The New Academic Word List Test (NAWLT)

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The NAWLT is a diagnostic test of written receptive knowledge of the New Academic Word List (NAWL) (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014a). The NAWLT is comprised of 963 words¹ that appear frequently in academic discourse and that are not part of the New General Service List (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014b). The NAWLT is comprised of 40 items, 20 from each of two frequency-determined bands of the NAWL. This sampling rate is approximately equal to that of the New General Service List Test (NGSLT) by the same authors. Sampling from bands of around 500 words is useful for two reasons. First, it allows for more precise feedback than sampling from 1000-word bands, which has been the norm in recent years. Second, it was felt that approximately 500 words is a reasonable learning goal for a semester of study, especially considering that some of those words will already be known to learners.

Both the NAWLT and the NGSLT have been designed to the same specifications as the Vocabulary Size Test (VST) (Nation & Beglar, 2007). Each item provides the target word followed by a short sentence containing this word in a natural yet non-defining context. Four answer choices are given, with one being a paraphrase of the target word. In the case of target words with more than one sense, the item was written based on the most frequent meaning as determined by the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/). When considered appropriate, we also consulted the academic sub-corpus of the COCA to help in these determinations. The three distractors for each item define words that are the same part of speech and of a similar frequency as the target word. As far as possible, items were written with simplified grammatical structures and with high frequency vocabulary. Other than the target words themselves, the test is comprised entirely of words from the NGSL.

Currently in its pilot phase, the NAWLT has demonstrated good technical quality, with no discernible problems with either dimensionality or item fit under the Rasch model. The test reliability of .75 (Cronbach’s alpha) is somewhat lower than that of the NGSLT, reflecting the fact that it has fewer items.

Interpretation and Use

Because the test is designed to aid in setting learning goals and making principled plans of vocabulary study, we suggest that except in the case of highly proficient learners, the NAWLT initially be used together with the NGSLT to establish a profile of both high frequency and academic vocabulary. For learners with sizeable gaps in knowledge in any of the five tested levels of the NGSL, it would be better to first target those words for learning, as they are more common and therefore more useful in increasing the percentage of words a learner knows when encountering a written text. One approach is to use a threshold score of around 80 to 85% to determine mastery of each level, and then to identify the first gap in knowledge based on this threshold. Once learning goals are established, there is a range of useful study materials for both the NGSL and NAWL located under “Tools and Textbooks” on the NGSL website (http://www.newgeneralservicelist.org/vocabulary-links/).

Further Development

Additional, parallel versions of the NAWLT are being developed to enable repeated testing for ongoing feedback to students in longer programs of study. We tentatively plan to complete one by the summer of 2015 and another by early 2016. We also intend to develop Japanese-English bilingual versions of the tests in order to eliminate the risk of unknown words or grammatical structures in the test items influencing test scores. For the continued development and refinement of the NGSL and NAWL tests, we would be most grateful to anyone who is willing to share anonymous test results with us. Kindly contact either of us at the email addresses listed above.

References


¹ Strictly speaking, the NAWL and NGSL are comprised of modified lemmas, in which the headword and its inflected forms are considered part of the same group. In the case of different parts of speech which have the same form, such as cure (n) and cure (v), the inflected forms of both words are considered part of the group, hence the term modified lemmas.