

HIGH FREQUENCY VOCABULARY: REVOLUTIONIZING TESOL CURRICULA

by Constance L. Benson
www.constance.bendag.com/

presented to the NYS TESOL 2013 Annual Conference, Nov. 15-16, 2013
copyright 2013 by Constance L. Benson

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss an innovation in the design of reading materials that I believe holds great promise for improving TESOL literacy instruction. In a seminal but largely overlooked experimental study, Marks, Doctorow, and Wittrock (1974) found that replacing only 15 percent of the words in elementary school reading materials produced dramatic and statistically significant gains in reading comprehension. The investigators substituted high frequency words for low frequency words, and the group given the high frequency words demonstrated superior comprehension. They conclude, “The data suggest that, in the design of reading materials for use in elementary schools, sizable increases in reading comprehension can be produced by increased attention to the semantic variable of word frequency” (p. 259).

In fact, one set of early childhood reading materials launched in Britain in 1964 was designed on precisely this principle, *Key Words with Ladybird* (Murray 1964). Popularly known as the Peter and Jane readers, this series has long been the reading curriculum of choice in the UK, a country that enjoys a 99% literacy rate. While over 90 million copies of the Ladybird readers have been sold worldwide, it is less known in the United States and there is to my knowledge no comparable reading curriculum in use here designed on the word frequency principle. I have been using the Ladybird curriculum with ELLs for ten years and getting outstanding results, consistent with the above-mentioned experimental findings and the curriculum’s success in the UK.

Before discussing this curriculum and my experience with it in more detail, let me put this topic into a historical and theoretical context. The Ladybird curriculum is an example of what has been called a basal reader series. This type of curriculum has been a staple of early childhood literacy instruction for more than 300 years (Venezky 1987). Basals were first introduced in the United States in 1836 with the McGuffey Readers [<http://mcguffeyreaders.com>], which sold more than 120 million copies over the next 130 years, followed by the famous Dick and Jane series by William S. Gray and Zerna Sharp, published by the Scott Foresman Company. These early basal readers were associated with the “look and say” method, which was discredited by Rudolf Flesch in his 1955 book *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. Flesch advocated a more phonics-based program for beginning readers.

By the late 1980s, the pendulum had swung to the whole language paradigm and basals were attacked from the opposite direction—not because they failed to build skills, but because they weren’t “authentic.” Thompson (1988) discussed the value of using authentic materials and accepting the tentative nature of comprehension. At the same time, however, she acknowledged that this top-down, whole language approach must be combined with a bottom-up process of skill-building. Crossley et al (2007) present a quantitative linguistic analysis of simplified and authentic texts, identifying linguistic features of each that are relevant to assessing their relative strengths and limitations. Beginning in the 1990s and into the present, renewed interest in skill acquisition has caused a revival of basal reading programs.

Meanwhile, the basals themselves have undergone change since the 18th century in the narratives and the changing images of society and the child's role in it that they reflect, passing through religious, moral, materialistic, and multicultural phases (Venezky 1987). While the skill-building value of this form of instruction is time-tested, the state of research has of course also changed. Basal readers today are accordingly embedded in pedagogical frameworks informed by evolving research findings (Venezky 1987). For example, Rayner et al (2001) conclude that elementary school reading proficiency requires mastery of the alphabetic principle—the ability to associate written symbols with phonemes—and that direct instruction is effective in promoting such mastery.

The importance of lexical competence in reading comprehension has long been recognized in the TESOL literature, and research on language acquisition generally. Richards (1976) examined the linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects of word learning and their implications for teaching. These and other considerations inform the way basal readers are deployed and utilized in reading programs today.

The use of basals is especially relevant to the needs of young children with few literacy skills. As Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) note, vocabulary instruction can provide the skills base needed for self-instruction. To be effective, however, vocabulary instruction requires a contextualized approach centered on meaningful situations, not one that teaches individual words in isolation (Crow 1986). Basal readers designed around high frequency words embedded in narratives that are engaging for young children simultaneously satisfy both these criteria for effective literacy instruction.

KEY WORDS WITH LADYBIRD

Word frequencies for languages are determined empirically by sampling diverse texts and utterances and simply counting the occurrence of different words. It is helpful to think of word frequency in terms of concentric circles with the highest frequencies in the center, the next highest in the first ring, and so on. For the rings closest to the center, any large survey of texts or utterances will generate very nearly the same set of high frequency words. It is easy to verify this robustness using, for example, the hundred highest frequency English words listed by Ladybird. According to the publisher, these hundred “Key Words” account for about half the words that users of English routinely speak, read, and write. The procedure for testing this, given on the Ladybird website, is as follows:

Choose a paragraph from any book or newspaper, which was not written for children. Reading through the paragraph, underline all words from the Ladybird first 100 key words. After counting the key words in your paragraph, you should find that approximately 50% of the words are key words. This is the finding on which the Ladybird Key Words series is based and is structured to introduce these key words within repetitive stories. [Ladybird website:
<http://www.ladybird.co.uk/ladybirdworldwide/keywords.html>

The first three concentric circles of the Ladybird Key Words scheme are as follows:

- The first 12 Key Words make up 1/4 of those we speak, read and write.
- The first 100 Key Words make up 1/2 of those we speak, read and write.
- About 300 Key Words account for 3/4 of those we speak, read and write.

Word frequency lists corresponding to these categories and other information about the Ladybird system appear in an Appendix.

This reading curriculum was first published in 1964 using the available data on English word frequency. I am not aware of any independent research that has been done on *Key Words With Ladybird* specifically. As I indicated previously, however, Marks, Doctorow, and Wittrock (1974) showed experimentally that replacing low frequency words in elementary school reading materials with high frequency words dramatically improved comprehension. This research suggests that the Ladybird curriculum embodies a design principle—creation of instructional texts around high frequency words—that may have general applicability for childhood literacy instruction, including TESOL.

I have ten years of experience using this curriculum with elementary school English Language Learners in New York City. I explain to my students the principle of word frequency and the design of the program as early as possible. This knowledge transforms their perception of the vocabulary acquisition process from daunting toil into a manageable and exciting challenge. The students have experiences of mastery beginning with the first book of the series, and have cumulative experiences of accomplishment as they master more and more key words.

As shown in the Appendix, there are a total of 12 reading levels in the *Key Words with Ladybird* curriculum, each level having three books: a, b and c. Level 1 introduces the beginning reader to the first 12 Key Words. By the end of level 4, students have mastered the 100 most important Key Words. Levels 5 through 8 bring the total to 380 Key Words, more than 3/4 of the words needed for routine reading. Upon completion of the curriculum (Level 12), students have a working grasp of the 750 highest frequency words in the English language.

The books are written using a controlled vocabulary so that the new words are introduced gradually, have a high degree of repetition and are carried over to the following books in the series. The first books are written using very few words, so the learner can make a rapid and confident start. These few select words are matched with an illustration on each facing page.

Each of the 12 levels in the reading curriculum consists of three parallel books (a, b, and c; see Appendix.) Each of the three books at any given level use the same high frequency word list, but differ in context and illustrations. For example, Book 1a introduces and repeats all the level 1 words. In Book 1b, students encounter the same words in new contexts and with new illustrations. Finally, Book 1c provides the link to writing and phonics.

The learner then proceeds to the second level, and reads Book 2a. This book contains the same 16 words already learned, but also has 27 new words. These 16 plus 27 words are also to be found in Books 2b and 2c.

The three-book sequence at every level provides a high degree of repetition, while simultaneously maintaining the child's interest by embedding the same words in ever new narratives. Children who learn to read quickly, or those who are using additional books from another reading scheme, can alternatively read straight through the 'a' set (Books 1a-12a) and skip the 'b' and 'c' books, as there is a complete carry-over of new words from stage to stage.

In summary, *Key Words With Ladybird* contains three core design features: (1) the highest frequency words appear earliest in the sequence, (2) new words are gradually introduced, and (3) key words are repeated frequently but encountered in ever new and interesting narrative contexts with different illustrations. The first edition of the curriculum in 1964 contained these design features, as have all subsequent editions into the present. The curriculum was created by William Murray, headmaster of a

“school for the educationally subnormal” in Cheltenham, England. He teamed up with Professor Joe McNally, an educational psychologist at Manchester University.

Although originally created for a special needs population, *Key Words With Ladybird* came to be the curriculum of choice for general education students in the United Kingdom and much of the British Commonwealth, which includes millions of second language learners. Tamarind, a popular Indian blogger on early education, recommends Ladybird, noting that his own children display more rapid progress using it than another widely used curriculum that is not designed on the word frequency principle. (See: <http://tamarindphonics.blogspot.com/>) The Wee Web, another popular early childhood website, makes the case for Ladybird. [See www.theweeweb.co.uk/public/news_ladybird.php?id=156] It cited a recent study by Jonathan Solity and Janet Vousden of Warwick University Institute of Education, corroborating the efficacy of reading curricula designed around high frequency words (see “Only 100 Words Needed to Read,” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/4514106.stm).

APPLICATION IN ESL

For more than ten years, I have used *Key Words With Ladybird* with ELLs, mostly new arrivals. It enables them to read and write without first having to acquire a substantial English vocabulary. In fact, this reading scheme serves to combine the teaching of reading with the initial teaching of a second language. A new arrival might only know 20 words, yet begin to read Level 1 of *Key Words with Ladybird*. It is an excellent vehicle not only for teaching reading, but for systematically and rapidly building the vocabulary of ELL beginners.

With their basic story lines, the Ladybird readers provide a natural starting point for speaking and listening exercises. The curriculum lends itself to text-to-self and text-to-world connections that make for simple conversations. The themes in the stories cover common everyday activities, which are normally the focus of ESL instruction as well. For example, the first 5 books in the A series have the titles, “Play with Us;” “We Have Fun;” “Things We Like;” “Things We Do;” “Where We Go...” These themes provide a springboard for great beginning ESL lessons.

In general, the Ladybird curriculum, when embedded in an appropriate and research-based pedagogical framework, brings together Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Academic reading and writing do not have to wait until the BICS are established. Further, the Ladybird series introduces new words embedded in narrative—much more fun and effective than in vocabulary lists where the items appear out of context. This also conforms to research findings, namely that ELLs learn new words best when hearing and seeing them repeated in a variety of contexts. At the same time, when new words are introduced in the stories they are also listed at the bottom of each page where they first appear, and in a new word index at the back of each reader, so the student can refer to them for speaking and writing exercises (Nagy, Herman and Anderson 1985).

In addition to introducing the most common words first, the Ladybird series begins with the most basic syntactical structures. The first conjunction introduced is “and,” and complex verb and sentence structures are only gradually introduced across several levels. Beginning ELLs, even those who can only speak short phrases, can therefore tackle these readers and experience mastery from the outset. They acquire basic lexical and syntactic competence simultaneously as they progress through a

sequence that introduces more difficult elements gradually and repeats them systematically and in varying contexts.

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Using this curriculum with ELLs over the past ten years, I have seen consistently good and sometimes outstanding outcomes. I once had a group of 1st grade ELLs who quickly became among the strongest readers in their regular classes. Three of them passed the NYSESLAT at the end of the year. One new arrival went from 0 on the LAB-R test to Advanced on the NYSESLAT by the end of the same year. Another new arrival from

Africa came into Kindergarten with no knowledge of English. I incorporated her into my Ladybird reading groups and by the end of her first year, she was near the top of her class. She remained at the top and eventually graduated as valedictorian of her fifth grade class.

Last year, nearly all of my ELLs moved up at least one level over the course of the year, and a couple moved up two levels, that is, from Beginner to Advanced. Students who otherwise cannot seem to catch on to reading English typically do so with these readers, and this includes students in Special Education. Of my special education ELLs, 50% moved up a level. One 6th grade special education ELL student who was reading on a second grade level, began to experience serious progress with the Ladybird books, surprising and pleasing his regular teacher. I invite you to view an eight minute teaching video demonstrating my work with ELLs using Ladybird, which appears on my website at: www.constance.bendag.com

I found the transitions from book to book to be smoother than anything else I have used with English Language Learners. I attribute this to the focus on high frequency words, the gradual manner in which new words are introduced, and the high repetition of each word in varying contexts and with ever new and colorful illustrations.

COMPARISON WITH LEVELED TRADE BOOKS

By contrast with these satisfying experiences and excellent outcomes, many of my ELLs are frustrated with the leveled trade books that dominate mainstream classrooms. They will open their “A” level books only to encounter words that they have most likely never heard and are unlikely to see or hear again with any frequency, words like “clown” and “lizard,” which do not appear even among the 5,000 most common English words.

As they turn the pages of just a few of these books, they will often be confronted with 50 or 60 new words, including the seven days of the week, the colors of the rainbow, the body parts of an animal, and a list of animals at the zoo. The words, which are typically repeated only once or twice, are mostly low frequency words. For example, “tiger” is number 3,164 on Davies’ and Gardner’s (2010) frequency list. “Giraffe,” “zebra,” and “ostrich” are not listed at all among the 5,000 most common English words. The students have little opportunity to learn them since the words often appear only once.

By contrast, the names of zoo animals hardly appear at all in the Ladybird readers. The word “monkey” does not appear until Level 11, and domesticated farm animals, such as “sheep” and “goat,” only appear on Level 12. Nor do the days of the week appear in Ladybird. Only on Level 6, half way through the series, does the root word “day,” which is number 92 on Davies’ and Gardners’ list, make its first appearance. While words like Monday and Tuesday may seem like high frequency words to adults, none of the seven days of the week appear in Davies’ and Gardners’ top 5,000 word list.

CRITICISMS OF KEY WORDS WITH LADYBIRD

The Ladybird Reading Scheme has been criticized as using the discredited “look and say” method of reading instruction. Over successive editions, however, it has evolved into a curriculum that supports emergent reading with phonics, as the series c books demonstrate. Another criticism is that the books are not multicultural and reflect the culture of 1960s England where the stories were first written. However, the illustrations were revised in the 1970s to show female characters wearing jeans, playing more active roles, and to include people of color.

To be sure, Jane still helps Mummy while Peter helps Daddy; the gender roles need to be further equalized. Ethnic and cultural diversity need to be expanded and incorporated in characterization and plot. These deficiencies will most likely be addressed, at least to some extent, in the next edition of the books. Even in its current form, however, the series is popular in India and other Asian countries, which are still sensitive to the painful history of British imperialism. Indian blogger Tamarind, who is well aware of the series’ cultural limitations, nevertheless strongly endorses it, arguing that Ladybird’s use of high frequency words and other powerful design features far outweigh these drawbacks.

A reading specialist who is originally from Guyana explained to me that she prefers the Ladybird reading scheme because it makes learning to read fun and easy, and moves the student forward rapidly. Achieving reading success in school is itself highly empowering for girls and for people of color. My experience using Ladybird with African and Hispanic immigrant children in Harlem is consistent with these perspectives from people of color. The children love the books and the learning experience and their parents are delighted with the rapid academic progress and integration into mainstream classrooms that result from my program.

One other criticism of basal readers generally is that such materials are not “authentic” texts. This criticism does not apply, however, to early childhood education, for which the Ladybird series was designed. Authentic texts greatly exceed the cognitive capabilities of most elementary school children. Accordingly, the dominant alternatives to Ladybird, such as the abovementioned trade books, are no more authentic. The presence of more low frequency vocabulary does not make them more authentic, but it does make them less effective for early childhood literacy instruction, I would argue.

Even Thompson (1988), who advocates an earlier phasing in of authentic materials, acknowledges that this top-down, whole language approach must be combined with a bottom-up process of skill-building. But she does not address the question of how lexical and other reading skills can best be taught—given the ineffectiveness of studying isolated words out of context—if the design of instructional materials does not incorporate controlled vocabulary. While I acknowledge the value of authentic materials for later grades, students who have not mastered the core English vocabulary are poorly equipped to benefit from reading authentic texts. I therefore disagree with Thompson that authentic texts should be

phased in earlier. I would argue that doing so would have the opposite effect from what she intends, slowing down the acquisition of basic lexical competence that is the precondition for success with authentic texts.

Finally, I would argue that the need for a well-designed, high-frequency vocabulary curriculum such as *Key Words With Ladybird* is even more acute for ELLs and other struggling readers than for native speakers of average or above average lexical competence. At-risk students such as beginning and intermediate ELLs are the ones most likely to fall behind and become trapped in a painful downward spiral of low achievement and low self-esteem. The high-frequency pedagogical paradigm I have presented in this paper provides, by contrast, an empowering and rapid path to mainstream academic success. Given the availability of such a path, there is no good reason today for any ELL to languish and fall by the wayside.

REFERENCES

- Crossley, Scott A., Max M. Louwrese, Philip M. McCarthy and Danielle S. McNamara (2007). A Linguistic Analysis of Simplified and Authentic Texts. *The Modern Language Journal* 91 1 (Spring), 15-30
- Crow, John T. (1986). Receptive Vocabulary Acquisition for Reading Comprehension, *The Modern Language Journal* 70, 3 (Autumn), 242-250
- Davies, Mark and Dee Gardner (2010). *Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary American English*. New York: Routledge.
- Juel, Connie and Cecilia Minden-Cupp (2000). Learning to Read Words: Linguistic Units and Instructional Strategies, *Reading Research Quarterly* 35, 4 (Oct. - Dec.), 458-492
- Marks, Carolyn B., Marleen J. Doctorow and M. C. Wittrock (1974). Word Frequency and Reading Comprehension, *The Journal of Educational Research* 67, 6 (Feb.) 259-262.
- Murray, William (1964). *Key Words With Ladybird*. London: Ladybird Books
- Nagy, William E., Patricia A. Herman and Richard C. Anderson (1985). Learning Words From Context, *Reading Research Quarterly* 20, 2 (Winter), 233-253
- Rayner, Keith, Barbara R. Foorman, Charles A. Perfetti, David Pesetsky and Mark S. Seidenberg (2001). How Psychological Science Informs the Teaching of Reading. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 2, 2 (Nov.), 31-74
- Richards, Jack C. (1976). The Role of Vocabulary Teaching, *TESOL Quarterly* 10, 1 (March), 77-89
- Thompson, Irene (1988). Languages Reading Research and Its Curricular Implications, *The Slavic and East European Journal* 32 4 (Winter), 617-642
- Venezky, Richard L. (1987). A History of the American Reading Textbook. *The Elementary School Journal* 87, 3, Special Issue: The Basal Reader in American Reading Instruction (Jan.), 246-265



Key Words

with Peter and Jane

Ladybird Key Words with Peter and Jane is an incredibly successful way to teach children to read and develop learning at a steady pace.

The specially designed and illustrated books can be used with individual children, groups or with a class and have been trusted by parents and teachers around the world for 45 years, selling over 90 million copies!

How does it work?

12 words

$$= \frac{1}{4}$$

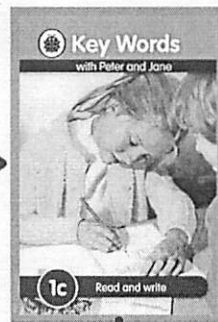
of all the words we read and write every day!

100 words

$$= \frac{1}{2}$$

of all the words we read and write every day!

If children are taught these key words first, it is easier for them to learn to read.



Key Words – as easy as a,b,c!

Key Words with Peter and Jane has 12 levels, each with 3 books: a, b and c.

Series a

Gradually introduces and repeats new words.

Series b

Provides further practise of these same words, but in a different context and with different illustrations.

Series c

Invites children to try writing the words and introduces reading using phonics, enabling children to read increasingly difficult words.



For extra practise use Key Words with Peter and Jane Flash Cards.

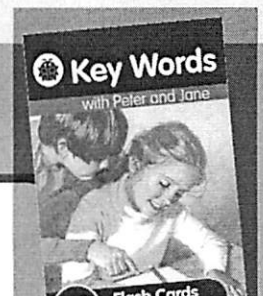
50 easy-to-use cards featuring the first 100 key words!

to

it

and

is





Key Words

with Peter and Jane

Learn these 100 key words and you are on your way to reading success!

Start with these words

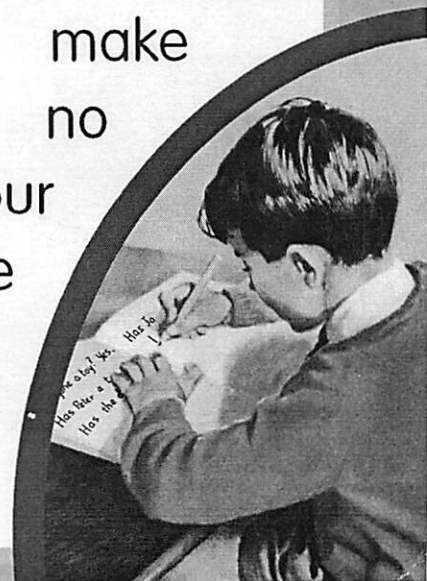
a and he I in is it of that the to was

Give these a try

all are as at be but for had have him
his not on one said so they we with you

You are almost there!

about an back been before big
by call came can come could did do
down first from get go has her here if
into just like little look made make
me more much must my new no
now off old only or other our
out over right see she some
their them then there this two
up want well went were what
when where which who will your



The first 250 Key Words

a

about
after
again
all
always
an
and
another
any
apple
are
as
ask
at
away



c

call
came
can
car
cat
children
come
could
cup



d

day
did
dinner
do
dog
doll
don't
door
down



e

east
egg
end
every

f

farm
fast
father
fell
find
fish
five
fly
for
four
from
fun



g

gave
get
girl
give
go
going
good
got
green

h

had
hand
has
have
he
head
help
here
hill
him
his
home
horse
house
how



i

if
in
into
is
it

j

jam
jump
just

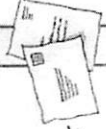


k

keep
know

l

last
left
let
letter
like
little
look
long



m

made
make
may
me
men
milk
money
more
mother
Mr
Mrs
much
must
my

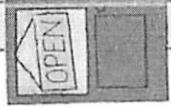


n

name
never
new
next
night
no
not
nothing
now

o

of
off
old
once
one
only
open
or
other
our
out
over
own



p

picture
pig
place
play
put

r

rabbit
ran
read
red
right
road
room
round
run



s

said
same
sat
saw
say
school
sea
see
she
shop
should
sing
sister
sit
so
soon
stop
street
sun

t

table
take
tea
tell
than
that
the
their
them
then
there
these
they
this
three
time
to
today
too
top
toy
tree
two



u

under
up
us

v

very

w

walk
want
was
water
we
well
went
were
what
when
where
which
white
who
why
will
wish
with
woman
work
would



y

year
yes
you
your