

# Keeping it in the family

**Richard West** introduces a new online resource for systematic vocabulary learning.

The aim of this article is to introduce and describe the Word Family Framework (WFF), a new British Council vocabulary resource related to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This is a free, online resource for teachers and students, which aligns over 26,000 vocabulary items with the levels of the CEFR. In particular, I will address the following questions:

- What is the WFF?
- How does it work?
- What are its practical features?
- What are the vocabulary strategies that students need in order to learn vocabulary efficiently?

## What is the WFF?

Vocabulary is not really central to the CEFR, which devotes fewer than three pages to ways in which learners might be expected or required to develop their vocabulary. This neglect seems strange, given the importance attached to vocabulary learning in other Council of Europe documents. For example, Jan van Ek and John Trim, in *Vantage*, the third level in a series on the specifications for the Council of Europe language learning programme, assert that ‘*vocabulary extension may well constitute the greater part of the learning load required to pass from the earlier level to the present one*’.

At the heart of the CEFR are some 60 ‘can do’ scales, describing various aspects of language, each related to six levels of performance from A1 (Breakthrough) to C2 (Mastery). Only two of these scales relate to vocabulary

– *Vocabulary Range* and *Vocabulary Control*. These scales describe a student’s vocabulary repertoire at each CEFR level:

<b>C2</b>	<i>Has a good command of a very broad lexical repertoire ...</i>
<b>C1</b>	<i>Has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire ...</i>
<b>B2</b>	<i>Has a good range of vocabulary for matters connected to his/her field and most general topics ...</i>
<b>B1</b>	<i>Has sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some circumlocutions on most topics ...</i>
<b>A2</b>	<i>Has sufficient vocabulary to conduct routine, everyday transactions ...</i>
<b>A1</b>	<i>Has a basic vocabulary repertoire of isolated words and phrases ...</i>

These descriptors are quantitative, yet the CEFR gives no quantities suggesting the number of vocabulary items needed at each level: there are no vocabulary examples or vocabulary lists that could form the basis of a vocabulary syllabus. Earlier Council of Europe documents, such as that by John Trim *et al* in 1980, had suggested the need, and even the methodology, for constructing such lists, and the authors of some documents (eg *Threshold*) had even drawn up a ‘word index’, but these are not included in the CEFR.

Headword	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	X
example	example <i>nC</i> typical case	for example	example <i>nC</i> sample			exemplify <i>vT</i>	exemplary <i>adj</i> exemplification <i>nU</i> follow sb's example make an example of sb set an example

Figure 1

The aim of the WFF is to rectify this omission by producing a research-based, online vocabulary resource aligned to the levels of the CEFR. However, the vocabulary items are not arranged merely as a series of *lists*, but as a series of more than 6,600 word *families*, each showing how family members relate to the CEFR levels.

As can be seen in Figure 1, this horizontal entry includes not only the headword (*example*) but also derivatives (*exemplify*), fixed formulae (*for example*) and collocations (*make an example of*, *set an example*), each aligned with one of the CEFR levels. It was found that many useful items were off the A1–C2 scale, and so an additional level – level X (for ‘extra’) – has been included.

Thus, unlike a conventional word list or dictionary, the WFF is arranged in word families, so that related words can be seen together, including those which would normally be separated by conventional alphabetical order (*witch/bewitch, example/exemplify*). A word family may consist of various items:

- A headword or root word, eg *bank*. However, many headwords belong to different, unrelated word families: *bank*<sup>1</sup> = financial institution and *bank*<sup>2</sup> = river bank; *bark*<sup>1</sup> = outer surface of tree and *bark*<sup>2</sup> = sound made by a dog.
- Derivatives are formed by a prefix (*witch/bewitch*) or, more commonly, a suffix (*banker, banking*). Suffixes may include the so-called ‘zero suffix’, which is often used to change a word class in English (*bank* noun + ∅ suffix → *bank* verb).
- Compounds in which the headword may form the first element (*banknote*) or the second (*sandbank*).
- Phrases and idioms, such as *laugh all the way to the bank* or *bark up the wrong tree*.
- Collocations, such as *set an example*.

## How does it work?

The WFF consists of a database of over 26,000 vocabulary items, which have been sorted into the levels of the CEFR. The 6,600 word families are arranged alphabetically, and it is possible to download and print out the entire WFF. This would give you a document with over 750 pages, which could be searched manually like any other reference book. However, all of the items have been tagged so that the database can be searched online, enabling users to search it in various ways to meet their teaching/learning needs.

## What are the practical features?

The WFF is available online from the British Council’s Teaching English website. When opened, it offers users a screen which looks like the one shown in Figure 2.

This initial screen allows you to do three things with the WFF:

- 1 You can search for any word, and this will give the complete word family to which that word belongs (as in Figure 1).
- 2 You can download all the vocabulary items at any one level or any combination of levels, if, for example, you wish to have a vocabulary syllabus for levels A1 and A2, or B1 to C2.

- 3 You can download the entire WFF and then search it from your own computer at any time.

The WFF was constructed by searching 18 existing lexicons or vocabulary lists, all of them recent (1980–2010) and including publications from Britain, the USA, Europe, Germany and China. These lexicons had been constructed in various ways: the larger ones were purely objective and were based on word frequency, while others were purely subjective and were drawn up by panels of teachers and linguists, and some combined both objective and subjective criteria. These sources gave an initial research database of over 25,000 items, which were then aligned to the levels of the CEFR using the labels or the frequencies given in the original sources. These alignments were then compared. Where there was agreement between sources, the level was accepted for the WFF. When sources disagreed, frequency was used to determine an initial level, and an item was then given a higher or lower level by consulting the subjective sources. The result was that many really useful words, such as *lazy*, *punctual* and *belief*, were promoted to an earlier CEFR level. Marginal members of word families with low frequency or usefulness were allocated to level X, beyond C2.

### WORD FAMILY FRAMEWORK

**1**

**2** **Advanced options**

A1:  A2:  B1:  B2:  C1:  C2:  X:  All:

[Start search](#)

[Show all words](#)

**3** Download a PDF file of all the terms within the WFF [Download](#)

Figure 2

# Keeping it in the family

## Vocabulary-learning strategies

The WFF lists a very large number of items, and these can be searched and selected for teaching and learning vocabulary lists or syllabuses. The word family arrangement is believed to be a more efficient format than the purely alphabetical arrangement of dictionaries and conventional word lists. However, there are several strategies, apart from simple rote learning, which may make vocabulary learning easier and more efficient. These may be divided into 'knowledge' (knowledge about the English vocabulary system which makes it easier to understand how words are constructed and related) and 'skills' (strategies which can be used to understand unfamiliar words in spoken and written texts). These are summarised in Figure 3.

Here is a short activity to practise some of these strategies. The students should work in pairs.

### Pre-reading

- 1 What meanings can you think of for these words: *milk*, *waste* and *plant*? (Indicate the part of speech and arrange them into different word families.)
- 2 Find each word in your dictionary or online dictionary. Time yourselves. How long did it take to find each word?
- 3 Check the meanings you have given, and extend your list.

### While-reading

- 4 Look at the following extract from an authentic text about refrigeration. Use the context to decide which meanings are used for the words in the list.

*Another application for the technology is to **milk** additional energy from the hot **waste** water produced by conventional power plants. Even the most efficient **plants** today capture only 30 to 40 per cent of the energy in the fuel, releasing the bulk of the remainder in the form of heat – much of it is hot water, with sometimes damaging environmental consequences.*

Knowledge	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English core vocabulary consists of base or headwords, from which word families are constructed.</li> <li>Base words may have different, unrelated meanings (polysemy) – <i>bank</i><sup>1</sup>/<i>bank</i><sup>2</sup>, <i>bark</i><sup>1</sup>/<i>bark</i><sup>2</sup>.</li> <li>Derivatives are constructed by prefixes and suffixes.</li> <li>Base words can combine to form compounds.</li> <li>Words can change grammatical function through the addition of the 'zero suffix'.</li> <li>Words can change meaning through figurative use (<i>crane</i><sup>1</sup> = <i>bird</i> → <i>crane</i><sup>2</sup> = <i>lifting device</i>).</li> <li>Words in the target language may sound or look like those in the mother tongue – these may be 'friends' or 'false friends'.</li> <li>A monolingual dictionary contains many resources apart from spelling.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using structural clues which determine parts of speech.</li> <li>Using morphological clues (prefixes, suffixes, compounding, etc) to determine meaning.</li> <li>Recognising and using definitions and glosses in a text.</li> <li>Inferencing meaning from a word's context.</li> <li>Ignoring 'throw-away' words which are not important to the meaning of a text.</li> <li>Using 'semantic approximation' to determine the rough meaning of a word.</li> <li>Distinguishing between 'friends' or Anglicisms and 'false friends'.</li> <li>Efficient dictionary use – being able to find any word within 15 seconds.</li> </ul>

Figure 3

- 5 Do you notice any other words in this text that have several different meanings and functions? Which meanings are being used here?

### Post-reading

- 6 Add all the words to your vocabulary notebook/computer folder. Can you add other members of each word family, using prefixes, suffixes or compound words?
- 7 Do any of the words in the text look similar to words in your own language? Are they 'friends' or 'false friends'?



The WFF has been designed as a resource to enable teachers and learners to make informed decisions about which words are worth learning, and whether they are worth learning earlier or later in one's language-learning career. It is a resource covering general English, and does not attempt to include ESP items. While it is a resource produced by the British Council that is written in British English, it also gives full prominence to items of American English. It is hoped

that it will prove valuable to both teachers and learners, and the team that designed it welcomes comments and suggestions, either via the British Council's Teach English website or directly to me at the email address below. 

Council of Europe *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Language, Teaching, Assessment* CUP 2001

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