

## A Contrastive Analysis of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List With a General Service List of English Words and Academic Word List

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### Abstract

Chinese College English Syllabus Word List issued by Chinese Ministry of Education has always been instructing Chinese college English teaching for about 14 years. Now Chinese college English teaching is focusing more and more on learners and to satisfy learners' needs, Chinese college English teaching is turning from teaching English for general purposes to for academic purposes. To investigate whether Chinese College English Syllabus Word List can meet the vocabulary requirements of academic learning of Chinese college learners or not, a contrastive analysis between Chinese College English Syllabus Word List and A General Service List of English Words and Academic Word List is made via the software, Range. The results show that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) can accord with A General Service List of English Words in word families, but has a low coverage in word types in Academic Word List and most words in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 & level after 6) are not in A General Service List of English Words or Academic Word List. Thus, it can be concluded that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is made up of high frequent words but not academic words while Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 & level after 6) is neither high frequent word list nor academic word list. It is proposed that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List must be revised to meet the requirements of academic learning of Chinese college learners.

**Key Words:** High frequency words; Academic words; Chinese College English Syllabus Word List; A General Service List; Academic Word List

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### INTRODUCTION

To improve the learning efficiency of the academic learners, a variety of corpora based on different disciplines were established and analyzed. As a result, different kinds of word lists were set up on the basis of the word frequency, for example, cross-discipline word lists such as the University Word List (Xue & Nation, 1984), the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), and discipline-specific word lists like the word list for engineering (Mudraya, 2006), for medicine (Wang et al., 2008) and for applied linguistics (Vongpumivitch et al., 2009), etc. The establishment of these word lists provides the vocabulary goal for academic learners and it has been proved that most successful language learners have a definite vocabulary goal. It is on the basis of the establishment of the word lists that Paul Nation (2001) proposed that the academic learners should learn vocabulary by following the four steps: first, they have to master the high-frequency words; second, they will learn the academic words; third, the technical words and at last, the low-frequency words.

The high-frequency words from A General Service List of English Words (GSL) developed by Michael West in 1953 including 2,000 word families can satisfy the vocabulary requirements for general English communications such as greetings, asking for a way and

seeing a doctor, etc. And according to Nation, almost 80% of the running words in a text are high-frequency words (Nation, 2001, p.11). Thus, to acquire 2,000 high-frequency word families from GSL can improve the learners' communicative ability efficiently in a short time, which is significant for beginners to build up their confidence to learn English at the very beginning. That's why Nation thinks 2,000 word families are the first vocabulary requirement for academic learners. And the second vocabulary requirement for academic learners is to learn academic words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), which contains 570 word families and provides academic learners with the basic vocabulary to comprehend academic texts, describe and report their scientific and technological experiences. The third phase is the learning of the technical words. The technical words are those words which are closely related to the subject of the academic learners. To acquire the technical words can result in the improvement of the academic communications of the academic learners. The fourth step is to learn the low-frequency words which make up 5% of the words in an academic text (Nation, 2001, p.12). For low-frequency words, to save time and energy, the academic learners can learn this part of words by guessing from the context or word-formation because of their low frequency in texts.

The four-strand vocabulary learning process can be of significance for Chinese academic learners because Chinese college English teaching is focusing more and more on academic English teaching nowadays. Before Chinese academic learners engage themselves in academic learning, it is quite urgent to know the status quo of their academic vocabulary ability. Chinese College English Syllabus Word List has always been the guideline for Chinese college English vocabulary teaching since 1999. Most Chinese scholars investigated Chinese college academic learners' vocabulary ability from the perspective of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List. They designed vocabulary tests based on Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (Ma, 2001; Zhou et al., 2000), so a prerequisite to know the academic vocabulary ability of Chinese college academic learners via these investigation based on Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is to know whether Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is a word list of high-frequency words or academic words. To answer this question, the paper makes a contrastive analysis between Chinese College English Syllabus Word List and A General Service List of English Words and Academic Word List.

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## 1. BACKGROUND

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Chinese College English Syllabus Word List was compiled and issued by Chinese Ministry of Education and College Foreign Language Teaching Committee in 1999, which

consists of three parts: the first is level 1 to 4 including 4,200 words; the second is level 5 to 6 with another 1,300 words and the third is level after 6 with another 1,000 words, so the total is about 6,500. The establishment of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List was based on the 6,000-word-frequency word list from the corpus of JiaoDa English for Science and Technology, Collins, Longman and Oxford dictionaries (Editors of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, 1999). As the guideline of Chinese college English vocabulary teaching, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is of importance in the aspects of college English teaching, college English tests and textbook compilation. College English teaching, however, was innovated since the issue of the Requirements of College English Teaching by Chinese Ministry of Education in 2007. Chinese college English teaching is more and more centering on the learners' needs and changing from teaching English for general purposes to for academic purposes. In this case, it is significant to investigate whether Chinese College English Syllabus Word List can still meet the requirements of academic learning of the college students or not.

A General Service List of English Words (GSL) was compiled and edited by Michael West in 1953. The GSL includes 2,000 word families from a corpus with 5 million words on the basis of frequency, universality (words used in all countries), utility (words used to talk about a wide range of topics), and usefulness (words that can be used to describe or define other words) (Gilner, 2011). Approximately 1,850 words are content words and 150 are functional words in GSL. According to Nation (2001), GSL has a high coverage both in non-academic and academic texts. GSL accounts for 90% of the running words in novels and fictions and 75% in non-fictional texts (Coxhead, 2000, p.213). Coxhead's research shows that GSL accounts for 76% of the running words in the texts which she studied (Coxhead, 2000, p.213). Therefore, it can be concluded that GSL is a prerequisite for ESL academic learners to begin academic learning.

In 2000, Averil Coxhead compiled a 570-word family academic word list which is made up of the words from a 3.5 million-word corpus of academic texts in Law, Arts, Commerce, and Science (Coxhead, 2000, p.213). With the criterion of word frequency, the words which occur at least 100 times in the entire corpus, 10 times in each of the four main disciplines, and at least once in 15 out of 28 subject areas are included and what's more, these words are not any of the most frequent 2,000 word families in West's A General Service List of English Words. The Academic Word List (AWL) represents approximately 10% of the total tokens in Coxhead's corpus (Coxhead, 2000, p.213) and they are formal and learned and characterized by their Latin or Greek origins, consequently, they are considered to be difficult for most ESL academic learners (Coxhead & Nation, 2001). They, however, are effective for

academic learners to understand the academic texts and write scientific journal papers and experimental reports.

The 2000-word family GSL and the 570-word family AWL mentioned above are considered quite necessary for ESL academic learners and they are vocabulary guidelines for college academic teaching, course design and materials development. And according to Nation (2001), both the lists provide 75-80% and about 10% coverage of tokens (running words) in a text, respectively. Cobb and Horst (2004) showed that the knowledge of the AWL words as well as the knowledge of words in GSL is necessary in understanding an academic text in English. As for Chinese academic learners, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is their vocabulary learning goal. Whether Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is consistent with GSL or AWL is very important for Chinese academic English teachers and learners to teach and learn academic English words. So this paper aims to investigate the consistency between Chinese College English Syllabus Word List and GSL and AWL.

## 2. THE STUDY

Before we make a contrastive analysis between Chinese College English Syllabus Word List and GSL and AWL, the way to count every word form in the three lists has to be clarified. As for Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, it counts the words by the unit of word while GSL and AWL count the words by the unit of word family. A word family consists of a headword, its inflected forms, and its closely related derived forms (Nation, 2001, p.8). And there are two more important concepts in counting the words: tokens and types. Tokens or running words are all the words in a text, counting repeated words. Types are the word patterns in a text and if the same word repeats again, it can be regarded as just one type (Nation, 2001, p.7).

### 2.1 The Research Questions

- a) What is the coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4, level 5 to 6 and level after 6) in GSL?
- b) What is the coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4, level 5 to 6 and level after 6) in AWL?
- c) Is Chinese College English Syllabus Word List a high frequent word list or an academic word list?

### 2.2 The Research Method

The software, Range, is used to analyze the coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4, level 5 to 6 and level after 6) in GSL and AWL. Based on word frequency, Range can be used to retrieve the high frequency words and academic words in GSL and AWL respectively. In the software, Range, there are three lists. The first list includes the most frequent 1,000 word

families from GSL, and the second list is the less most frequent 1,000 word families from CSL and the third is the 570 word families from AWL.

Chinese College English Syllabus Word List published in 1999 by Higher Education Press and Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press jointly in China. According to the specifications of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, the words with the symbol of the asterisk (\*) belong to level 1 to 4, the words with the symbol of the triangle (▲) belong to level 5 to 6 and the words with the symbol of the diamond (◆) belong to level after 6. By this way, the total of the words in level 1 to 4 is 4,326, level 5 to 6 is 1,321 and level after 6 is 1,015. And there is no other specific norm or standard mentioned in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List to classify the word list into the three levels so the number of the words counted in this research is not the same as that of the specified in the preface of the syllabus. But this can be explained by the paper, *On the Specification of the Vocabulary of College English Syllabus (revised edition)*, published by one of the editors of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, Jianbin Huang, in 1999, which specifies that some homonyms are counted once and some clipped words such as ad, auto, bike, lab and math are not to be counted. Nevertheless, in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, these words are still counted.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

i) The amount of the word families in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is near to that in GSL.

Results show that the amount of the word families in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) in the first most frequent 1,000 word list and the second most frequent 1,000 word list of GSL are 970 and 938 respectively, which displays that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is consistent with GSL in word families. The reason is that the editors referred to the latest achievements in the field of word study abroad when they compiled Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (Huang, 1999, p.29). In this respect, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is the high frequency word list. But, in word types, the percentages of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) in 1,000 most frequent families and 1,000 less most frequent word families of GSL are 33.9% and 25.5% respectively, which are comparatively small. With almost the same amount of word families and low percentage of the word types in GSL, it comes to the conclusion that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is a high-frequency word list but has the different inflected or derivative words from that of GSL.

**Table 1**  
**The Coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) in GSL and AWL**

Word list	Tokens/%	Types/%	Families
List 1	1473/34.0	1459/33.9	970
List 2	1105/25.5	1098/25.5	938
List 3	601/13.9	597/13.9	475
Not in the List	1147/26.5	1146/26.7	—
Total	4326	4300	2383

ii) The percentage of the word types of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) in AWL is small.

In word types, the percentage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) in AWL is 13.9%, which shows that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is not a word list with academic words.

iii) The coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and level after 6) both in word families and word types is extremely low in GSL and AWL.

Table 2 and Table 3 show that almost all the words of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and level after 6) are not in GSL or AWL. Obviously, the words in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and level after 6) are neither high frequent words nor academic words.

**Table 2**  
**The Coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6) in GSL and AWL**

Word list	Tokens/%	Types/%	Families
List 1	1/ 0.08	1/ 0.08	1
List 2	0/ 0.00	0/ 0.00	0
List 3	0/ 0.00	0/ 0.00	0
Not in the List	1320/99.92	1320/99.92	—
Total	1321	1321	1

**Table 3**  
**The Coverage of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level after 6) in GSL and AWL**

Word list	Tokens%	Types%	Families
List 1	9/ 0.89	9/ 0.89	9
List 2	10/ 0.99	10/ 0.99	10
List 3	23/ 2.27	23/ 2.27	23
Not in the List	973/95.86	973/95.86	—
Total	1015	1015	42

To sum up, the above contrastive analysis of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List in word range with GSL and AWL suggests that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is a high frequent word list but not an academic word list while Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 & after level 6)

is neither the high frequent word list nor academic word list. This finding has important implications for teaching academic English vocabulary in China. For those students who passed college English test and prepared themselves for academic English learning, a complete academic vocabulary list as the guideline of their academic learning is quite necessary.

#### 4. SUGGESTIONS FOR CHINESE COLLEGE ENGLISH SYLLABUS WORD LIST

To satisfy the needs of Chinese college academic English teaching and learning, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List should be revised based on the analysis above-mentioned.

First of all, in view of the approximation of the number of word families of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) to that of GSL and the low coverage of 59.4% in word types, it is proposed that some revisions should be made in word types of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) to make it a high frequency word list. On the other hand, use academic vocabulary to replace the words in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and after level 6) and to make it an academic word list.

Second, for the convenience of academic English learning, teaching and researching, the standard to count the vocabulary in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List should be “word family” instead of “word”. For one thing, the problem which some high frequent words cannot be put into the word list because they are just the derivations can be solved. For another, we can have the uniform standard with the foreign vocabulary researchers.

Third, the standard to select the words should be specified for Chinese College English Syllabus Word List. With the advanced computer technology, the compilation of the word list should be based on the corpus and frequency of the word. Although the standard to select the words was mentioned as the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis in the preface of Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, it is not specified. It is proposed that Chinese College English Syllabus Word List should be mainly based on word frequency because with the acquisition of high frequent words, learners can improve their learning efficiency.

Finally, the way to annotate the words in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List is too simple and should be improved. It is of less significance to simply list words’ Chinese meanings, phonetic symbols and parts of speeches. It is better to present the frequency of the word meanings and provide with the English meanings of the words and examples to illustrate the usage of the words, which can make Chinese College English Syllabus Word List more instructional both for teachers and learners.

## CONCLUSION

A contrastive analysis between Chinese College English Syllabus Word List and GSL and AWL is made to investigate whether Chinese College English Syllabus Word List a high frequency word list or an academic word list. The study shows that vocabulary in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) is a word list of high frequent words but not academic words while vocabulary in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and level after 6) is neither high frequent words nor academic words. As a consequence, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 1 to 4) should be revised and completed as a high frequency word list and Chinese College English Syllabus Word List (level 5 to 6 and level after 6) should be changed into an academic word list. In addition, the contrastive analysis also implicates that some revisions for Chinese College English Syllabus Word List should be made such as the improvement of the illustration of the words and the specification of the selection norm of the words in Chinese College English Syllabus Word List. In a word, a general vocabulary list, that is, Chinese College English Syllabus Word List, should be perfected and an academic word list should be set up for Chinese academic learners.

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