Appendix 3--Are You in a Hurry to Learn English?

Are you in a hurry to learn English? Most people who are studying a second language want to learn it as fast as they can. If you are one of these people, there are some things you should know.

Setting Goals in Learning Vocabulary

A student's first goal should be to learn the 2000 most frequent word families in English. The words in these families[1] make up about 80% of all individual words in English text or spoken text used by the general public. This is shown in the table at the right (Cobb, Tom http://www.lextutor.ca/research) . The text analysis here was done on the Brown corpus[2].

Once you understand about 90% of the words in a text, you are getting to the point where you can successfully guess the meaning of the words you don't know (though 95% is better). You can at least understand the basic meaning of the text, and your guesses about meaning of words that are new to you will often be right.

One way to set goals for vocabulary-learning is to look at this website: http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/bnc/samples.html. The chart here has text samples. They correspond to the Corpus level you would need to achieve to be able to read that text and understand the basic meaning without looking up words. Look at it, decide at what level you would like to read, and set your vocabulary-learning goals accordingly.

Table 1	
# Words from List of English Word Families in Brown Corpus, Arranged by Decreasing Frequency	Percent of Individual Words in Average Text
*10	23.7
**1,000	72.0
2,000	79.7
3,000	84.0
4,000	86.7
5,000	88.6
6,000	89.9
43,831	99.0
86,741	100%

* Ten words are so frequent that they account for 23.7% of all words in the corpus (a, an, the, etc).
**The 1000 most frequent words account for 72% of all words in the corpus text.

Vocabulary-Learning Facts

One question we might ask is, "Why read English as a way to learn new words? Why not just memorize words using lists?" The answer is that words have many dimensions of meaning that are impossible to learn through lists, and it is through the words around a

1 Word family: group of related words with same stem - for example the words develop, developed, developing, development, developer, underdeveloped all have the same stem (develop--), and all of them would be counted as belonging to one word family.

2 A corpus is a collection of texts, including speech text. A list of the kinds of text used for the Brown Corpus can be found at http://www.essex.ac.uk/linguistics/clmt/w3c/corpus_ling/content/corpora/list/private/brown/brown.html

word that you to decide which meaning the author intended. Furthermore, we need to see a word more than once in order to really get it into our memory. Research has shown that it takes around 10 meetings with a word in reading before it becomes part of the learner's vocabulary (can remember it when she/he sees it again.)

Thus reading material for English learners should ideally provide for at least 10 repetitions of as many of the new words as possible.

Bauman, J. 1996. Vocabulary Resources for Material Writers *The Materials Writers Newsletter*, Vol IV, No. 3   Most of the information, all the quotations, and statistics in this article are from this article.

Cobb, T.   Why and How to Use Frequency Lists to Learn Words.http://www.lextutor.ca/research/