In Search of Basic Verbs for Japanese Learners of EFL at the Junior High School Level: A View From “Coreness”

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Abstract

This paper discusses “basic verbs” for Japanese learners of EFL at the junior high school level, which is part of the author’s attempt to compose a “basic word list for Japanese beginners of EFL at the junior high school level.” The verbs in the defining vocabulary of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the most common verbs in the English language in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, and the verbs used in the seven English textbooks currently used at the junior high school in Japan are surveyed, and the overlap among these three groups of data are compared. In an attempt to extract “basic” verbs, the concept of “coreness” (Carter, 1998) was employed to test the relevant verbs from the three groups of vocabulary. Some 85 verbs emerged as “basic.” The remaining about 100 verbs, which seems to be the number of words proportionate to the total number of words in the Course of Study, are yet to be identified. For further investigation, a perspective from the learning of basic English structures needs to be incorporated into the results obtained herein.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There have been a number of word lists proposed based on frequency and range (e.g., Dewey, 1923; Faucett & Maki, 1932; Horn, 1926; Thorndike, 1921, 1931; Thorndike & Lorge, 1944) (Umamoto, 2001). In addition to these lists, some lists are based mainly on frequency and adopted teachers’ intuition of experience as their principle of selection (e.g., Palmer, 1931a, 1931b, 1931c, 1932; I. R. E. T., 1934; Faucett et al., 1936; West, 1953) (Umamoto, 2001). Others are produced through researchers’ original points of view (e.g., Ogden, 1930; van Ek, 1975, 1976; Hindmarsh, 1980) (Umamoto, 2001).

The latest trend in the selection of vocabulary has been to set a target for the learners (e.g., JACET, 2003; Takefuta & Chujo, 1994; Tono, 2001). These lists also use frequency and range as their criteria for word selection. Those who make and/or use such goal-oriented word lists may take it for granted that the vocabulary in the junior high school English textbooks in Japan is
basic and has been acquired if one once be a junior high school student for three years. The current study does not try to add another list of words with similar perspectives.

How are those words in Japanese junior high school EFL textbooks chosen? Although textbook writers design their textbooks chiefly on a grammatical syllabus, they recently pay more attention to contexts in which words are used and the functions they serve. Vocabulary comes, therefore, necessarily secondary in their mind. A typical vocabulary selection of this kind is to be found in Fries and Fries (1961).

Frequency is, of course, necessary but the range adopted in the existing word lists was selected subjectively according to the ideas and concepts of respective studies. Moreover, if some words that are very frequent in wide range but indicate concepts that are not familiar with Japanese, they are not helpful for beginners of EFL in Japan. If a given word and its synonyms have high frequency, how many of them do beginners of EFL need to learn? In addition we also have to focus on the meanings. English words, with the exception of highly technical terms and proper names, have multiple meanings. To which meaning do beginners of EFL need to pay attention in the first place? The word lists so far refer to only the frequency of word forms, but their meanings have somehow been neglected.

According to Chu-o Institute for Education Research (2003), 91 verbs, including 17 past tense and past participle and four variations of verbs, appear commonly in all the seven junior high school EFL textbooks in Japan. However, these 91 verbs, more precisely, their word forms commonly appear in the textbooks, but their meanings used in each textbook are not as common as their forms (Dogishi, 2005b). As textbook writers choose topics and grammar first, and then words, their meanings are determined by the context. The meanings of the words to be taught should also be regarded as the object of study.

In addition to this fact, the Ministry of Education listed 100 function words in the Course of Study and set the number of words to teach: about 900 words including these 100 words (1999, pp.62-3). This means that the rest of the undetermined 800 words can be selected freely in each textbook. Neither the ratio of the eight parts of speech nor the substance of content words was decided at all. The author strongly believes that both of them should be determined from an educational point of view, because students’ goals are only achieved if they start learning appropriate materials from the beginning.

To rely on frequency and to adopt teachers’ intuition of experience as the principle of selection of words sounds fine, but there is a question as to why some words are included in the list and others are not. What is the rationale for selecting a given set of words as the learning material for Japanese EFL beginners?

A criterion without any objectives lacks persuasiveness. We do not know how much “researchers’ original points of view” can be relied upon. Carter and McCarthy analyzed Basic English (Ogden, 1930) and reported that there are only eighteen main verbs in the Basic 850 words. The verbs are send, say, do, come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take, see, plus
the modal verbs may and will and the auxiliary words be and have (1988, p.3). In spite of the fact that “for Ogden and Richards it is a principle that, although their scheme will not embrace full English, it will at least not be un-English (Carter & McCarthy, 1988, p.2),” the number of verbs seems too small. Even if people can express their ideas with Basic English, their expression can be too periphrastic. And what is more, the learner has to un-learn the “basic English” as s/he advances in learning process, which had better be done away with.

1.2 Purpose

The current study aims to ascertain the principles for the selection of the “basic” verbs for Japanese learners of EFL at junior high school level, because the author considers that the early stage of learning is most important. For the reason that verbs have profound influence on sentence patterns, they are taken up in the current study prior to other parts of speech.

2. Survey

2.1 Materials

The following three types of materials are used for the study: 1) 435 verbs in the defining vocabulary of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (hereafter LDOCE) (2003); 2) 436 verbs in total, in the seven junior high school EFL textbooks currently used in Japan, New Crown, Columbus 21, New Horizon, One World, Sunshine, Total active.comm, and Total English (Chu-o Institute for Educational Research, 2002); 3) 113 verbs listed as the most common lexical verbs in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (hereafter LGSWE) (1999).

The first material is in a widely known dictionary for learners of English as an L2/EFL. There is no other English-English dictionary which sets such defining vocabulary that can define over 106,000 words and phrases listed with some 2,000 words.

The second material is in the textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education of Japan. This should be regarded as more or less “basic.” The Course of Study prescribes the size of vocabulary as teaching material and lists 100 function words. The remaining 800 words used in each textbook are also regarded as “basic,” because textbooks are the main sources that beginning students actually use and learn from. However, 800 words are actually chosen freely in each textbook, even though some among those 800 overlap across textbooks. The textbooks are chosen as one set of materials to see if the verbs in the textbooks overlap with those in the other two materials.

The final material is in a well-known grammar book based on a huge corpus, which cites the authentic examples of native speakers of English. However, its readers are different from those of the LDOCE. The data in the LGSWE are taken from the authentic use of English. It is not edited for educational use as its primary purpose, but for academic and referential use. The LDOCE and the LGSWE are, therefore, perfect sources of reference material and information for
the current study.

2.2 Procedures
2.2.1 Comparison among the materials
2.2.1.1 Forms and meanings

First, these three sets of materials are compared to see the overlap among them. To take account of the ambiguity of words in English, this writer referred to the most common meaning of the words in the definition of the LDOCE before the comparison. After that, as they have different behavior, relevant verbs are classified into semantic domains: activity verbs, communication verbs, mental verbs, causative verbs, verbs of simple occurrence, verbs of existence or relationship, and aspectual verbs respectively according to the LGSWE. However, delexical verb take is excluded from all three materials in this study, because the first meaning of take cannot be categorized into any of the seven semantic domains.

Subsequently, overlaps among the three materials are examined. It is not easy to assert unequivocally that the verbs commonly appearing in these three materials are “basic” for Japanese junior high school students learning EFL or not, but it is obviously essential for us to see, first of all, which words overlap in all the materials.

2.2.1.2 A criterion, “coreness”

Besides looking into the overlaps among the three groups of verbs, another yardstick, a view from coreness, to compare different groups of verbs has been employed.

Before going any further, let us discuss coreness. Coreness is said to exist among synonymous words or semantically related words (Carter, 1998). The words with least semantic features among semantically similar words are regarded to be “core” words. Except for function words, there are lexical sets that share the same or similar meaning, and each set has one core word. The differences among words in one lexical set arise when they are made by adding different semantic features to core meaning (Dogishi, 2005b). A schematic representation of this concept from Dogishi (2005b) is given below.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
[Fc] & [Fc + \alpha] & [Fc + \beta] \\
\downarrow & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
V_{\text{core}} & V\alpha & V\beta \\
\end{array}
\]

\[Fc= \text{core semantic feature} \]
\[V= \text{vocabulary} \]
\[V_{\text{core}}= \text{core vocabulary (word)} \]
\[V\alpha= \text{word in a vocabulary set with feature } \alpha \text{ added} \]

Figure 1. The concept of lexical set.
Core words can substitute for other members in their lexical set with an adverb or an appropriate phrase added. Furthermore, they are invariable and will not be affected by time. Therefore, teaching one core word to beginners of EFL seems much more useful than teaching many other synonyms that have more semantic features that restrict their use and situations and so forth.

However, not all of them are appropriate for teaching, especially at the beginner level, for instance some words, related to criminality, sexuality, and other specific ranges must be avoided even if they are core words in their lexical sets.

After the grouping, we could get several core words from each word set. These core words in each word group were pooled and examined for overlap.

Core words appearing commonly in all materials should be looked upon as important. Besides these words, we need to pay attention to core words in the LDOCE and the LGSWE. The core words in these two sources might well be regarded in the first place as “basic” verbs for beginners of EFL in Japan.

2.2.2 Numbers of verbs accounting for the whole

In making a word list, we have to take the ratio of each of the parts of speech to the total number of words in question. As shown in the chart in the LGSWE (p.65) and the percentage of the verbs in the defining vocabulary (435 among total 2,065 are verbs), in English, 20% or so seems to be the ratio that verbs account for the total types. The total amount of the defining vocabulary of the LDOCE is 2,050; total entries are 2,065 but 14 phrasal verbs and one delexical verb *take* are excluded from the list. That gives 435 verbs in the list, therefore, they account for 21% of all the defining vocabulary. We may well say that this percentage represents the authentic proportion of verbs when we deal with an English corpus.

The Ministry of Education has set the number of teaching vocabulary to about 900 words. When these 900 is multiplied by the coefficient of about 0.2, the number of verbs will turn out to be around 180. However, the established number of words is ambiguous, because the system of counting is not defined anywhere in the *Course of Study*.

There are two ways of counting words. One is the “lemma” system that regards a given word and its inflected forms as the same word. Therefore, *play, plays, played, and playing* are counted as one word. The other is the “word family” system that counts such inflections and derivatives of a word as the same word. The inflected forms of *play*, such as *plays, played, playing*, and the derivative of *play, player* is included under *play*. It is said, therefore, that words counted by the lemma system are 1.6 to 2 times as much as those counted by the word family system. Consequently, the estimated number of verbs, such as about 180, mentioned above is no more than a rough estimate of the size of the basic vocabulary depending on which system we may employ.
2.3 Results

2.3.1 Overlaps among the three sets of materials

2.3.1.1 From the view of forms and meaning

There are 69 verbs that commonly appear in all of the seven junior high school EFL textbooks, and these 69 words are included in the 435 verbs in the defining vocabulary of the LDOCE. Of the 113 common verbs in the LGSWE, there are 15 verbs not appearing in the 69 verbs that appear commonly both in the seven junior high school EFL textbooks and the defining vocabulary of the LDOCE; they are answer, cry, do, drink, enjoy, excuse, have, learn, look, ride, stop, study, teach, visit, and worry. Some of these seem to be good examples of the words that need to be taught even though they are infrequent in the authentic materials.

Another instance of overlap of the materials is as follows. There are 86 verbs appearing commonly in all three materials. From this point onwards, the names of three sets of materials are shown as a), b), and c): defining verbs in the LDOCE as a), verbs in the textbooks as b), verbs in the LGSWE as c). Overlap between a) and b) is 249, a) and c) is 100, and b) and c) is 88. There are several verbs not overlapping at all with any other materials: there are 172 verbs appearing only in a), 185 verbs in b), and 11 verbs in c).

However, it should be noted that the defining verbs in the LDOCE and the verbs in the LGSWE consist of the forms with the exclusion of inflected forms and allomorphs, but verbs in the textbooks are made up not only of this type. For instance, 185 verbs appearing only in the textbooks consist of mainly original forms, but five allomorphs (am, are, is, does, and has) and some past tenses and/or past participles are included.

In addition to this fact, some verbs appear only in one of the seven textbooks, which is not used by many junior high school students. The author would like to limit the verbs to those appearing in more than three textbooks, which are said to cover most of the junior high school students learning English in Japan, and compare them with the other two sets of materials.

Thereupon, figures decrease sharply; 78 verbs commonly appear in all three materials (see Appendix). b') indicate the verbs in more than three textbooks. The overlap between a) and b') is 153, a) and c) is 100, and b') and c) is 78. There are 260 verbs only appearing in a), 12 verbs in b'), and 13 verbs in c). Figure 2 shows the overlap among three materials; a), b'), and c).

![Figure 2. Overlap among three materials.](image-url)
2.3.1.2 From the view of coreness

There are 57 core words that commonly appear in the three sets of materials, a), b') and c). They are ask, be, become, begin, believe, bring, buy, call, carry, catch, die, eat, fall, follow, get, give, go, happen, hear, help, keep, know, let, like, live, make, mean, meet, move, open, play, put, reach, read, remember, run, say, see, sell, send, show, sit, smile, speak, spend, stay, thank, think, try, turn, understand, use, walk, want, wear, work and write.

To illustrate that words listed above are the core words, the figure in Dogishi (2005b) that shows how semantic features are added to make non-core words in a lexical set, using ask and its synonyms is given below:

![Figure 3. How semantic features are added to make words in a lexical set.](image)

In addition there are 25 core words overlapping between a) and c): they are add, answer, consider, contain, cry, develop, do, drink, excuse, expect, have, include, learn, offer, pay, reduce, ride, seem, shake, stop, study, suggest, teach, visit, and worry.

Besides, only three core words (apply, assume, and stop). Stop is regarded as an aspectual verb in the LGSWE, but the LDOCE takes it as an activity verb according to the first definition of stop in the LDOCE) are identified in the LGSWE.

2.3.2 Numbers of verbs which account for the whole

Verb ratio in each textbook is shown below. Numerals in parentheses show pure rate of verbs; that is allomorphs and past tenses and past participles are excluded from both numerator and denominator.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Number and percentage of verbs in the textbooks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>original forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Crown</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus 21</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Horizon</td>
<td>160</td>
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<tr>
<td>One World</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total active.comm</td>
<td>149</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total English</td>
<td>174</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As has been mentioned in 2.2.2, 180 is nothing but an estimated number of verbs which may be included in the vocabulary of 900, both original forms and total numbers including allomorphs and irregular past tense and past participles, shown in the Table 1 are more or less hitting the mark.

3. Discussion

From 2.2.2, we can say that the reasonable proportion of verbs in the whole vocabulary is around 20%. Nevertheless, the ratio of the verbs in each textbook is smaller in number, especially when only the original forms are counted as verbs, than the number assumed to be used by native speakers’ of English as shown in the LGSWE.

The range of vocabulary required to teach beginners of EFL is not stated clearly yet, but we can refer to the proportion that we have obtained in this study.

We have seen the overlap among the three sets of materials from two different points of view. One is their forms and meaning and the other is their coreness. The 78 verbs appearing commonly in their forms and meanings in all three materials, a), b'), and c) deserve more attention than they have received up to now.

Moreover, the 57 core words commonly appearing in three materials, a), b') and c), and 25 core words overlapping between a) and c) need to be regarded as important. And the three core words, apply, assume, and stop which are only seen in the LGSWE need to be seriously considered too.

There are only 85 core words in all the above. We need about 100 more words that can be brought forward to Japanese learners of EFL at the junior high school level as basic verbs. In order to do this, a further investigation into the 78 verbs commonly appearing in the three sets of materials should be made.

4. Conclusion

The number of verbs needed in the junior high school EFL textbook has been brought to light, i.e., around 180. However, the author has not yet been able to produce the actual list of verbs amounting to this size. The coreness can be a very important criterion in the selection of words. Acquisition of core words will necessarily expand the learner’s freedom in the use of English, since the “core” words can be used as substitutes for similar words. But it is not the only criterion in selecting basic verbs for Japanese beginners of English. A different perspective, one from the learning of basic English structures, needs to be investigated and what we will obtain from this line of approach should be cross-checked with the results presented here.
Appendix

78 verbs commonly appear in all three sets of materials:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ask</th>
<th>feel</th>
<th>like</th>
<th>read</th>
<th>thank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be</td>
<td>find</td>
<td>listen</td>
<td>remember</td>
<td>think</td>
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<td>become</td>
<td>follow</td>
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<tr>
<td>fall</td>
<td>let</td>
<td>reach</td>
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</table>

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