Developments in First-year Students' Vocabulary – 2011 Spring Semester
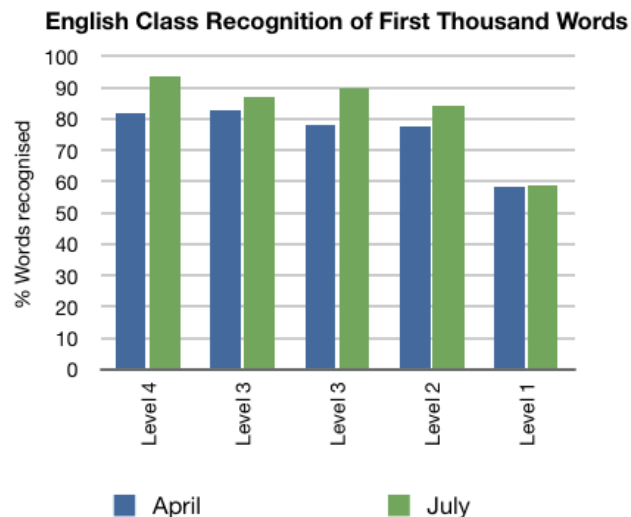
All first-year students took vocabulary tests at the beginning and end of the spring semester. The first tests were carried out in April within one week of the semester beginning. The second tests were carried out in the examinations week in July.

There were three sections to each test. The first two sections targetted vocabulary taken from the first and second 1,000 most frequent words in English (West, 1953). These first 2,000 words are commonly accepted as a 'core' vocabulary which is required for all students, whatever their learning purpose. The third section targetted words taken from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). This list includes 570 words that are outside the first 2,000 words of English but that appear frequently in academic text.
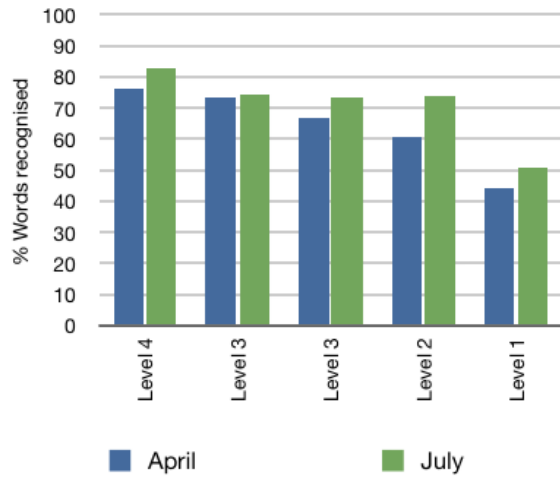
There are several goals for the results of this test. For the faculty, the results will enable us to prepare more appropriate lesson materials, since we will be more informed about our students' vocabulary levels. We will also be able to advise students to focus on studying particular word lists based on their individual test results. This will provide students with better feedback on their learning, and will also allow them to set goals for improvement. Finally, by providing students with actual data about their vocabulary knowledge, it is hoped that they can be encouraged to take control of their own development and become more autonomous learners.
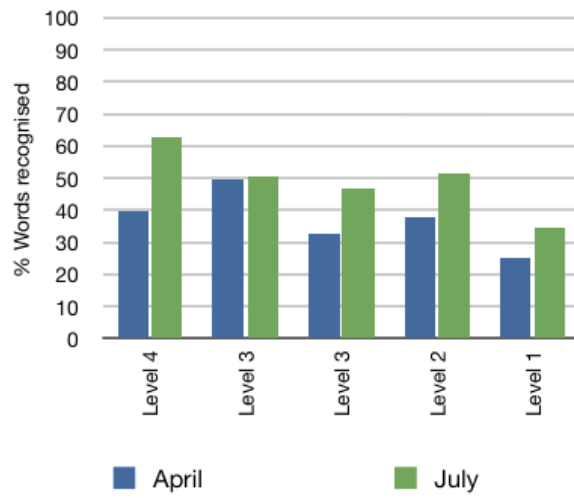
Results

The charts below show the performance of the five English classes in July. The classes are grouped by their level in the English program, with the Level 4 class being the highest.
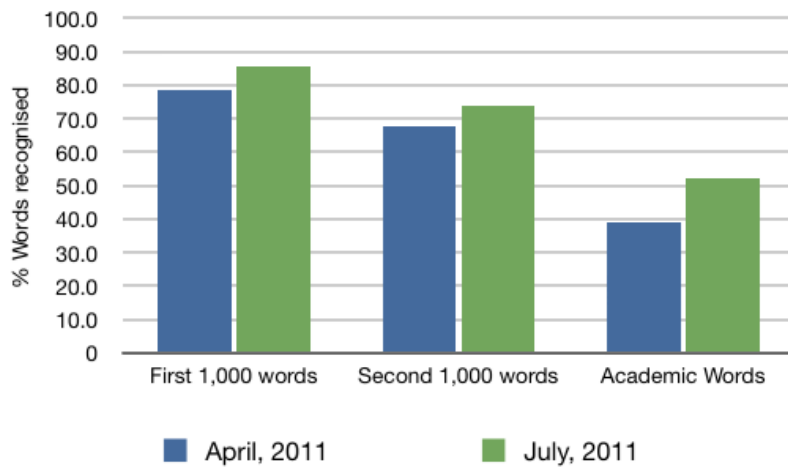

English Class Recognition of First Thousand Words

English Class Recognition of Second Thousand Words

% Words recognised

	Level 4	Level 3	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1

■ April   ■ July

English Class Recognition of Academic Words

% Words recognised

	Level 4	Level 3	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1

■ April   ■ July

All 1st Year Students

% Words recognised

	First 1,000 words	Second 1,000 words	Academic Words

■ April, 2011   ■ July, 2011
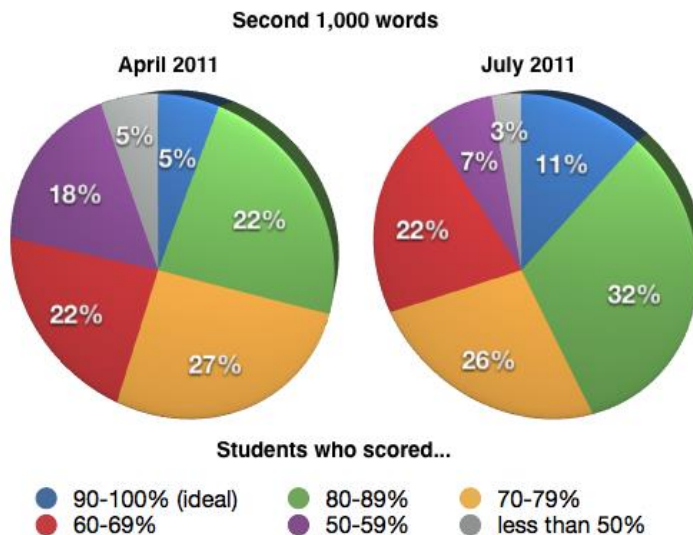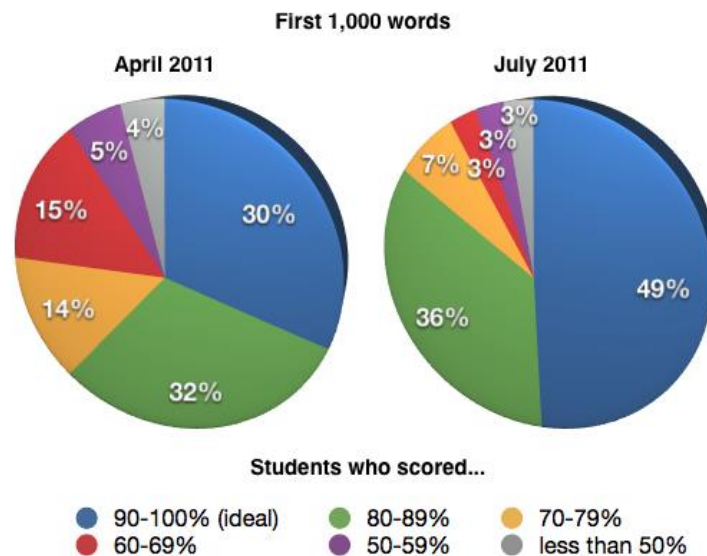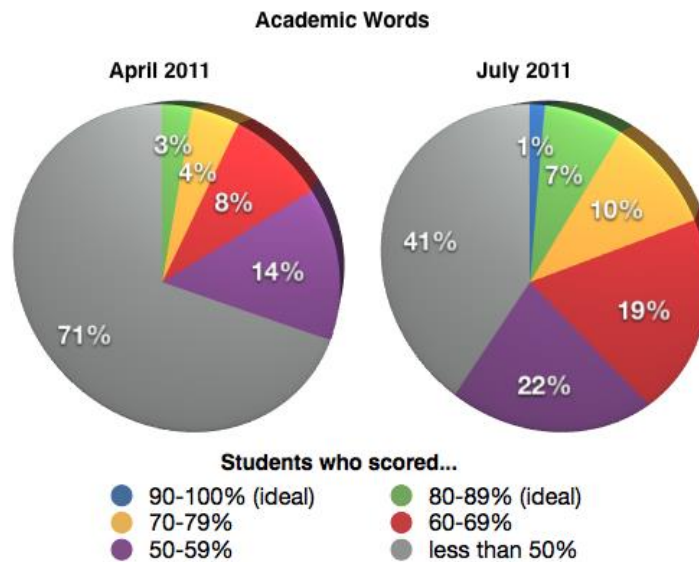
These results suggest that students' ability to recognize vocabulary has improved over the first semester. In some cases, the improvements are marginal, but the majority of cases appear to show clear improvements.

The averages across the entire year seem to follow the same trend. On average, the first-year students recognized 86% of the first 1,000 words, 74% of the second 1,000 words, and 52% of the academic words in July. While theses results do appear to be positive, it is important to note that the first 1,000 words are absolutely essential for language use, and realistically, we should be aiming for 100% recognition as soon as possible. Likewise, the second 1,000 words are highly frequent, and a goal of 100% recognition by the end of the third semester may be appropriate. For academic vocabulary, 80% is a commonly quoted figure for acceptable recognition.

The following charts show how the breakdown of vocabulary recognition scores changed over the first semester for all students. For example, in April, 30% of the students recognized over 90% of the first 1,000 words, while in July 49% appeared to have reached this ideal range.

First 1,000 words

April 2011

4%
5%
15%
14%
32%
30%

July 2011

3%
3%
7% 3%
36%
49%

Students who scored...

● 90-100% (ideal)   ● 80-89%   ● 70-79%
● 60-69%   ● 50-59%   ● less than 50%

Second 1,000 words

April 2011

5%
5%
18%
22%
22%
27%

July 2011

3%
7%   11%
22%
32%
26%

Students who scored...

● 90-100% (ideal)   ● 80-89%   ● 70-79%
● 60-69%   ● 50-59%   ● less than 50%

Academic Words

| April 2011 | July 2011 |

(April 2011) 3% · 4% · 8% · 14% · 71%

(July 2011) 1% · 7% · 10% · 19% · 22% · 41%

Students who scored...

- 90-100% (ideal)
- 80-89% (ideal)
- 70-79%
- 60-69%
- 50-59%
- less than 50%

In each of the levels, the charts suggest improvements, with more students approaching acceptable levels of vocabulary recognition. However, it should be noted that while the overall trend is positive, many MIC first-year students still appear to lack essential vocabulary. Academic vocabulary, in particular, is largely unrecognized by most students.

Student feedback

The results of the two tests have been returned to students, and used by faculty to advise MIC learners on suitable words to focus their attention on. Students have been provided with word lists that are appropriate for their individual needs.

Limitations of the data

The results presented above are taken from a trial study of a vocabulary test. The test instrument, while appearing to perform in a satisfactory manner, has not been fully validated. As such, the data cannot as yet be used to make definitive statements about the MIC program.

Validation work is in progress, and further data will be collected at the end of the current semester and the spring 2012 semester. This will lead to refinements in the test itself, and greater confidence in the results it provides.

References

Coxhead, A. (2000) A New Academic Word List. TESOL Quarterly 34-2: 213-238.

West, M. (1953). *A General Service List of English Words*. London: Longman Green.