Making and Using Word Lists for Language Learning and Testing

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Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, (210 pages).
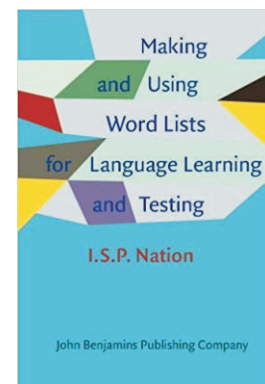
Nation, I. S. P.

Hardbound   ISBN 9789027212443;

Paperback ISBN 9789027212450,

e-Book ISBN 9789027266279

Reviewed by: Veena Kapur

 "Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing easier to perform" (Nation 1994, p. viii).

In his book Making and Using Word Lists for Language Learning and Testing Nation posits fundamental issues in vocabulary studies. The theoretical framework of the book focuses on past and current research on vocabulary, targeting those who know something about the teaching and learning of vocabulary and want to use word lists in an informed way for an academic purpose. Of the 16 chapters, 10 chapters are written by Nation and five chapters by Nation in collaboration with other scholars. Chapter 15 is by Dang and Webb.

The author begins with the basic premise that vocabulary lists are made to guide the design of a teaching and learning program that aims at receptive knowledge of vocabulary. However, the detailed analysis brings out in stark relief, the importance of vocabulary lists for productive purposes and those designed for the analysis of texts and vocabulary test construction. The book also highlights the factors that need to be considered when frequency-based word lists are created, including the purpose for which the word list is to be used, the

design of the corpus from which the list will be made, the unit of counting and what should and should not be counted as words. The author draws on research to show the current understanding of these factors, providing practical guidelines for making word lists for language teaching and learning.

The book is divided into five sections entitled:

- The uses of word lists(one chapter)
- Deciding what to count as words (eight chapters)
- Choosing and preparing the corpus (two chapters)
- Making the lists (four chapters)
- Using the lists (one chapter)
- In addition, the book has three appendices followed by references, and an author and subject indexes

The introduction sets the tone of the book, as it highlights the basic questions that the book attempts to answer. The author emphasizes the fact that the book is written with preconceived biases, stressing that these biases are explained in the book itself. The technical terms that are interspersed within the analysis are also explained here.

 The first section: 'The Uses of Word Lists', in the author's own words, "is a kind of justification for the rest of the book" (p.3). The author focusses on what word lists can be used for, and the important role they can play in learning a foreign language such as English. This chapter explores the important factors affecting the making of word lists, the unit of counting and the collection of texts (nature of corpora) used for making word lists. The occurrence of words in a text of 1000 words can be described by Zipf's law. The generalizations that follow from Zipf's law has major implications for course design. Nation brings to the fore that good vocabulary course design gives attention to the most useful words first, excluding words outside the high frequency lists.

Word lists based on range, frequency of

occurrence and dispersion are excellent guides for choosing words for systematic teaching and learning of vocabulary. The author further stresses that a well-balanced course has four equal strands, namely, meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development. Shortlisting the well-defined strands of a well-balanced language course provides directions to course designers. The chapter is comprehensive, with separate sections on specialized vocabulary. language testing, factors affecting the making of the word list and finally influential word lists. The influential word list section discusses a variety of word lists like Micheal West's A General Service List of English Words (GSL), Coxhead's Academic Word List and subject-specific word lists. These early word counts show a growing awareness of the effect of the nature and size of the corpus on words occurring in a count. This section also gives a historical perspective of word lists. A breakthrough in the construction of word lists came with the availability of computing resources; as in all other areas of knowledge, it put an end to manual counting. The next breakthrough was the availability of digital corpora and word lists based on them.

Section two: 'Deciding What to Count as Words', defines which forms in a corpus are counted as words. The author discusses Nagy and Anderson's 1984 study that analyses what counts as a word. They use the criteria of relatedness among words, in terms of the similarity of their current meanings rather than the dictionary route of looking at historical derivations. It is a highly detailed discussion that clarifies the linguistic basis of a word. Each of the chapters in this section looks at a different category of words. The categories covered are lemmas, word families, affixes, homoforms and polysemes, proper nouns, hyphenated words, transparent compounds, multiword units, acronyms and function words. These chapters attempt to describe the words in the

category, look at the justifications and difficulties involved in distinguishing such words and suggest resources for finding items for the category. They also cover the number of items and the frequency of items in the category. Each word-type discussion concludes with a short recommendation by the author on the factors that need to be included in the criteria for deciding what will be counted as a particular kind of word.

Section 3 entitled 'Choosing and Preparing the Corpus', begins with a discussion of corpus selection and design. Here, the authors clarify that the written and the spoken distinction is the primary one, both for vocabulary and grammatical features. However, the author points out that the comparison of discourse features suggests that TV sitcoms and movies may be a useful addition to a corpus of spontaneous dialogue, thus incorporating contemporary language usage. The chapter also discusses the distinction between various text types from a vocabulary perspective. The authors suggest that frequency lists can only reflect the corpora they are derived from. It is therefore suggested that mixing the types of texts in the corpus produces mixed results. The authors define four text types: interactive, reported exposition, imaginative and narrative, and academic writing. Each text type is roughly equidistant from its neighbour in terms of vocabulary similarity with conversation followed by narrative, then general writing followed by academic writing. The chapter also brings to the fore the major distinctions between the British and American versions of the English language, which can involve a preference for certain words but only involves a limited number of different words for the same concept. It however involves systematic spelling differences, the issue being to decide if the spelling differences

are to be treated as members of the same lemma or as different lemmas or families. Another issue that is of singular importance is the proportion of text types in a corpus. The academic word lists needed to be equally valuable to students, regardless of the subject they study.

Section 4 titled 'Making the Lists' stresses on the range of purposes for making the lists should be kept in mind while preparing word lists. It includes a discussion on the criteria of range, frequency and dispersion, and more subjective criteria. The author stresses that the purpose and audience for a word list needs to be clearly described, which in turn provides the basis for evaluating the list.

The chapter on critiquing a word list is replete with a wealth of details. It incorporates questions for critiquing a word list and specifications for the British National Corpus (BNC)/Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) lists. This is followed by listing the criteria used to make word families. The writing of the present book has resulted in several improvements to the BNC/COCA lists. It is pertinent to mention here that the word families were developed over several years and low frequency family members continue to be added to the existing families.

The last three chapters of this section focus on specialized word lists and on making an essential word list for beginners. They also focus on how word lists can be used for course design, language teaching and learning, designing graded reading programs, analysing vocabulary load of texts and developing vocabulary tests.

Besides the theoretical framework, the book also provides practical guidelines for making word lists for teaching and testing English language.

Reference

Nation, I. S. P. (Ed.) (1994). *New ways in teaching vocabulary*. New Ways Series: Innovative Classroom Techniques. TESOL