VOCABULARY SIZE TARGETS AND SPACED RETRIEVAL IN UNIVERSITY EFL PROGRAMMES IN UZBEKISTAN

Rasulov Ibrohimjon Akramzoda
Teacher, Philology, Turan International University
overcome2792@gmail.com

Abstract. Vocabulary teaching in Uzbek universities is often unsystematic: students copy word lists with translations, memorise them before a test and forget most of them soon afterwards. Programmes rarely say how many words students should know at each stage, and vocabulary size is hardly ever measured. Drawing on research on lexical coverage, vocabulary size testing and distributed practice, this thesis proposes a four-part plan: measuring vocabulary size every year, setting frequency-based targets, teaching through spaced retrieval with free flashcard tools or paper word cards, and assessing vocabulary cumulatively.

Keywords: vocabulary size, lexical coverage, word frequency, spaced repetition, retrieval practice, vocabulary assessment.

Introduction.

Ask English majors at an Uzbek university how they learn new words, and many will describe the same routine: copy the words from a text into a notebook with an Uzbek or Russian translation, memorise the list before the test, then move on to the next unit. Ask them how many English words they know, and few will have any idea. Their teachers are often just as unsure how many words a second-year student ought to know.

Research offers fairly clear answers. Studies of lexical coverage estimate how many words are needed for different purposes, vocabulary size tests let teachers measure what students actually know, and memory research shows that spacing practice over time and actively recalling words leads to far better retention than cramming. Local publications on vocabulary teaching, however, tend to describe individual techniques such as games and visual aids rather than these broader questions.

Aim and methods.

The aim of this thesis is to turn these findings into a practical plan for four-year English programmes. Research on coverage, word frequency, vocabulary measurement and distributed practice was reviewed and related to the structure and typical practices of Uzbek university programmes. The resulting plan is presented for adoption and evaluation.

Main part.

Words are usually counted in word families: a headword with its inflected and derived forms (use, used, useful, useless). Nation (2006) calculated that reading authentic texts with about 98% coverage of running words requires roughly 8,000–9,000 word families, and listening about 6,000–7,000. Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) proposed an optimal threshold of about 8,000 families and a minimal one of 4,000–5,000 families (95% coverage) for reading with some support. High-frequency words, the first 2,000–3,000 families, cover most everyday language and deserve direct teaching; beyond them, Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List adds 570 families that are frequent across academic disciplines.

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The plan has four parts. First, students take the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) on entry and at the end of each year; the results show each student's approximate vocabulary size and the frequency band where their knowledge starts to weaken. Second, the programme sets targets: the first 3,000 families in Year 1, the Academic Word List and 4,000–5,000 families in Year 2, 6,000–7,000 families including specialised vocabulary in Year 3, and 8,000 or more by the end of Year 4. These figures are approximate and should be adjusted to students' levels on entry.

Third, words are learned through spaced retrieval. Each week students choose 30–50 words from course texts that fall within their current target band, rather than every unknown word, and enter them into a free spaced-repetition flashcard app, with the English word on one side and a translation or definition plus an example sentence on the other. In a large review, Cepeda, Pashler, Vul, Wixted and Rohrer (2006) showed that spacing practice over time produces much better long-term retention than massed study. The app schedules reviews at growing intervals, and students practise in both directions, from word to meaning and from meaning to word. Students without smartphones can use paper cards in boxes (the Leitner system). Because flashcards build form–meaning links but not use, students also write sentences or a short paragraph with their words each week. Fourth, assessment becomes cumulative: a weekly ten-minute quiz of 20 items mixes 10 words from the current week with 10 from earlier weeks, so that continued review pays off.

Conclusion.

The plan answers three questions that vocabulary teaching in Uzbek universities rarely asks: how many words students need, how many they already know, and how they can keep new words in memory. It needs no special funding, only changes in course organisation and assessment agreed within a department. Size tests measure receptive knowledge only, so they should be combined with speaking and writing tasks, and a longitudinal comparison of cohorts with and without the plan would show its effect.

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