

## Chapter 4: Syllabus Content

### Too much to learn

The most difficult thing about learning a language is that there is simply so much to learn. An educated speaker of English is likely to have a vocabulary of some 50,000 words. Not only that, but a native speakers act on a great deal of information about every one of these words.

We have already looked at the word **way**. What about another common word –**thing**? Obviously we know what this word means. We know, too, how it behaves grammatically. It has a plural form, **things**. More than that, we know that **thing** has a complex grammar. It is commonly found in sentences like:

- 1 The most difficult *thing* about learning a language is that there is simply so much to learn.
- 2 The best *thing* is probably to read as much as we possibly can in the target language.

We probably carry in our minds ‘chunks’ of language incorporating the word thing in these grammatical frames:

- The (adjective) *thing* is that...
- The (adjective) *thing* is to...
- It’s one *thing* to X, and quite another to Y.

We also carry around ‘chunks’ with **thing** like ‘one thing after another’ and ‘the shape of things to come’. We know that the word **thing** can be used in ways which carry attitudinal overtones.

- 3 How do you drive this *thing*?

Does not mean the same thing as:

- 4 How do you drive this vehicle?

The first of these signals quite clearly that there is something about the vehicle which I find annoying. Similarly the sentence:

- 5 So that’s George. I’ve heard about him.

is not an accurate paraphrase of

- 6 So that’s George. I’ve heard things about him

To a native speaker, the second of these implies that what I know about George is not to his credit.

We also know that the word thing can be used in fixed phrases in specific contexts:

- 7 Eating with your fingers is not quite *the done thing*.

The important thing here is that thing cannot be replaced by another word or phrase, even one which seems to make perfectly good sense as:

- 8 \*Eating with your fingers is not quite the done *way*.

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Similarly, the phrase 'All *things* being equal' comes to the tongue much more readily than 'All opportunities being equal'. So there are a lot of things to know about **thing**. This brief summary represents just a few of them. All of this must be involved in learning the language.

### Collocational patterns in language

Hanks (1987) elaborates the point that knowledge of a language includes a vast amount of collocational knowledge - a knowledge of which words combine with which other words or categories of word:

The words of English simply do not, typically, combine and recombine freely and randomly. Not only can typical grammatical structures and form classes be observed, but also typical collocates. The distinction between the possible and the typical is of the greatest importance. It is possible given a reasonably lively imagination, to use a particular word in any number of different ways. But when we ask how the word is typically used, rather than how it might possibly be used, we can generally discover a relatively small number of distinct patterns. (Hanks 1987)

In this way Hanks argues for the notion of 'selection preference' underlying our language behaviour. He exemplifies this by looking at the words **wide** and **broad**, suggesting that it is unhelpful to look for a subtle semantic distinction between the two.

The important thing to say about BROAD is that it means wide and it co-occurs with words of a certain type. (Hanks 1987)

Part of the native speaker's language knowledge is an awareness of these probable co-occurrences - the knowledge, for example, that **broad** is used not only with physical entities such as roads and rivers, but also with more abstract notions:

This takeover bid has broader implications.

and also in very specific cases:

Broad hints were aired that the newspaper should be closed down.  
She spoke in a broad Wiltshire accent.

in which **wide** is not an acceptable substitute. This is not because **broad** is preferred to **wide** with an abstract noun.

The library had a wide variety of books.  
?The library had a broad variety of books.

It is simply because some nouns collocate with **wide** and some with **broad** - that is, some have a selection preference for **wide** and some for **broad**.

Collocations of this kind are features of naturalness in language, and in looking at syllabus content we need to take deliberate account of such features. Unfortunately in doing so we run very seriously into the problem of proliferation: the fact that language knowledge is so vast and detailed. One way of limiting this proliferation is by taking note of Hanks' distinction between the typical and the possible. We should take care that the language to which the

learner is exposed is typical of the language as a whole. This can only be done by research. We need to look seriously at the language and make principled decisions about what patterns and uses are to be regarded as typical and to be highlighted for the learner.

The uses of common words like **thing** and **way** are so frequent that the learner is unlikely to get very far without the need to encode these meanings. Unfortunately there are no rules by which learners can create or retrieve these forms for themselves. It is important, therefore, that they are included in the language to which learners are exposed and that their attention is drawn to them.

Of course, this wealth of knowledge which is part of 'knowing a language' is largely unconscious. It is revealed in use, and although it is called up very readily in response to some need to communicate, it is only with great difficulty that we can summon up such knowledge by an effort of will. Ask someone who is linguistically unsophisticated what they know about the word **point**, for example, and then look the word up in a good dictionary. The *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* devotes almost two whole pages to the word **point**. It identifies 30 categories of meaning for the headword **point** together with such fixed phrases as 'I take your point', 'beside the point', 'the finer points' and 'in point of fact'. It then goes on to treat derived forms like **pointer**, **pointed** and **pointless** together with phrases like **point out**, **point up**, **point of view** and **point of reference**. All of this is information that the competent user of the language acts on on appropriate occasions, but it is unlikely that even the most sophisticated native speaker would be able to recall more than a fraction of it at will.

Indeed even sophisticated language users like lexicographers have to undertake a long and complicated research programme to make explicit what all of us already know about **point** - in the sense that all the meanings and phrases are likely to be instantly understood by an adult native speaker and most of them will be readily produced. It is not an easy task to make comprehensive explicit statements about all the other words we use so easily and automatically. But the appropriate forms are readily called to mind when there is an occasion for use. It is the occasion for use that activates our language knowledge.

### **Structural syllabuses and synthetic approaches**

Language learners face three tasks. They must acquire an enormous body of knowledge, they must store it in such a way that they can act on it automatically, and they must use the language with which they are familiar as a basis for exploring the further possibilities which exist in the language. In order to help learners achieve this, the syllabus designer must first specify syllabus content as economically as possible. Almost any language course specifies what the designers believe that learners at a certain stage of language development need to learn and know, even though they cannot guarantee when and if learners will acquire what is presented to them. Good coursebooks which have been carefully worked out provide an inventory of words, patterns and meanings that learners are to acquire as a result of their course. Normally this is a list of words,

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structures and language functions in both their written and spoken form with both orthography and phonology as part of the learning task. But the major problem is in deciding what items to include. This is particularly important in designing material for beginners or near beginners.

Language teaching in its broadest sense - syllabus specification, syllabus design, methodology, classroom interaction - always involves choices between control and exposure, form and outcome, fluency and accuracy. Wilkins (1976), reviewing the work of the Council of Europe on Notional Syllabuses, highlights a choice between what he calls synthetic and analytic-approaches to language teaching. A synthetic teaching strategy:

is one in which the different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up. (Wilkins 1976)

This strategy breaks language down into small units and arranges these in a particular order. The learner's task is to re-synthesise the language that has been broken down into a large number of pieces with the aim of making his learning easier. It is only in the final stages of language learning that the global language is re-established in all its diversity. (ibid.)

Wilkins quotes Corder (1973) who suggests that such approaches, which specify the syllabus in terms of language patterns, have 'low surrender value'. This is a term taken from the world of insurance. A life insurance policy which has low surrender value is one which you must pay into for a very long time before it acquires a reasonable value. If you cash it in early, either by choice or by necessity, you do not get much of a return on the money you have invested. Corder argued that grammatically based language courses have the same problem. If you give up such a course after say one hundred hours, you will have learned very little that is likely to be of real use to you. Your grammar will be very limited and may be missing major categories like the passive, and many of the models. If you have been well taught you may have good control over the limited grammar you have learned, but it will almost certainly be very limited and, as we have already seen, there is no guarantee that this control will be reflected in your use of the language.

A second problem with synthetic approaches is that they assume grammatical items can be ordered in a way which is logical, not only from the course writer's point of view, but also from the learner's. It may well be that there are criteria for ordering which are reasonable in the course writer's terms, but that is not the same as saying that the ordering is logical. It will depend very much on what model of grammar the course writer is working from. But even writers working from the same model may quite reasonably reach different conclusions about ordering. What about ways of referring to the future, for example? Should **going to** come before or after the present continuous as future? What about the modal **will**? Different course writers and teachers make different decisions on this, and there is no objective way of saying that one way is right and another wrong.

There is therefore no compelling logic to the ordering of items in a syllabus.

Of course learners must and will make generalisations about the target system. But in the absence of any overriding logic, how can they make generalisations about a whole system on the basis of evidence from an artificially constrained system which is built up piece by piece? If we can point to no logic in the ordering of the syllabus, then we must either deny the learners' capacity to generate from the language they have been exposed to or we must agree with Prabhu (1987) that it is 'unlikely that any planned progression in a grammatical syllabus could accurately reflect or regulate the development of the internal system being aimed at'.

Another problem with synthetic approaches is that syllabus specification and ordering place far too much emphasis on production of language and relatively little on comprehension. In an extreme form this means that the only language to which learners will be exposed is language they themselves will be expected to produce. There will be a successive series of models of the language as more and more parts are added, until finally learners are able to make generalisations from what Wilkins calls 'the global language'.

Yet another problem with synthetic approaches comes, paradoxically, from the fact that they are so well established. It is not surprising that one manifestation of a particular approach draws heavily on others. This means that the virtues of such approaches are solidly reinforced. Imaginative exercises designed for one coursebook are developed and improved by others. As an approach becomes established, teacher training begins to work on and develop methodological procedures for teaching particular items. A metalanguage is developed which enables practitioners to exchange and develop ideas. In this way an established approach becomes even more strongly established.

Unfortunately, this strength can also be a source of weakness. As manifestations of an approach draw on one another without questioning basic assumptions, so the weaknesses of one manifestation reappear in another, until they become an essential part of the approach, no longer subject to questioning. Almost all synthetic approaches to ELT seem to cover with some thoroughness those grammatical systems which are relatively closed. On the other hand, more open-ended and therefore more problematic systems are largely ignored. Clause structure and the verb group figure massively, but apart from the relative clause comparatively little account is taken of, for example, the way in which the complex noun phrase is built up. Sentences like:

Detectives hunting for the man believed to be responsible for the disappearance of sixteen year old schoolgirl Angela James have been forced to abandon their search.

simply do not feature in most pedagogic grammars, even though research suggests that roughly one noun phrase in eight has this kind of multiple modification. A proportion of one in eight certainly justifies thorough pedagogic treatment. Other complex phrases such as the adverbial:

On my way home from a recent holiday in France, I stayed overnight in a small hotel just south of Calais.

tend to be similarly ignored.

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Part of this weakness is the almost universal tendency to borrow systems and categories from other courses, irrespective of whether these systems and categories have any pedagogic usefulness, whether they are likely to cause serious learning difficulties, and in some cases irrespective of whether they have any grammatical validity. I have shown that some items such as the passive and the second conditional have been elevated to an undeserved level of importance, and that artificial and uneconomical categories such as reported speech have been created in the name of pedagogy. It is a strange teaching strategy indeed which allocates a large proportion of time to relatively straightforward grammatical systems and very little time to the most problematic systems. It is stranger still if, in the interests of grading, we deny learners exposure to the language which might enable them to draw conclusions for themselves about such problematic systems.

#### **Analytic strategies and syllabus content**

Wilkins contrasts synthetic approaches to language teaching with what he calls 'analytic strategies'. These analytic strategies form the basis of the methodology which realises the notional-functional syllabus. This methodology does not present carefully selected samples of language in an attempt to build up a gradual picture of the grammar of the language. Instead, it identifies phrases which have high utility and presents these as whole phrases. Analytic strategies, then, do not control the language presented to the learner by means of careful grading:

Components of the language are not seen as building blocks which have to be progressively accumulated. Much greater variety of linguistic structure is permitted from the start and the learner's task is to approximate his own linguistic behaviour more and more closely to the global language. Significant linguistic forms can be isolated from the structurally heterogeneous context in which they occur, so that learning can be focused on important aspects of the language structure. It is this process which is referred to as analytic. (Wilkins 1976)

Wilkins and his Council of Europe colleagues recommended that instead of looking at words, patterns and meanings we should begin by identifying meanings. In answer to the question 'What forms of the language does the learner need to be familiar with?' they no longer started by attempting to identify basic patterns of English. Instead they interposed a second rather different question 'What does the learner need to mean in English?' The idea was that we should first identify the basic meanings or 'notions' which learners would need to realise. We should also identify what it was that learners wanted to do with the language, what 'functions' they would need to carry out. Having established this inventory of notions and functions we could then ask the question 'How are these meanings realised in English?' The outcome of this would be not a structural, but a notional syllabus.

In drawing up a Notional Syllabus instead of asking how speakers of the language express themselves or when and where they use the language we ask what it is they communicate through the language. We are then able to organise language teach-

ing in terms of the content rather than the form of the language . . . A general language course will concern itself with those concepts and functions that are likely to be of the widest value. (Wilkins 1976)

In theory this would be a highly efficient way of designing a syllabus and of ensuring that learners acquired the language that would be of most need to them. It would avoid the charge of low surrender value. A great many applied linguists and course designers worked hard to produce complex inventories of semantico-grammatical notions, spatio-temporal notions, socio-cultural notions and so on and so on. This was certainly a useful exercise. It brought home very starkly the fact that learning a language means learning to encode meanings and to do things with the language rather than simply learning to produce the forms of the language. The Council of Europe Threshold and Waystage syllabuses, which are based to a large extent on a specification of notions and functions have informed syllabus design ever since. But in the final event, the problem of specifying notions and functions created as many problems as it solved.

We simply had no way of specifying with any objectivity the semantic content of a syllabus, let alone of going on to specify how that content might best be realised. But the pipe dream of the notional syllabus stayed with us. If only we could specify the basic meanings of English, the meanings which even the most elementary users of the language would need to encode, how efficient it would be. But Wilkins himself acknowledged the enormous complexity of this task:

I do not wish to suggest that it is in principle impossible to plan the conceptual content of language syllabuses in this way. However, it does seem to me clear that it would in practice prove to be an extremely complex task; the more so if we are simultaneously trying to introduce language functions which have been contextualised by suitable notions. (Wilkins 1976)

The arguments were compelling and convincing. The achievement, however, was as good as impossible.

It also transpired that exemplars of the notional-functional syllabus when it is used to teach English for general purposes are subject to one of the criticisms laid against synthetic approaches. They are concerned with specifying and ordering what it is that the learner will be expected to produce, rather than with helping the learner to build up a picture of the language. Wilkins himself is well aware of the problems of going beyond this producer-based specification:

If, however, we focus first on the receiver and then on the process of interaction we shall see that our model implies more radical changes in the teaching of languages than would be necessary simply to 'semanticise' existing forms of exercise or drill. The needs of the receiver will lead us to consideration of the place of authentic language materials. (Wilkins, 1976)

This echoes to some extent the distinction we have been making, following Widdowson, between use and usage. Artificially restricting the language to which learners are exposed in the interests of simplified production distorts the language in specific ways, and it is unlikely that when learners finally come face to face with the language in use they will meet the same distortions. By attempting to make things simple for the learner as producer, we are making things

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difficult for the learner as receiver, unless of course we are to accept low surrender value and postpone contact with language use for a considerable time.

But how could we possibly predict the needs of the receiver? How can we select, out of the vast range of linguistic knowledge, those items which are likely to benefit the learner as receiver in communicative situations over which there are no controls? And even if we could, how could we make this language accessible to the learner? It is one thing to prescribe artificially the language the learner will be exposed to and exemplify this simplified language. It is quite another thing to accept that learners are likely to be exposed to a bewildering range of language, and to enable them to draw useful conclusions and generalisations from exposure to authentic language materials.

### Specifying the lexical syllabus

As so often happens, however, the solutions to the enormously complex problem of syllabus specification proved to be disarmingly simple. The commonest and most important, most basic meanings in English are those meanings expressed by the most frequent words in English. If we could identify the commonest words in English and identify their meanings, we would have the solution to the whole problem. This very simple, yet highly significant insight was put forward by John Sinclair, editor-in-chief of the COBUILD project. He proposed a return to the idea first suggested by people like H E Palmer and Michael West in the 1930s and 1950s - of a syllabus based not on structures or on notions, but on words. This proposal is based on the observation that a relatively small number of English words accounts for a very high proportion of English text. Nation (1983) reports that Bongers (1947) produced a list of 3,000 words which would, he claimed, account for 97% of all written English text. Carroll et al. (1971) estimate that 1,000 words account for 74% of all text; 2,000 for 81% and 3,000 for 85%. The figures based on a computer analysis of the COBUILD corpus are slightly different, but point to the same basic conclusions:

The most frequent 700 words of English constitute 70% of English text.

The most frequent 1,500 words constitute 76% of text.

The most frequent 2,500 words constitute 80% of text.

This tells us two things. First, it shows the enormous power of the common words of English. It means that, even though we have a vocabulary of tens of thousands of words, on average seven out of every ten words we hear, read, speak or write come from the 700 most frequent words of English. In some texts, of course, the incidence is much lower. But in others it is very much higher. In a highly specialised text on nuclear physics, for example, there will be a high incidence of unusual words. But in many texts, even if they are highly specialised, the incidence of words outside the 2,500 frequency band is surprisingly low.

For example, in this section 'Specifying the lexical syllabus', there are so far only 11 words not in the top 2,500: corpus, dictionary, disarmingly, incidence, insight, lexical, specification, specialised, specify, syllabus, vocabulary. Of these words, three (specify, specification, specialised) have the same base form



as words that are in the top 2,500, and would therefore be easily guessable. This leaves eight words, most of which are to do with the specialist nature of the topic concerned. As such, these are used repeatedly in the text, and so will be quickly assimilated by the specialist reader. In general, therefore, the lexis in these paragraphs will be quite accessible to a learner who has been systematically exposed to the commonest words in English, and who has an interest and grounding in the specialist subject.

Secondly, the figures illustrate dramatically the importance of careful selection in identifying the lexical content of the syllabus. The 700 most frequent words cover 70% of text, but coverage begins to drop rapidly thereafter. The next 800 words cover a further 6% of text and the next 1,000 words cover 4%. The way in which utility begins to fall off at an accelerating rate shows the paramount importance of identifying the right words to give us the right sort of coverage. It is true that general frequency is not the sole criterion. As we move down the frequency band we need to take more and more account of the needs of specific learners. Particular vocations, cultures, and sections of society will have specific needs which are obscured in a general count. If we are talking about the 2,500 most frequent words in English, however, no learner is likely to get very far without needing to express and understand notions and functions carried by words at this level of frequency.

As I have already pointed out, frequency counts are not new. Michael West's *General Service List* (1953) is still widely used by course writers today, not as a basis of a syllabus but as a check to see they have a reasonable coverage of the most frequent words of the language. Tickoo (1988) pays tribute to the pioneering work of West and adds:

Although 35 years old and in many ways outdated, GSL continues to serve ELT practitioners in their search for the commonest uses of many common words. It is only in the last few years that computer-based studies of word values, concordances, and collocations (Sinclair, 1985) have begun to offer deeper insights into the behaviour of ordinary words. (Tickoo 1988)

We have already seen some evidence of the power and rigour of such computer-based studies, and how they can offer a more detailed study of larger and larger samples of language. The speed at which large corpora can be handled means that a description of today's language can be not merely produced but regularly updated.

The 700 most frequent words in current English were identified in the COBUILD study. With a few exceptions and additions (see page 77) these words make up the content of the remedial beginners course, the *Collins COBUILD English Course*, Level 1, as listed in the back of the Student's Book.

### **From words to meanings**

This takes us as far as identifying the words, but we are looking for meanings. We began with the assertion that 'the commonest and most important, most basic meanings in English are those meanings expressed by the most frequent

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words in English'. The COBUILD project worked, as we have seen in Chapter 2, from a corpus to concordances, from concordances to a database and from a database to the final dictionary entries. These entries summarised an array of information from the database which included syntactic and pragmatic information as well semantic.

Often the information on a given word derived from such a study is very much in line with the picture of that same word given in most EFL coursebooks. In the 7.3 million word Main Corpus the 22,000 occurrences of the word *by*, for example, reveal four major categories of meaning, leading to this picture of the word in the *Collins COBUILD English Course*, Level 1:

### **by (111)**

#### **1 who / what did it**

Wally is awakened by the phone ringing. (91)

Handicrafts made by people in the Third World. (104)

Is that a magazine published by Macmillan? (146)

#### **2 how**

You solve it by elimination. (158)

English by Radio. (146)

London is only 55 minutes away by train. (179)

Find out by talking to people.

#### **3 when**

Everyone helps to clear away after dinner. By then it's about 7.15 or 7.30 p.m. (113)

Even though the Forth River is only 66 miles long, by the time it reaches Edinburgh it is over 4 miles wide. (179)

#### **4 where**

Behind the chair? Of the person sitting by the desk? (72)

Just by the bus stop. (122)

On the wall by the entrance was a notice. (173)

The commonest of these meanings is the first, which accounts for just over 50% of occurrences of **by**. It occurs most commonly with a passive verb, but there are around 1,000 occurrences with a noun of some sort:

1 . . . an investment of 12 million pounds by Courtaulds . . .

2 . . . attacks on EEC ministers by a commission member . . .

Possibly underrated in many courses is the second use, particularly the pattern **by + . . . ing**. This accounts for almost 2,500 occurrences in the corpus with other expressions of manner making up a further 2,200 occurrences. The third use, on the other hand, may well receive more attention than it merits, although it is certainly important, with some 300 occurrences in the corpus. The fourth category is roughly twice as common as this, with around 600 occurrences. In spite of these weightings, however, the picture of **by** shown by the

COBUILD research accords pretty well with that traditionally given in EFL courses. It is not always the case, however, that the research bears out our intuitions so neatly.

### Some surprises

As one looks more closely at the evidence, surprises begin to emerge. A common EFL view of the words **some** and **any**, which is enshrined in many pedagogic grammars, suggests that where **some** is used in affirmative sentences its counterpart **any** is used in negative and interrogative sentences. But look at the concordances for the word **any** taken from the texts which make up the first 13 units of Level 2 of *CCEC*. (see p.53)

Look particularly to see how many of the occurrences are in negative sentences, how many in interrogative and how many in affirmative sentences. These concordances show a very different picture from that shown above, which is the picture presented to many language learners. Of the 38 concordance lines shown here, 23 are in affirmative sentences, 11 in negative and only 4 in interrogatives. At first sight one might think that the data is restricted and therefore the picture is a false one. But the description of **any** derived from the corpus shows this picture: (see p.53)

Far from being an aberration, the use of **any** in an affirmative sentence is in fact much commoner than its use in interrogatives. In this particular instance the information given to learners by some coursebooks and grammars is simply wrong.

Fortunately there were comparatively few findings which stood in outright contradiction to the traditional picture. There were, however, a large number of findings which suggest that the traditional picture is somewhat skewed. A study of the word **would** presents the picture: (see p.55)

There are two things of particular interest to the EFL teacher here. First there is the frequency of Category 2: 'used to'- indicates past habits. At 21 % of 14,687 this represents some 3,100 occurrences. The conventional EFL wisdom is that this use of **would** is rather informal, even old-fashioned. The commonest way of expressing this notion is **used to**. A look at **used to** shows 1,100 occurrences with this meaning. In spite of the conventional wisdom **would** (or '**d**', as in '**I'd**') meaning 'used to' is almost three times as common as **used to** meaning 'used to'. This is not to say that we should teach **would** to the exclusion of **used to**. They are both common forms and should both feature in an intermediate course. **Used to** also has a less restricted use than **would** since it can be used with stative verbs such as **know**, **understand**, **notice** and **believe**- those not commonly found in the progressive tenses:

- 1 'I used to know,' Mary said.
- 2 I don't notice things as much as I used to.

whereas there are no occurrences of **would** with these verbs. But the fact remains that **would** with this meaning is extremely common and must be

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included. It is surprising how many teachers reject this recommendation, preferring to hold to their intuitions. A common reaction is to query the validity of the corpus. Is it predominantly made up of written texts? Is it out of date? But no amount of doubt and suspicion can gainsay figures as stark as these. It is not just that this use of **would** is more common than **used to**, it is three times as common. A syllabus which ignores this fact is deficient. It ignores the fact that outside the classroom setting the learner is at least three times as likely to come across the form **would** or **'d** as the form **used to**.

The second interesting thing about the word **would** has already been highlighted in our discussion of the second conditional in Chapter 2. That is the predominance of Category 1.1, the use of **would** 'to talk of events which are of a hypothetical nature':

- 3 I suspect the Germans would still be a little bit cautious.
- 4 I think *The Tempest* would make a wonderful film.

This makes up almost half of the 14,687 occurrences. As a sub-category of this we have **would** used in conditional sentences:

- 5 It would surprise me very much if sterling strengthened.
- 6 You would be surprised if I told you what my credit is.

As we have seen the usual strategy in EFL courses is to present **would** as a part of the second conditional. We have argued, however, that it would be more effectively taught lexically.

Perhaps one of the most pervasive findings of the COBUILD study when used as the basis for a syllabus, however, is the recognition that we use language in a much more abstract way than most elementary courses would lead us to believe. We have already looked at the word **thing** and noted that it refers much more commonly to an abstract entity, such as a proposition or argument, than to a physical object. The same is true of many other words. The pronouns **this** and **that** behave in the same way:

- 7 Is that why you had a few days off?
- 8 Is that clear, Sergeant?
- 9 This is why I'm opposed to the plan.
- 10 The law says he can't be evicted. Is this right?

Similarly the word **see** is much more common with the meaning 'understand':

- 11 I see what you mean.
- 12 I don't really see how I can.

than with the meaning 'to perceive with the eyes':

- 13 I can hardly see without my glasses.
- 14 He looked up and saw Ellen staring at him.

Verbs of motion are used to describe progress through time and through discourse as well as through space:

- 15 We'll *come back* to that point shortly.
- 16 Most children stay at home until they *reach* school age.
- 17 We finally *arrived* at a situation where we were making a small profit.

All of this suggests that there may be a considerable gulf between the language used in elementary and intermediate courses and the language used in the world outside. The language of the classroom largely handles a world of concrete objects and observable events. The language needed outside the classroom is needed much more to create an abstract world of propositions, arguments, hypotheses and discourses. It may be that in learning our first language we move from concrete to abstract, but mature learners of a foreign language already have these abstract concepts as part of their knowledge of their first language. As mature language users they will want to understand and create similar concepts in the target language. We should provide them with experience of the kind of language they need in order to do this.

A fresh look at the meanings of common words, therefore, brings to light a number of failings in the traditional EFL view of language. Occasionally it is simply mistaken, as when it asserts that **any** is rarely used in affirmative sentences. Sometimes it is wrongly weighted, as when it includes **used to** for past habit but ignores the much commoner **would**. Sometimes it is uneconomical, looking at specific uses of words rather than making broad generalisations about them. Thus it restricts **would** to the context of a conditional clause without recognising explicitly that the hypothetical meaning of **would** has a much wider currency than this.

Finally I have suggested that unless we look with an open mind at the commonest uses of the common words of English and try to reproduce those uses in the classroom, then we are in danger of using language in the classroom in a very restricted way to create a material world of objects and events, ignoring the commonest and most typical uses of language which create a world of abstract ideas. There is certainly enough evidence in the research to show that the use of language in the classroom is far from typical of language use in the world outside.

### Patterns in language

Clearly there are recurrent patterns in language. Some of these patterns are so common and so salient that we actually have names for them:

Noun phrase + **am/are/is** + . . . **ing** = the present continuous tense.

Noun phrase + **be** + past participle (+ **by** + noun phrase) = the passive.

Course writers and teachers also identify more informally such patterns as 'the *going to* future', 'the second conditional' and 'reported statements'. These are certainly items which need to be covered in an English course up to the elementary level. The matter at issue is *how* they are best covered. There are, however, a number of important patterns which are in danger of being overlooked altogether unless once again we go back to the research and make sure that we have a reasonable coverage of the language.

I showed in Chapter 3 that the word **way** occurs with a variety of patterns:

- 1 The most effective way of countering the Soviet air threat . . .
- 2 I believe this is the only way that an ordinary person can inspire others.
- 3 Life isn't the way it ought to be.

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the same applies to the word **thing**. There is a large class of nouns like **way, thing, idea, wish, notion, hope, intention**, all of them very common, which pattern with *of*, *that* or *to*. It is worth emphasising that these words all play an important part in structuring discourse, and that they are not generally highlighted in intermediate coursebooks. If we look at language we will discover these patterns and recognise their importance. If we rely on intuition - even, or perhaps especially, intuition informed by years of ELT practice - we may overlook them.

We shall also look later (Chapter 5) at the level of detail required if we are to offer learners reasonable exposure to the common patterns of the language. The *CCEC* elementary syllabus covers, with a few exceptions, the 700 most frequent words in English. For each of these words we worked with data sheets similar to those for **way** shown in Chapter 3, and those for **would** and **any** shown above detailing meanings and recurrent patterns. This elementary syllabus, therefore, consists of many hundreds of pages. If we are to attempt to list realistically the content of a syllabus it seems to me to be necessary to go into at least this level of detail. It is not enough to offer a list of structural frames without indicating which words are likely to fill them and also how the words which fill the frames are likely to behave. If one starts by listing words and their behaviour, one generates automatically the structural environments and the words which are likely to occur within them.



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I doN'T know any Russian / I caN'T even remember any English /There'd be a big to-do that couldN'T do anybody any GOOD/They had NOT dared to strike any MORE matches / we haveN'T any paper / in Hong Kong's slum there is NEVER any privacy / I doN'T think there was any rain all summer long / There was NEVER any TIME for . . . / In this job I didN'T have to do any writing / this state of affairs could NOT go on any LONGER/the Conservative Government's lack of any overall transport policy/to play as often as you can and to get rid of any inhibitions/'Did you, may I ask, get any results?'/ Have we any stain remover? /

Phrases and misc:

- i ANY MORE e.g.: There wasn't much to do any more / I wasn't going to the house any more /
- ii AT ANY RATE e.g.: she was undeniably attractive, at any rate to judge from the newspaper photographs /
- iii IN ANY WAY e.g.: Was he linked in any way to men in other countries? /
- iv IN ANY CASE e.g.: it was NOT written for a specific woman and in any case a woman's circumstances constantly change /

*Notes:*

- i In Category 1 most of the occs. are adj / det. Pronouns and adverbs are much less frequent, occurring in particular collocational patterns (see examples above).
- ii In Category 2 'any' occurs with negatives, and verbs or clauses with negative overtones e.g. Mr Habib's statement omitted any mention of the parties / it was very hard to find anyone with any previous experience /.
- iii Where 'any' occurs with an actual negative in a statement it seems to have the effect of strengthening the negation e.g.: 'A picnic wouldN'T be any fun,' Sarah said, 'without you.'
- iv Teaching wisdom has it that 'any' in questions implies that the expected answer will be 'no'. Without knowing the answers to the questions asked in the example above I can't shed any light on this.
- v 38% of sample occs. are preceded by 'not' or 'never'.
- vi Only 5% of sample occs. are recognisable as questions.
- vii In 2% of sammples, ANY is followed by a comparative adj/adv., e.g.: /Right, is that any clearer now? /Why should you want to go any faster? /, where ANY means 'at all' / to some extent'.

Further information on right-hand collocates:

OF	391 occs.
OTHER	361
MORE	340
CASE	129
RATE	111
TIME	111
KIND	104
ONE	98
WAY	89



## Entry for the word form 'WOULD'

Total no. of occs. in corpus: 14,687

Category 1: USED TO TALK OF EVENTS WHICH ARE OF A HYPOTHETICAL NATURE AT THE TIME OF BEING MENTIONED, EITHER BECAUSE THEY ARE IN THE FUTURE OR BECAUSE THEY DEPEND ON OTHER EVENTS WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT OCCUR (Modal auxiliary) [48% of sample occs.]

she just thought she would LIKE a little flat of her own / I suspect that the West Germans would still be a little cautious because of their . . . / This means, give or take a bit, that it would take a full century to produce a library of . . . / then the people of South Vietnam would receive their conquerors with relief / . . . direct massive action against the IRA because this would produce a polarisation / putting a private detective on your trail (which would probably cost more than you are fiddling) / I should have thought that YOU would prefer an agreed incomes policy to one that . . . / 'Productivity' became the magic password that would open the doors to prosperity / Opening the beaches would NOT be a solution or a conclusion / the barmen were threatening to strike. This would NOT only have deprived Dublin of drink, but . . . / but to look at her YOU would NEVER have guessed it / I think The Tempest would MAKE a wonderful film and have my own ideas . . . / telling the children about Bombay and how they would live in a beautiful flat with a lift to go up / A handlebar moustache would HAVE completed the picture / simply it came to my wife and myself that it would BE nice to keep bees /'. . . trade all my tomorrows for a single yesterday.' Would SHE make a deal like that? She wondered. / YOU would HAVE to be in at half past ten and YOU wouldn't be allowed any males in your room /

*Category 1.1:* USED IN CONDITIONAL SENTENCES 18% of sample occs.]

It would surprise me very much IF sterling strengthened / You would BE surprised IF I told you what my credit is / Would it feel wrong IF I didn't come? / Would sex crimes BE reduced IF children . . . / Would THE world BE a better place to live in IF the . . . / IF we were to let their emotions go they would run away with them / IF we were to put the idea to them all, it would require a plenary meeting / IF he wasn't such a reactionary, I'd feel sorry for him / IF I'd typhoid or cholera aboard I'd sail at once for . . . / IF there were a beast I'd HAVE seen it / IF we left it'd take about three or four weeks to settle down / IF you couldn't do that YOU wouldn't be able to do this next one /

*Category 2:* 'USED TO'- INDICATES PAST HABITS [21% of sample occs.]

The old man would walk down with me to check the camels of an evening / 'You are quaint, Crab,' she would SAY / by car or forty miles on horseback to Hobeni. He would stay the weekend and go bushbuck hunting / 'I do wish,' our mother would SAY, 'I do wish you'd listen to me.' / they would practise all day standing on their heads / often as many as three of them would play the same game together / the colonial servants' returning steamer would pass 'the outward bound troop ship . . . / 'Damn it, I'm exactly the same age as Hitler.' he would SAY /

*Category 3:* USED AS THE PAST TENSE OF 'WILL' IN REPORTED SPEECH, THOUGHT, ETC. [6% of sample occs.]

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Thatcher rather ringingly SAID that all this would BE sorted out very quickly / that's what he SAID, he would eat at his hotel/he was going to perform a story that she SAID I would NEVER have heard of before / Ford SAID the company would NOT comment on the claim before the October meeting / But I think he secretly HOPED I would one day change my mind/Bar had promised them that he would send her home every summer/I thought I would wait until something went wrong with his machine / there was no hurry, he told himself. He would return here later / I TOLD him I'd BE right back / Lynn had TOLD Derek she wouldn't BE long /

*Category 4: USED TO MAKE REQUESTS, QUESTIONS, OFFERS, SUGGESTIONS, ETC. POLITE*  
[2% of sample occs.]

'The devil take me if I can get my car to start. Would YOU be so good as to give me a push . . .'/Would YOU kindly send me your autograph?/Would YOU switch the light on, please? /Would YOU please remove your glasses? /'Would YOU LIKE some coffee?' 'No, thank you!'/Would YOU do me a favour?' 'Of course!'/Would YOU LIKE me to sing you a song?' I asked / Would YOU LIKE to see the house. Rudolph? / Wouldn't YOU LIKE to come with me . . . / Would YOU LIKE to come and read Proust with me? /'Would YOU LIKE to go to Ernie's for dinner?' /'You'd better tell me all about it.' 'Would YOU mind very much if I did?'/After what you've been through, Mr Gerran, I'd advise you to give it a miss'/

Phrases and misc:

i WOULD YOU SAY (THAT) e.g.:/Would YOU say that this method can be used widely /

*Notes:*

i The percentage counts given in the entry are based only on non-sentence-initial occs of WOULD. Examples are taken, however, from 'would', 'Would', and 'I'd'.

ii There are two problems with the frequency figures given above. First, Category 1 is very large and may contain occs. which should have gone in 1.1. The IF may well have been in an earlier or later part of a line which was not shown. Some of the occs. also implied IF, but does that make them conditionals?

iii Second, Category 4 accounts for only 2% of non-sentence initial occs. In sentence initial occs. it accounts for about 65%.

iv Sentence initial occs. only account for about 3% of total occs.

v WOULD is frequently preceded by a pronoun.

vi In contracted form - I'd, It'd, wouldn't, etc. - there were a higher proportion of more obviously conditional sentences.

vii WOULD can also be used instead of 'do' in some instances where it has the effect of making something sound more tentative or polite, or acts as an intensifier e.g.:/I wouldn't agree with you that it takes an . . ./How my English friends would rag me! /

Further information on left-hand collocates:

I 1,399 occs.  
IT 1,312  
HE 1,032  
SHE 562

Further information on right-hand collocates:

BE 2,475 occs.  
HAVE 1,517  
NO 556