The Potential Use of the Harry Potter Book Series for Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

論文

The Potential Use of the *Harry Potter* Book Series for Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

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As a language teacher and learner, one is always looking for new and better ways to motivate our students as well as ourselves. One such method that is both useful and potentially motivating is *narrow reading*. Whereas in extensive reading the language learner engages in reading a large volume of comprehensible text with the aim of improving their own language ability (Nation, 1997; Waring, 1997), in narrow reading the leaner reads a number of texts all written about the same or extremely similar subject area (Krashen, 1981). The texts used in narrow reading may or may not be of great length, though the concept is that by reading a number of highly similar texts, the language learners will learn new vocabulary even *more* quickly than what is expected to be learned using extensive reading. By learning vocabulary more quickly, and about a specific topic, it is thought that this would allow these language learners to progress more quickly on to more challenging texts (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Krashen, 1996). Another advantage of reading highly similar texts is that there is a noticeable increase in the repetition of vocabulary within the texts (Shaffer, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2015) which decreases the burden of acquiring new vocabulary items (Nation, 2001). This, in turn, increases the learner's change of acquiring new vocabulary (Nagy & Herman, 1985). An increase in word repetition also means a potential increase in word generation, which are the variations in how a single word is used (i.e., *jump*, *jumps*, and *jumped*). Frequent encounters with word generation are believed to improve learners' understanding of a text and help improve their depth of knowledge of grammatical

behaviors, collocations, register constraints, and alternative meanings (Schmitt & Carter, 2000). An additional advantage of using narrow reading is that it allows language learners to obtain a high degree of comprehension through the accelerated acquisition of context-specific vocabulary -- lexical items that are specific to the subject matter. The relevance of context-specific vocabulary has been demonstrated by Ward (1999), who showed that a carefully constructed list of 2,000 context-specific words could account for 95% of every word found within engineering texts.

This type of rapid vocabulary acquisition is further explained by Nagy and Herman's Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis (1985), which states that most vocabulary is learned gradually through repeated exposure to new and known words in various contexts. They estimated that when a learner encounters a new word, they have only a 5-10% chance of acquiring that word and that it may take 10-12 encounters before a word is acquired. This suggests that input materials with less vocabulary repetition may be less comprehensible to lower level learners than similar materials with greater vocabulary repetition (Schmitt & Carter, 2000). One implication of the Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis, therefore, is that input with a high degree of vocabulary repetition is preferred, and this is precisely what narrow reading provides.

Hirsh and Nation (1992) calculated that at least a 95% vocabulary comprehension rate would be necessary for a learner to read unsimplified texts without any aid, though they suggest that a 97-98% vocabulary comprehension rate would be more ideal. They estimated that in order to reach such a high comprehension rate with academic texts, the reader must know approximately 5,000 word families. In 1996, Hazenberg and Hulstijn, working with learners of Dutch as a second language, estimated that 10,000 words or more might be necessary to comprehend academic texts. However, as learners wishing to read academic materials in English may not be able to simply memorize 5,000 to 10,000 words, Nation (2001) has suggested that a well-designed language program should use no more than 25% of

instruction time for the explicit instruction of vocabulary, while the remaining 75% or more should be dedicated to incidental vocabulary acquisition by such means as communicative output activities, fluency development tasks, and reading activities such as narrow reading.

Schmitt and Carter (2000) looked at the lexical advantages of narrow reading by comparing two sets of newspaper stories, one set comprised of an 8-day running story, and the other a collection of unrelated stories. By looking at the lexical content of these two sets of stories, they found that the increase in degree of similarity among the running story texts also lead to an increase in overlap, and this increase in overlap lead to an increase in both vocabulary repetition and word generation, which in turn improved vocabulary acquisition and depth of word knowledge, respectively. Schmitt and Carter's study did indeed show the use of related stories, such as those commonly used for narrow reading, to be advantageous.

Previous research, such as that done by Schmitt and Carter and by myself (Shaffer, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2015) have examined the use of texts for incidental vocabulary acquisition. My own previous work looked at how the selection of input texts, such as TV news as opposed to newspaper articles, can affect word repetition and word generation. However, this previous work was conducted upon relatively short texts which, at best, gave only a suggestion of how textual similarities in subject-matter and similarities in text-types (TV, newspaper, etc.) actually affect word repetition and word generation, and thus incidental vocabulary acquisition. The current paper looks to clarify the findings of my previous work by examining texts of much greater lengths in order to either support or correct my previous findings. Simultaneously, it looks to expand upon my previous work by looking at the potential benefits of reading a long series of novels written about a singular topic for incidental vocabulary acquisition.

I propose to do this by using the seven-book *Harry Potter* series to build a corpus from which to

address the following questions: (1) *How difficult, lexically, are the source materials?*, (2) *How suitable is the book series for incidental vocabulary acquisition as determined by the degree of vocabulary repetition and word generation found within (a) the individual Harry Potter books, and (b) within sets of books (i.e., books 1+2, books 1+2+3, etc.)?*, and (3) *How does the overall length of a text affect the potential for incidental vocabulary acquisition?*

METHOD

For this study, I specifically chose to examine the popular *Harry Potter* series of book because first, they are widely available and second, they are well known around the world (Buzacott-Speer, 2017). This makes them not only a readily-available corpus to examine, but just as readily available for language learners to find and use. As shown in Table 1, these books are also of considerable length, which makes them a desirable corpus with which to study the effectiveness of narrow reading for incidental vocabulary acquisition as more data means increased accuracy of the results. After obtaining all seven of the *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2009), each was scanned and then saved in PDF format. The text data from these PDF files were then copy-pasted into individual plain-text files. Once each book was thus converted from paper to plain-text, the individual book-files were then arranged into different datasets which were then analyzed using the AntWordProfiler software program (Anthony, 2014).

Table 1. *The Harry Potter books and their respective word counts*

Book	Word Count
Harry Potter 1	80592
Harry Potter 2	88508
Harry Potter 3	111431
Harry Potter 4	197340
Harry Potter 5	265944
Harry Potter 6	174838
Harry Potter 7	204376

Based on the original lexical analysis software program Range (Heatley & Nation, 1996), AntWordProfiler reads in one or more plain-text files and then returns not only the number, but also the frequency of occurrence for word tokens (running words), word types (the first occurrence of a word), and word families (clusters of words based upon a common root). These resulting lexical data is presented across four vocabulary levels – the first 1000 high frequency vocabulary words and the second 1000 high frequency vocabulary words (which together comprise the 2000 most frequently occurring word of English as noted in the General Service List (West, 1953)), academic words (which is based on Coxhead's (2000) Academic Words List), and low frequency words (which is all other words.) AntWordProfiler was chosen over Range (which was used exclusively in my previous work) as it boasts several improvements over the original, most notably in that it counts hyphenated words (such as "book-lover") as two separate high frequency words instead of as a single low frequency word.

RESULTS

Answering each research question in turn, we begin with the first question: *How difficult, lexically, is the source material?*

It is possible to assess the overall lexical difficulty of a text by looking at the distribution of vocabulary as found among the three base word levels (high frequency, academic, and low frequency.) Nation (2001) states that for academic texts 80% of all word tokens (every instance of word) fall under high frequency vocabulary, with an additional 10% falling under academic vocabulary, and the remaining 10% being classified as low frequency vocabulary. While the *Harry Potter* series of books is obvious not academic in nature, West's General Service List (1953) from which Nation (2001) partially based his work, also states that 80% of *average* texts, such as novels, should be covered by high frequency vocabulary.

Upon initial analysis of the *Harry Potter* corpus, it was found that the first 1000 high frequency words provide 77% coverage and the second 1000 high frequency words provide 6% coverage of the text (see Table 2 below), giving a total of 83% coverage provided by all high frequency vocabulary. Compared with the 80% coverage proposed by Nation (2001) for all high frequency words, this seems to suggest that the *Harry Potter* books may be easier to read and comprehend, lexically. Analysis also shows that academic words provide just over 1% coverage for the text, which is far below Nation's proposed 10% coverage (2001), again strongly that the lexical contents of the *Harry Potter* books are much more comprehensible than that of academic texts, and the results of the *Harry Potter* corpus are comparable to the results found in my paper on using video for incidental vocabulary acquisition (Shaffer, 2015) where the first 1000 high frequency words were found to provide 79.8% coverage of all word tokens generated by TV News broadcasts. The 15% coverage given by low frequency vocabulary in the current corpus appears to be a notable increase over Nation's proposed 10%. However, a closer examination of the corpus reveals that the top ten proper names alone (*Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Snape, Weasley, Malfoy, Voldemort,* and *Potter*, respectively) represent 3.8% of the 15.36% coverage provided by low frequency vocabulary for the entire text. It is expected that further examination of other frequently reoccurring names may likewise show an even greater coverage within the low frequency vocabulary items, and thereby suggesting that a large portion of the low frequency words might be readily learned and thus present less of a problem with comprehension.

Table 2. *Distribution of word tokens per vocabulary level*

	High Frequency 0-1000	**High Frequency 1001-2000**	**Academic Word List**	**Low Frequency**
Harry Potter 1-7	77.20%	6.42%	1.02%	15.36%

Overall, the current lexical analysis indicates that despite an increased number of low frequency vocabulary, the large coverage provided by the first 1000 high frequency words suggests that the *Harry*

Potter series of books may, indeed, be found useful for the incidental acquisition of high frequency vocabulary.

Continuing with the next research question, *How suitable is the book series for incidental vocabulary acquisition as determined by the degree of vocabulary repetition and word generation found within (a) the individual Harry Potter books, and (b) within sets of books (i.e., books 1+2, books 1+2+3, etc.)?*, the *Harry Potter* corpus was analyzed according to various datasets in order to more clearly assess how word repetition and word generation change as more texts are included. Six datasets were used for analysis, starting with books one and two with each following dataset adding the next sequential book. Thus, the second dataset included books one through three, the fourth dataset books one through four, and so on.

Word repetition can be indicated by a type-token ratio (see Table 3 below). As noted above, word tokens are counted as *every* occurrence of a word whereas word types are counted as only the *first occurrence* of a word in a text. No matter how often the same word appears throughout the text, it is only counted as one type. For example, if the word "dream" occurs 20 times within a text, then it is counted as 20 word tokens, but only as one word type. Thus, a type-token ratio represents how often words are repeated within a text, with the calculation being simply (word types / word tokens). Thus, if a word occurs only once, then the type-token ratio is (1 type / 1 token =) 1.00. If a word occurs twice, (1 / 2 =) 0.50. To simplify and summarize, as word repetition increases the type-token ratio (TTR) decreases.

Looking individually at each of the *Harry Potter* books, we find an extremely high rate of repetition, the least of which being found in Book 2 with a TTR of 0.0772 (though this is still a notable amount of repetition) and the greatest amount being found in Book 5 with a TTR of 0.0449 (see Table 3 below). To help provide an idea of what constitutes "a high rate of repetition", my previous article

on choosing narrow reading texts for incidental vocabulary acquisition (Shaffer, 2005) found that nine newspaper articles written upon the same subject matter had a combined TTR of 0.2246 which, comparatively, is approximately five times less repetition than that of *Harry Potter* Book 5.

Table 3. *Types, tokens, and type-token ratios for each book*

	Types	Tokens	TTR
Harry Potter 1	5711	80592	0.0709
Harry Potter 2	6830	88508	0.0772
Harry Potter 3	7375	111431	0.0662
Harry Potter 4	10095	197340	0.0512
Harry Potter 5	11949	265944	0.0449
Harry Potter 6	10115	174838	0.0579
Harry Potter 7	10909	204376	0.0534

Looking at the results of the AntWordProfiler analysis for the different sets of books (see Table 4 below), we find that as the number of books are increased the TTRs decrease steadily. Thus, from a reader's perspective, reading only the first book (shown in Table 3 above) the reader would encounter a TTR of 0.0709, but if they were to read all seven books, they would encounter a TTR of 0.0184. Thus, by reading the entire series, the reader would encounter 3.9 times greater word repetition than by reading only the first book in the series.

Table 4. *Types, tokens, and type-token ratios for each set of books*

	Types	Tokens	TTR
Books 1-2	8679	169100	0.0513
Books 1-3	10890	280531	0.0388
Books 1-4	14142	477871	0.0296
Books 1-5	17270	743815	0.0232
Books 1-6	18980	918653	0.0207
Books 1-7	20654	1123029	0.0184

Next, a deeper analysis was made of the *Harry Potter* series to discover how much repetition occurs within each of the four vocabulary levels. Looking first at the TTRs found in the individual books, we find an extremely high amount of repetition among the first 1000 high frequency words (HF 1-1000), with the greatest amount of repetition occurring in Book 5 which has a TTR of 0.0128 (see Table 5 below). The least amount of repetition at this vocabulary level is in Book 1 with a TTR of

0.0299. Looking at the next vocabulary level, the second 1000 high frequency words (HF 1001-2000), we still find a large amount of repetition with TTRs ranging from 0.2204 to 0.1156. The academic word list (AWL) level shows a marked decrease in repetition, though this may be caused by the relatively small amount of AWL vocabulary used in the corpus as a whole – Table 2 above shows that only 1.02% of the entire seven-book series is comprised of words at this level. Last, looking at low frequency vocabulary (LF), we find slightly less repetition than with the HF 1001-2000 level words, ranging from TTFs of 0.2218 to 0.1616. It is interesting to note that taking only the low frequency vocabulary found within the *Harry Potter* series we find these words repeating more often than the entire newspaper corpus used in my 2005 research paper which had a TTR of 0.2246. This suggests that even the low frequency vocabulary found in the *Harry Potter* book series would be learned more quickly and more easily though incidental vocabulary acquisition than all of the combined vocabulary from my newspaper articles study.

Table 5. *Type-token ratios per word level for each book*

	High Frequency 0-1000	**High Frequency 1001-2000**	**Academic Word List**	**Low Frequency**
Harry Potter 1	0.0299	0.2204	0.3482	0.2153
Harry Potter 2	0.0298	0.2228	0.4178	0.2218
Harry Potter 3	0.0247	0.1846	0.3515	0.1924
Harry Potter 4	0.0162	0.1415	0.2785	0.1708
Harry Potter 5	0.0128	0.1156	0.2550	0.1616
Harry Potter 6	0.0181	0.1664	0.2819	0.2028
Harry Potter 7	0.0160	0.1482	0.2995	0.1903

Next, we look at the repetition among the four vocabulary levels as found in the datasets of increasing size (see Table 6 below). As might be expected, we find a very large increase in repetition at the HF 0-1000 level with TTRs ranging from 0.0175 to 0.0037. This is nearly a five-fold increase in repetition within the HF 0-1000 level. The HF 1001-2000 level sees a similar increase in repetition with TTRs ranging from 0.1434 to 0.0369, which is nearly a four-fold increase in repetition. At the AWL level we find a smaller increase in repetition with TTRs ranging from 0.3120 to 0.1084, and at

the low frequency level we find TTRs ranging from 0.1700 to 0.0784, which is still a two-fold increase in low frequency vocabulary repetition. The most interesting feature of the TTRs across the four vocabulary levels, as seen clearly in Table 6, is the steady *increase* in repetition among *all* vocabulary levels as the size of the input (word tokens) increases.

Table 6. *Type-token ratios per word level for each set of books*

	High Frequency 0-1000	High Frequency 1001-2000	Academic Word List	Low Frequency
Books 1-2	0.0175	0.1434	0.3120	0.1700
Books 1-3	0.0117	0.0994	0.2473	0.1349
Books 1-4	0.0077	0.0699	0.1892	0.1109
Books 1-5	0.0053	0.0501	0.1438	0.0929
Books 1-6	0.0045	0.0430	0.1218	0.0855
Books 1-7	0.0037	0.0369	0.1084	0.0784

Next, our analysis considered word generation within the *Harry Potter* corpus. Word generation is when a word is used in grammatically and semantically different ways. For example, we can have *round* circles, well-*round*ed students, *round*s of golf, and doctor's *rounds*. As noted above, apart from word repetition, word generation is another key factor in incidental vocabulary acquisition as it promotes depth of word knowledge. Word generation can be measured as a family-type ratio (FTR) which represents the relation between the number of word families and the number of word types that appear within a text. For example, the word types “jump”, “jumped”, and “jumping” all belong to a single word family called “jump”. Similar to TTRs, lower FTRs indicate higher levels of word generation, and are therefore more desirable for acquiring depth of word knowledge. When looking at FTRs there is a problem in that a master list of all possible word families does not yet exist, even though such lists of families *do* exist for the two high frequency vocabulary lists and for the academic vocabulary list. This means that programs like Range and AntWordProfiler cannot accurately assess the FTRs for the low frequency vocabulary level. Range simply returns a blank whereas AntWordProfiler returns the number of families as the same number of types it discovers. This is

obviously not an accurate portrayal of low frequency word families. Thus, the current study will only be looking at word generation as it is found in the first three vocabulary levels for the sake of accuracy and clarity.

By looking at the word family and word type results for the first three vocabulary levels of the *Harry Potter* series as seen as individual books (see Table 7 below), we notice a fairly linear decrease in FTRs from book to book. Only Book 5 seems out of place with the most amount of word generation at an FTR of 0.4061. If we were to temporarily set Book 5 aside, then the remaining data shows a steady increase in word generation in the high frequency and academic vocabulary levels from Book 1's FTR of 0.4980 to Book 7's FTR of 0.4157. This is a curious effect as this is the type of result that would be expected in the datasets of increasing size and not a feature of the individual books, themselves. This suggests that further research might be warranted to determine if this is a feature of the *Harry Potter* texts in particular or a feature of all such book series that form a major story arc.

Table 7. *Word families, word types, and family-type ratios for the first three vocabulary levels of each book*

	Families	**Types**	**FTR**
Harry Potter 1	1604	3221	0.4980
Harry Potter 2	1772	3593	0.4932
Harry Potter 3	1855	3878	0.4783
Harry Potter 4	2103	4839	0.4346
Harry Potter 5	2174	5354	0.4061
Harry Potter 6	2097	4846	0.4327
Harry Potter 7	2111	5078	0.4157

Looking at the results from an analysis of the datasets of increasing size (see Table 8 below), we find that the FTRs gradually decrease as the number of word types increase, as one might expect. With the *Harry Potter* corpus we find a very smooth linear increase in word generation as more books are added, starting with an FTR of 0.4491 (again, considering only the first three vocabulary levels) and decreasing steadily to an FTR of 0.3334 for all seven books inclusively.

Table 8. *Word families, word types, and family-type ratios for the first three vocabulary levels of each set of books*

	Families	Types	FTR
Books 1-2	1900	4231	0.4491
Books 1-3	2063	4909	0.4202
Books 1-4	2241	5811	0.3856
Books 1-5	2322	6504	0.3570
Books 1-6	2353	6845	0.3438
Books 1-7	2379	7135	0.3334

Next, we come to our third and final research question: *How does the overall length of a text affect the potential for incidental vocabulary acquisition?*

We have seen how the *Harry Potter* series, taken individually and in datasets of increasing size, show a significant amount of word repetition and word generation, both of these being essential for incidental vocabulary acquisition. Next, we look at whether the length of a text (or collection of texts) directly affects both word repetition (TTR) and word generation (FTR) as proposed by the extensive reading and narrow reading models.

By arranging the texts in order of increasing word tokens, we find a very clear (though not perfectly linear) increase in both word repetition and word generation (see Table 9 below). We see a gradual increase in word repetition from an initial TTR of 0.0709 found in Book 1 all the way down to a TTR of 0.0184 for the book series taken as a whole. Similarly, we see a gradual increase in word generation from an initial FTR of 0.4980 found in Book 1 all the day down to an FTR of 0.3334 for the entire book series. There are a few minor aberrations such as the non-linear TTRs of Books 2, 6, and 7 and the FTRs of Book 4 and the set of books 1-3. However, overall, we find a relatively clean linear progression from high TTRs and FTRs to low TTRs and FTRs. Thus, we find a 3.9 times increase in word repetition and a 1.5 times increase in word generation, both strongly suggesting that the more input a language learner receives, especially input based upon a similar subject matter, the greater the chances of incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Table 9. *Effects of word count on word frequency and word generation (token order)*

	Tokens	TTR	FTR
Harry Potter 1	80592	0.0709	0.4980
Harry Potter 2	88508	0.0772	0.4932
Harry Potter 3	111431	0.0662	0.4783
Books 1-2	169100	0.0513	0.4491
Harry Potter 6	174838	0.0579	0.4327
Harry Potter 4	197340	0.0512	0.4346
Harry Potter 7	204376	0.0534	0.4157
Harry Potter 5	265944	0.0449	0.4061
Books 1-3	280531	0.0388	0.4202
Books 1-4	477871	0.0296	0.3856
Books 1-5	743815	0.0232	0.3570
Books 1-6	918653	0.0207	0.3438
Books 1-7	1123029	0.0184	0.3334

CONCLUSIONS

By taking a large corpus of narrow reading materials into consideration, we have noted a large increase in both word frequency and word generation. This strongly suggests that language learners can greatly benefit from extensive reading, especially by reading books written about the same subject or characters (narrow reading). The current paper looked at the *Harry Potter* series of seven-books which has both minor story arcs within each book and a major story arc across the entire series. This suggests that other book series with similar major and minor arcs may likewise see a large degree of word repetition and word generation. If so, they too would be ideal for incidental vocabulary acquisition for L2 and L1 learners alike.

One potential problem of using texts with a high degree of similarity, as noted in my initial paper on narrow reading for incidental vocabulary acquisition (Shaffer, 2005), is the potentially negative impact on learner interest. I had originally suggested that by reading large volumes written upon the same subject matter learners may quickly lose interest. At the time, however, only the use of shorts texts such as essays, web pages, and newspaper articles was considered. Likewise, Cho and Krashen's

paper on vocabulary acquisition via the "Sweet Valley Kids" series of books (1994) had not yet been expanded upon (though perhaps this was due more to the difficulty of acquiring the necessary text data from the books than due to a lack of research interest). As this current paper shows, the use of a series of books, such as the *Harry Potter* series, does not seem to have any problems holding reader interest. As time has shown, the *Harry Potter* series continues to be well loved and well-read around the world leaving one to conclude that at least some texts with a high degree of similarity can be found to be extremely interesting and highly motivating, both of which are important for learning and language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001; Locke & Latham, 1997).

It would be interesting to take the subject even further by examining the lexical content of the *Harry Potter* series of movies, and then cross-examine those findings with that of the current paper. The differences, or similarities, between the lexical content of the books verses that of the films may prove extremely beneficial for future learners seeking to employ incidental vocabulary acquisition, especially those predisposed to watching movies. Another future research topic might be to look at other book series to see whether similar results can be found or whether the current results are a consequence of the author's (J.K. Rowling's) writing style.

Suffice to say, any comprehensible input is good input, but apparently the more's the merrier.

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