

ELT IN CHINA 2001

— Papers Presented
at the 3rd International
Symposium on ELT in China

中国英语教学 [三]

胡文仲 主编
Edited by Hu Wenzhong

2001 年北京中国
英语教学国际研讨会
论文集

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Preface

On May 19 – 21, 2001 the 3rd International Symposium on ELT in China was held in Beijing. It was attended by close to a thousand academics and college teachers of English from as many as 28 provinces and municipalities, as well as Hong Kong SAR. In addition there were international participants from Australia, Britain, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and the United States. If the criteria for the acceptance of papers had been less stringent, the number of participants would probably have doubled. However, it was not the attendance that drew attention from many quarters. The symposium became particularly significant because there was a lapse of almost nine years between the last symposium and this one. And during this time China's ELT made much headway and witnessed a number of major changes, which were duly reflected in the papers of this huge gathering of ELT professionals.

From the very beginning we felt it was beyond any one person's capacity to evaluate all the papers and select from them the most representative ones to make a volume. Therefore, we invited a number of senior academics to form an advisory board, whose job it was to sit in the sessions, hear the presentations, and note down their comments. After the conference we pooled together our advisors' observations and picked out the papers they recommended. However, we found there were still far too many papers for a single volume. It then fell upon me to sift through about two hundred papers and choose the sixty odd papers you find between the covers of this volume. The criteria I used for selection were: 1) It touches upon one important aspect of China's ELT; 2) It presents some fresh point of view; and 3) It is data-based instead of impressionistic. Although I kept the criteria in mind while going through the papers, nonetheless I had great difficulty in determining which ones to keep and

which ones to leave out. In many cases it was simply because of the limitation of space that some papers were not included.

Compared with previous conferences, this symposium has several outstanding features. First, the papers we collected seem to indicate that the research into learners and learning strategies has gained momentum in recent years and begun to yield results. Many researchers have shifted their attention from how teachers teach to how students learn. The number of papers on this is very impressive and they make up a sizable portion of this volume. Secondly, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and corpus building have attracted many scholars' attention. It is true that CALL has been around in this country for some time now, but it was in the past few years that computers became so extensively used and the Internet gained such popularity. Many teachers have started designing their own multimedia courseware, some of which was displayed during the conference. In this volume you will find several papers on CALL, corpus building and the use of corpus for teaching purposes. Thirdly, the long-standing discussions and debates on the deeply-entrenched "intensive reading" (*jingdu*) have finally come to an end. (or shall we say, to a halt?) Most teachers seem to have lost interest in discussions of this nature, which itself is an indicator of how much progress we have made. Teachers would now rather spend time pursuing other more important topics in their research. Fourthly, some larger issues have come to the fore such as the developing of China's western region in terms of FL education, China's language policy in education, and the overall planning of English language teaching from primary school to secondary and tertiary levels. It is needless to say that these issues along with others will impact China's ELT in a most significant way.

In conclusion I would like to take this opportunity to thank members of the advisory board for their conscientious work and their expert advice. It was on the basis of their work that I was able to do further selection and editing. I would also like to

thank the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press for providing secretarial and logistic support during the conference. Without the tireless work of their staff the conference would not have been possible.

Hu Wenzhong
Professor
President, CELEA

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The Role of Frequency in ELT: New Corpus Evidence Brings a Re-Appraisal

Geoffrey LEECH
Lancaster University

Abstract: This paper reconsiders the value of frequency information in ELT, taking into account new evidence provided by corpora of native speakers' English (e.g. the British National Corpus) and evidence available through new dictionaries and grammars making use of such corpus information.

Some examples are given, showing how information about frequency in spoken and written English may cause re-appraisal of assumptions common in pedagogical grammar. It is argued that frequency as a principle for the selection and prioritising of language content has been neglected, and the availability of corpus-derived frequency information means that this neglect can now be rectified. However, frequency must be considered alongside other factors that have a bearing on sequencing in ELT materials, such as dispersion, coverage, learnability and communicative need. Also, it is important to bear in mind that findings based on corpora of native-speaker English must be complemented by those based on corpora of learner English, and of the native language of the learners.

1. Why is frequency important?

My subject in this paper is the role of frequency in helping to determine teaching priorities in English language teaching.

On the one hand, it seems to be a matter of common sense to teach words or forms which are frequent before those which are infrequent or rare. On the other hand, I feel that over the past generation the topic of frequency has been neglected in the teaching of languages, although it has started to reclaim attention in the last few years. There are also problems, both of theory and practice, relating to frequency.

First, what is the point of frequency? Why is it valuable, in particular, for the language teacher? I claim that it is valuable to build frequency considerations into one's curriculum, one's syllabus, one's teaching materials, and one's classroom teaching. If an item naturally occurs frequently in the language being taught, it is likely to be important also for the target behaviour of the learner: the learner will later often come across that item in reading and listening, and will often need to use it in communicating with others. And yet, frequency has been largely ignored, for three reasons.

The first reason is that until recently, knowledge of the frequency of items in a language has been very limited. To consider *why*, we need to ask: How do we find out about frequency? Information about frequencies of words, expressions, and grammatical structures can be gained from a large sample of texts, i.e. a **corpus**, of the language concerned, and of course the computer is indispensable to this work, which may involve sifting through tens or hundreds of millions of words. Such corpora of language data have been increasingly compiled over the past 30 years, but are only now becoming seriously applied to pedagogical purposes. But the breakthrough *is* being made, particularly in dictionaries. The major English-language dictionaries for advanced learners, such as the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*, and especially the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE), now take account of frequency information about items of vocabulary. For example, the senses of words are placed in order of

frequency, and the American English edition of *LAAD* (*Longman Advanced American Dictionary*, 2000) provides little “frequency boxes” alongside important words, giving their frequency rating in spoken and in written English.

return (verb)		return (noun)	
S	W	S	W
	1		1
2			
		3	

Figure 1

As an example, the boxes in Figure 1 inform us that *return* as a verb and *return* as a noun are both very frequent in written English (“1” means that they are in the top one thousand words), but are not quite so frequent in speech (“2” = in the top two thousand words, and “3” = in the top three thousand words). The same dictionary provides occasional bar charts, contrasting (for example) the different frequencies in American English and British English of the near-synonyms *rubbish*, *garbage* and *trash*. This kind of information is now making an impact in lexicography because publishers have invested a great deal of time, effort and money in building and using such large electronic text corpora of both spoken and written language. So useful knowledge about frequency is now at last becoming available. To give some recently available frequency data on general English, I will make reference in this paper to two books:

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E., *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman 1999. (henceforth *LGSWE*)

Leech, G., Rayson, P. and Wilson, A. (2001), *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English, based on the British National Corpus*. London: Longman 2001. (henceforth *WFWSE*)

(The former of these books gives information on grammatical

frequency, and the latter gives information on word or lexical frequency.)

The second reason for the neglect of frequency is that specialists in applied linguistics have not given much attention to it since the 1950s. Fifty years ago, frequency was quite a popular topic with leaders of opinion in ELT. People like Michael West, who compiled the *General Service List of English Words* (Longman, 1953), spent years, with teams of helpers, counting the frequency of words in many texts. That was before the age of computers: so, the work of obtaining frequency information by *hand* was extremely time-consuming and boring, and moreover, since there were no tape recorders in those days, it was restricted to written language. So this work was of limited application, and applied linguists have since then given more attention to more interesting topics, like how do people learn languages. The focus turned to the processes and techniques of learning and teaching, rather than course content. It is now instructive to look at the most influential textbooks on applied linguistics over the past 30 years, such as Rod Ellis's *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (1994), and to notice how little attention is given to frequency, and how little enthusiasm is shown for it. Ellis wrote:

Overall, there is little evidence to support the claim that input frequency affects L2 acquisition, but there is also little evidence to refute it. Perhaps the safest conclusion is that input frequency serves as one of the factors influencing development, often combining with other factors such as L1 transfer and communicative need. (ibid. 272-3)

This is one of the very few passages in that long and highly informative book where Ellis discusses frequency. But looking closely, we see that Ellis is discussing *input frequency* — the frequency with which learners are exposed to language items in the classroom — rather than frequency in the language in general