. It is impossible for students to have reading ability by working through only 40 passages, even though teachers might explain these passages in great detail. Now we have to reconsider the issue of reading.

Reading helps to enlarge students' vocabulary, but to be meaningful the amount of reading must be increased. The necessity to increase reading seems to suggest that College English teachers in China have to switch their focus from productive words to receptive ones. Without the support of receptive words, productive words would be like water without sources. The increase of the former might naturally lead to the increase of the latter, but it might not be the case *vice versa*.

As noted above, in most universities in China, students have 50 periods of intensive reading class each semester. If students could acquire 50 new words in each period, they would learn 2,500 new words each semester, 5,000 new words each year and 10,000 new words over two years. When the 1,800 words that students have learnt at high schools are added to this vocabulary size, university students will have vocabulary sizes of 11,800 words. In that situation, a vocabulary size of 12,000 word families would no longer be an astronomical number to Chinese university students, though it is still larger than 11,800 words.

Many linguists complain that vocabulary teaching has been neglected in the literature of English language teaching and learning (Davies and Pearse, 2002, p.59; Dubin and Olstain, 1986, pp.111-12; Ellis, 1995; McCarthy, 1984; Meara, 1980, p.221; Wilkins, 1972, p.109). Although there is no research that can be applied directly to College English teaching in China currently, dealing with 50 receptive words each class is a practical goal rather than something within sight but beyond reach.

A MICRO POINT OF VIEW

Lexico-semantic theory suggests that learners have to set up in their minds the systems that keep words well-organized for retrieval and human lexicon is believed to be a web-like structure of interconnected links (Aitchison, 1987). Therefore, Sökmen (2002, p.241) believes that in vocabulary instruction, teachers need to help their students establish those links and build up those associations so that they can store vocabulary effectively. The links lie in word knowledge, which according to Richards (1976), consists of a word's orthographical and phonological form, meanings, grammatical behaviour, associations, collocations, frequency and register. It seems that word association plays an important role in vocabulary instruction.

Word association refers to ways in which words come to be associated with each other and which influence the learning and remembering of words (Richards et al., 2002, p.510). Nation and Waring (2002, pp.43-45) believe that a range of 5 to 16 encounters with a word would make a student truly acquire it. By association in vocabulary instruction, a teacher may make students frequently encounter the words that they are learning, for events, activities, and objects become schematised very quickly and repeated experiences extend and develop our schemes (Katz, 1993). The following might be helpful to increase receptive words by association.

- 1) Word form association
 - (a) association of word family members
 - (b) association of word beginning
 - (c) association of word ending
 - (d) association of derivative antonyms
- 2) Semantic association
 - (a) antonym association
 - (b) synonym association
 - (c) superordinate and hyponyms
 - (d) brainstorming association
- 3) Association by teacher talk
- 4) Association by writing
- 5) Association by doing exercises

Now let us take 'Brainstorming association' as an illustration. Brainstorming is also similar to what Sökmen (1992) calls 'semantic mapping'. A teacher may simply give students one word and ask them to supply words that are associated with it in semantic field. Hudson (2000, p.110) gives an example with the word 'utterance'.

General:	speaking, talking
Manner:	saying, shouting, whispering
Flow of information:	agreeing, announcing, asking, discussing, explaining, ordering, reminding, reporting, suggesting, telling
Source:	acting, reading, reciting, mimicking
Speaker evaluation:	apologizing, boasting, complaining, criticizing, grumbling, joking, thanking
Hearer evaluation:	flattering, promising, teasing, threatening, warning
Effect on hearer:	cajoling, discussing, persuading

This kind of brainstorming is similar to what Marzano and Marzano (1988) call the 'cluster approach', where words are taught in semantically related groups. For example, the word 'light' might be discussed in the following way.

Classification:	lamplight, sunlight, daylight, moonlight, starlight, candlelight
Actions:	shine, sparkle, flash, glow, glitter, glisten, gleam, glimmer, flare, twinkle, shimmer, radiate, illuminate, brighten, lighten, reflect
Effects:	radiant, dark, bright, brilliant, shiny, dazzling, luminous, dim, faint, gloomy
Producers:	torch, candle, lamp, light, fluorescent light, lantern, bulb, beam

Sökmen (2002, p.244) believes that learning is aided by making materials concrete and suggests enhancing memory by giving personal examples, relating words to current events and providing experiences with words. A teacher may ask students to write about a person or a situation in connection with the text they are learning. Before writing, ask them to collect which words will be needed in composition. In such a case, sets of related words may occur to the students. For example, when a teacher asks students to list the words that could be used to describe a person's character either positively or negatively, the following words might suggest themselves:

To describe positively:	warm and friendly, kind, nice, pleasant, generous, optimistic, cheerful, relaxed, strong, easy-going, sensitive, honest.
To describe negatively:	cold and unfriendly, unkind, horrible, unpleasant, mean, pessimistic, miserable, tense, weak, insensitive, dishonest

After learning "Why I Teach" (Dong, 1997, pp.46-48, Book III), a teacher may ask students to describe an old Chinese teacher. By brainstorming, the following words might be collected:

age, glasses, pen, presentation, desk, books, journals, dictionaries, devotion, committed, patient, kind, publications, clothes, manner, wrinkled face, students, lesson plan, thoughtful, considerate, optimistic, open-minded, industrious, intelligent, traditional, smiling, laughing, ,manner, elegant, learned, knowledgeable, well-informed, competent, voice, enthusiasm,, interest, motivation, noble, research, energetic, computer, scholarly, academic, persistent, experienced, respectable, strong-willed, exemplary, lectures, interview, beloved, amiable, hoary

Gairns and Redman (1986, p.60) argue that only when students perceive the vocabulary input to be useful, will it be easy to engage their interest and effective learning be increased. Brainstorming may result in students' strong motivation in vocabulary learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Channel (1988) suggests that language acquisition is the end result of vocabulary development. Deficiency in College English teaching in China lies in the small vocabulary size, which the author believes has become a hindrance in both inputting and outputting information in English. Chinese university students' vocabulary size of 4,200 words is too small for meaningful communication with native English speakers whose vocabulary size is around 20,000 word families.

Quality change usually depends on quantity change. It is now critical to enlarge Chinese students' vocabulary size in the teaching of English in China. Chinese university students' vocabulary size should be close to that of native English speakers. Without enlarging vocabulary size, students do not have real reading ability and communicative competence. While memory skills are best, high school students should develop larger vocabulary sizes by learning one to 12 new words in each period of their English class. Given the fact that English is still a foreign language in China, reading is the best way to deal with the issue and therefore should be the objective of English teaching. From a micro point of view, vocabulary instruction in China should aim at increasing

receptive words rather than productive ones on which most College English teachers focus in their classroom teaching.

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