THE ABC OF VOCABULARY

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Vocabulary lists have often puzzled me. Not just the selection. After all, one's own opinion will never coincide with the compilers', even when based on the same criteria. I'm not sure *hat* and *coat,* let alone *cap,* would be in my first 500 words in a tropical country. I doubt if *cradle* is one of my top 200 nouns (primary list A) even for 6 or 7 year olds. Take *light* and *lie* in one list I've seen. What is supposedly one word may have a bundle of meanings. This is pure cheating; how to get 800 words into a 500 word list. It is confusing, and unhelpful, but what puzzles me more is that the lists are almost always alphabetical. As a species we've been around a few million years, and in that time there is not a lot we have devised that is more boring than an alphabetical list of words. I imagine this is because there are no connections within it for the brain to make. Hardly a synapse is nudged. You notice the words are there and that's all. That's probably why no one takes the slightest notice of them.

Now a list of words doesn't make sense, it's not language, but it could tickle those synapses a bit more. Why, it could even be useful! Vocabulary selection itself is usually based on usefulness — frequency, range, coverage and learnability. So we consider semantics (coverage and range), situation (frequency and range) — and these two are quite close in practice — structure, morphology, phonology or even spelling (all learnability). But somehow we never hear of the Alphabetical Approach to language teaching. (Lesson 1: All American aquatic and amphibious animals, as alligators and abalone, are always absurdly amorous after absolutely any abstinence at all). So it was good to see a word list that is not only grouped semantically, but also according to grammatical categories and morphology — verbs with present/*s*/ and past/*id*/ and so on. In many cases this automatically distinguishes homonyms:

light — equipment, general, noun;
light — equipment, general, quantity

But what I think might also be useful is to indicate the structural implications of a word (which really means a verb).

forget-got-gotten	ϕ (to do sth. understood)
	sth.
	to do sth.
	that ....
	wh ....

Each usage, rather than each word, could be marked to indicate at which stage it might be expected to be taught. In this way a vocabulary list can be skimmed through to pick out words which fit a particular pattern, such as Verb s.o. to do sth. After teaching a structure I sometimes find I've left out fairly obvious words which I could have used if I'd had a suitable list, or had given it a lot more thought.

Light and *light* are clearly two different words, with opposites *dark* and *heavy*, but there are often different meanings of one word, such as *light*: verb; adjective; noun, *lamp;* noun; *brightness*. The semantic connections are not always obvious, especially to 2c. So that people like me can be reminded to teach each meaning using different situations, this polysemy should also be indicated as well as homonymy. Admittedly the boarderline between the two is a bit hazy; the opposites of *dark* and *heavy* were the same even in Old English, apparently, and though it was never my scene, I dare say they were closer semantically. Old Ethelred probably thought of 'leoht' having one meaning applying to different situations rather as we think of them having one meaning with opposites *thick* and *fat* for different situations. All the reason to list all the meanings with their usual situations; and teach them, subject to other criteria. For example the verb 'pass':

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pass 1. (go past)    φ (+ Adv. place esp.
                       pass by φ pass by sth.)
                       sth. (esp, people, buildings,
                       vehicles)
     2. (hand over)  sth. (+ Ind. Obj)
                       ∧ over, ∧ across, ∧ along,
                       ∧ round.
     3. (opp. fail)  φ (exam etc. understood)
                       sth. (exam etc.)
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∧ indicates the object can be inserted before the adverbs.

Some idea of important collocations could be given as pupils need to experience the word not only in different structures, but with different lexical items. They need to pass the post office, people in the street, a timber lorry at 20 m.p.h., quite apart from the salt and S.R.P. (but not the buck or muster, idioms being a different bucket of mustard).

It could also be useful to have some idea of what should not be taught

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drop φ (+ Adv.) x — use 'full'
     sth.
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The causal connection could be indicated here too.

Nouns can be fairly easily cross-referenced to indicate in which and in how many situations they commonly occur. Semantically, *rubber* might come under school objects, trees, and materials, with situations such as the classroom, agriculture, student's environment, occupations. Verbs and adjectives are not as easy as so many can occur almost anywhere. Semantic and situational categories overlap, and for teaching purposes each category need not be strictly one or the other.

Students almost always receive vocabulary before producing it but I don't think it follows that students need eventually produce all items taught receptively. The vocabulary list can perhaps indicate which may conveniently be left for comprehension only, though naturally a native speaker will find it easy enough to do this himself. Words such as *witch* or *palace* are largely restricted to children's readers and do not need to be part of a student's active vocabulary. When people talk of

E.S.L. rather than E.F.L. in Malaysia. I take it to mean that Malaysians are not learning English in order to absorb a foreign culture, ideas, literature and so on, in the way that we, or Malaysians, learn French; but for practical use within the country.

This is why, for me, *hat* and *coat* are second priority despite being useful cover words. Almost the only time my students will use hats and coats is when they are obliged to for an irrelevant picture composition. Since they are also as learnable as English words are ever likely to be the keener students will produce them if need be with no trouble.

So I'm suggesting that a word list should give masses of information to anyone who wants to select vocabulary for teaching: morphological forms; structural implications; semantic range; as far as possible situational range; important collocations; an indication of when the words might be taught; which words are cognate and which need only be taught receptively. All this would be much larger than the usual vocabularly list. But it would be much more useful, if not exactly 'a good read'. Who knows, if some attention were paid to it we might get some better textbooks next time around.

Considering teaching 'language' as opposed to 'skills', I find most of my teaching time and nearly all my preparation is concerned with structure. I don't think spelling, pronunciation and word formation need more time. But I think vocabulary and situation, including appropriateness, do. The kind of list I am advocating will I think give some ideas, particularly on situations we should use at each level, as well as being a reliable source of information on the language problems involved.

There would be no need for an alphabetical list. Most teachers have a rough idea of the semantics of the words they teach, and should find the right semantic group with as little trouble as a place in the alphabet. If there are teachers who are unhappy without their abc it could be printed, not double spaced, three columns to a page, but single spaced, say ten columns in microscopic print.