

# Teaching Vocabulary & Formulaic Language in the Language Classroom

How many words do our students know?

How many words do they need to know?

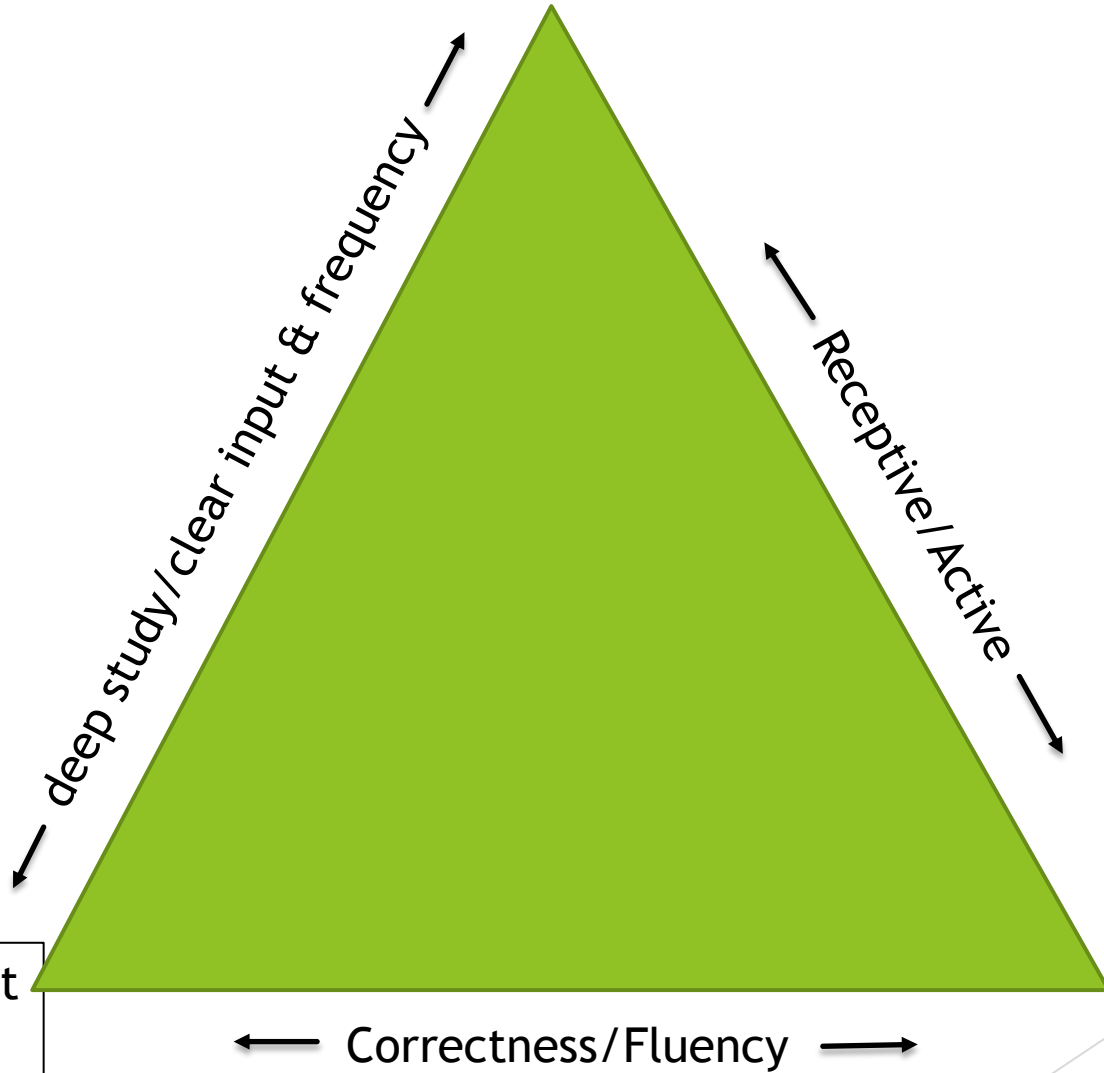
Which words do they need to know?

What does it mean to know a word?

What is a word?

# The Vocabulary Task

large number of words to learn



vocabulary in context  
& collocations

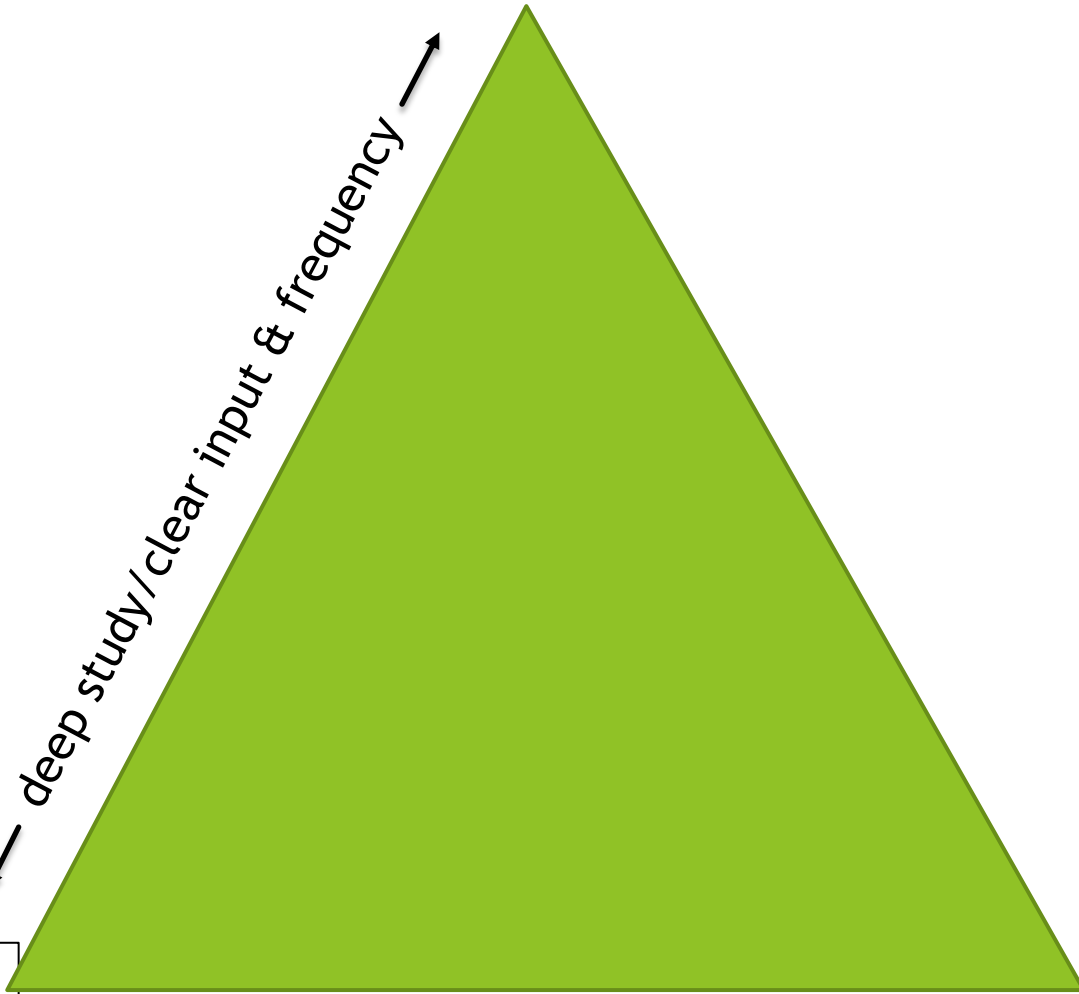
production

# The Vocabulary Task

large number of words to learn

*deep study/clear input & frequency*

vocabulary in context  
& collocations



# The Lexical Approach (1990's)

“What just happened here?”

- a vocabulary-centered approach to ESL arises (mostly outside the US) e.g. I.S.P. Nation
  - \* Lexical items as “chunks”
  - \* Fixed phrases and semi-fixed phrases make up most of what we say and write
  - \* Language as “Lexicalized Grammar” idea challenges Chomsky’s colorless-green-ideas-sleep-furiously view of language reality
- Corpus studies using computers and analyzing massive amounts of data (British National Corpus, American National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English, etc)

# The Lexical Approach

“What just happened here?”

- More specialized word frequency lists in addition to the General Service List (GSL, 1953)
  - \* e.g. Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000)
- New collocation dictionaries and teaching materials that emphasize frequency and usage
  - \* Collins COBUILD, Oxford , Longman
- Distinction between active/productive vocabulary and passive/receptive vocabulary

# What is Formulaic Language?

## Habitual Constructions

- the best way to (v) is to (v)
- not as (adj) as you might think

## Semi-fixed Expressions

- it is important to
- take some chances

## Fixed Expressions

- all wet
- deal with

## Polywords

- upside down
- nevertheless
- by the way

# What is Formulaic Language?

## Habitual Constructions

- the best way to (v) is to (v)
- not as (adj) as you might think

## Semi-fixed Expressions

- it is important to
- take some chances

## Fixed Expressions

- all wet
- deal with

## Polywords

- upside down
- nevertheless
- by the way

More rule-based  
(systematic)



More word-like  
(arbitrary)

# Formulaic Language and Frequency

*“One of the first issues to consider in idiom instruction is which idioms to teach and in what sequence. Many English idiom teaching and reference materials exist for ESOL learners, some of which claim to cover essential idioms. Yet the selection of idioms in these publications often reflects primarily the authors' intuition rather than any empirical data, and a substantial number of them are rarely used. Thus learning these idioms not only is difficult, but may also be unhelpful because students rarely encounter and use them. In addition, these materials cover many seldom-used idioms but fail to cover some frequently used ones.”*

Dilin Liu, Oklahoma City University

The Most Frequently Used Spoken American English Idioms: A Corpus Analysis and Its Implications. TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 671-700

(Take out “idioms” and put in “vocabulary” and the observation is just as valid.)



According to Liu's research, these are the top 10 most frequently used phrasal verbs in written academic English.

Go on

Take on

Give up

Make up

Carry out

Point out

Pick up

Turn out

Bring about

Set up

## In order of frequency

1. Point out
2. Carry out
3. Go on
4. Take on
5. Make up
6. Set up
7. Turn out
8. Bring about
9. Give up
10. Pick up
11. Take up
12. Find out
13. End up
14. Go back
15. Come up
16. Break down
17. Set out
18. Open up
19. Take over
20. Figure out

# Number of meanings

(according to the Longman Dictionary of American English)

Go on  
(9)

Give up  
(3)

Take on  
(4)

Make up  
(8)

Carry out  
(2)

Point out  
(2)

Pick up  
(15)

Turn out  
(5)

Bring about  
(1)

Set up  
(6)

## How's your intuition about word/phrase frequency?

- In Academic written American English, *Point out* is used \_\_\_ times more than *pick up* (#10) and \_\_\_ times more than *figure out* (#20). (Liu, 2003)
- *Rather than* is used \_\_\_ times more than *so far* and \_\_\_ times more than *at work*. (Martinez, PHRASE list)

## How's your intuition about word/phrase frequency?

- In Academic written American English, *point out* is used 4 times more than *pick up* (#10) and 8 times more than *figure out* (#20). (Liu, 2003)
- *Rather than* is used 5 times more than *so far* and 25 times more than *at work*. (Martinez, PHRASE list)

Discuss the role of teacher intuition in deciding which vocabulary to spend time on.

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

The Goal: Get students to that 95% comprehension level for academic English

Strategies:

## 1) Teach the high frequency vocabulary

- GSL list of 2000 words (updated NGSL)
- AWL of 570 Academic Word Families
- **PHRASE List (Martinez) or Longman Collocation Dictionary**

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

## Word List Deficiencies

1) Difference between spoken & written & academic spoken & academic written, etc

-- Shin (2007) Only 15 collocations occur in both the top 50 spoken and top 50 written lists.

2) Word lists ignore phrases and collocations (except for Martinez)

-- Martinez PHRASE list includes about 300 phrases in his first 2000 most common word list and over 500 in the first 3000.

3) Word lists ignore multiple meanings of words

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

2) Teach multiple meanings of most common verbs and various “pivot words”

(Shin & Nation, 2007) Very common nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs (content words) that are key in a large number of phrases and formulaic language

-- The root meaning of the *pivot word* is rarely used in isolation and the way the pivot word is used in a phrase is often completely different from the root meaning.

e.g. **Take** = **Obtain** is actually very rare but ...



Take place

Take over

Take up

Take on

It takes

Take into account

Take part in

Take off

Take advantage of

Take for granted

Take care of

Take notes

Take a test

Take your time

Take a bus

Take the lead

Take advice

Take a look

Take a break

Etc...

... are all very common and **none** of them mean “obtain.”

Are we actually misleading our students when we tell them what “take” means?

## How central are these pivot words?

“The most frequent 100 pivot words have 2052 collocations ... (and) have an average of 20.5 collocations, while the second 100 words have 8.4.”

These 100 pivot words are used in about 50% of the more than 700,000 collocations in the study.

-- Shin and Nation (2007)

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

3) Prioritize explicit teaching of vocabulary - don't suppose mere exposure will get them there.

-- In academic English, the most common 2000 words (GSL) gets us to 80%, then adding the 570 AWL words get us to 90%

(from T. Cobb, *Why and How to Use Frequency Lists*)

-- Even common words and phrases occur only a few times per million words in natural texts. How many natural encounters are we likely to have? The 10 encounters that are usually needed? No.

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

## 4) Empower students by teaching them vocabulary learning skills

Skills -- dictionary use, vocabulary notebooks, flash card methods and web sites, goal setting, establishing routines and methods, vocabulary learning partners, etc

Knowledge - Make them aware of issues like collocations and pivot words, active vs. passive vocabulary, extensive reading of easy materials, roots, and affixes

So what's next?

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

How do we get to the 95-98% that is necessary for reading success in the university?

- a) Lots of meaningful exposure to normal authentic materials (extensive reading)
- b) Using vocabulary skills like context clues, Latin and Greek roots and affixes, and good dictionary skills (intensive reading)
- c) Focus on their areas of interest (English for Special Purposes)
- d) Use words lists of the 5000-6000 most common words
- e) 2000 common words, plus 570 AWL, plus most common phrases

Discuss

# Formulaic Language and Pedagogy

Why do you think we don't teach collocations and phrases more?

- a) They're not in the book/materials we use.
- b) Students don't "get it" when I've tried.
- c) I don't know which ones are common and useful and which are trivial.
- d) I teach a (listening, writing, etc) class and they don't fit into that skill easily.
- e) It takes a lot of time to create something useful.
- f) We focus on mistakes and avoiding them; wrong collocations like a large idea, a mature banana, lying story (tall tale), false leg, and artificial teeth are not really mistakes.

Discuss

# A few ideas about teaching activities

- **Noticing**
- **Receptive Practice**
- **Review Exercises**
- **Activation Practice**

# Noticing

Teacher: *In this text, underline these words...*

Manufacturers often send coupons to shoppers. They want to attract attention to their products and get the shopper to try it out. In exchange for a coupon, the seller will give the shopper a lower price. The shoppers feel like they are getting a good deal and the manufacturers may have attracted a new customer as well.

*Now, find the words that 'partner' with these words. Are there other words or synonyms you know that mean the same thing as these partner words?*

(e.g. bring, test, trade, smaller, agreement, brought, good)

*Do you think it would sound as natural if we used these synonyms instead of the words?*



# Receptive Practice

Teacher: *Which 3 words mean the opposite of the phrase deep down? Do you see any other phrases here?*

**She seemed very calm on the surface, but inside she was scared to death.**

Teacher: *Now let's look at the words deep and surface in the dictionary. What else do you notice about how we use these words?*

-----  
Teacher: *What's another way to say really knows how to use?*

**He started learning English when he was just a child and has been speaking it all his life, so now he has a good command of English and he can deal with any situation that comes up.**

# Receptive (or review) Practice

Fill in the blank with either the noun lead or the time. You may use your dictionary.

- just in \_\_\_\_
- had a big \_\_\_\_
- take the \_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ them back
- \_\_\_\_'s up
- on \_\_\_\_
- a short \_\_\_\_
- in the \_\_\_\_
- a small \_\_\_\_

# Activation Practice

Now in groups of 2 or 3, make a sentence using each of the phrases.

- **just in time**
- **had a big lead**
- **take the lead**
- **time's up**
- **on time**
- **a short time**
- **in the lead**
- **a small lead**

# Receptive (or review) Practice

Match the verbs with the phrases.

\_\_\_ understand

grow \_\_\_

stand \_\_\_

leads to \_\_\_

that brings \_\_\_

that is up \_\_\_

lead by \_\_\_

into a man

nowhere

still

example

completely

us to

to you

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks? (3 teams; reveal one at a time.)

- sour \_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ him for information
- whole \_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ jug
- \_\_\_\_ shake
- skim \_\_\_\_

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- **stone** \_\_\_\_

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war



# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call
- got \_\_\_\_ feet

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call
- got \_\_\_\_ feet
- freezing \_\_\_\_

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call
- got \_\_\_\_ feet
- freezing \_\_\_\_
- have a bad \_\_\_\_

# Review Practice

What one word fits in all the following blanks?

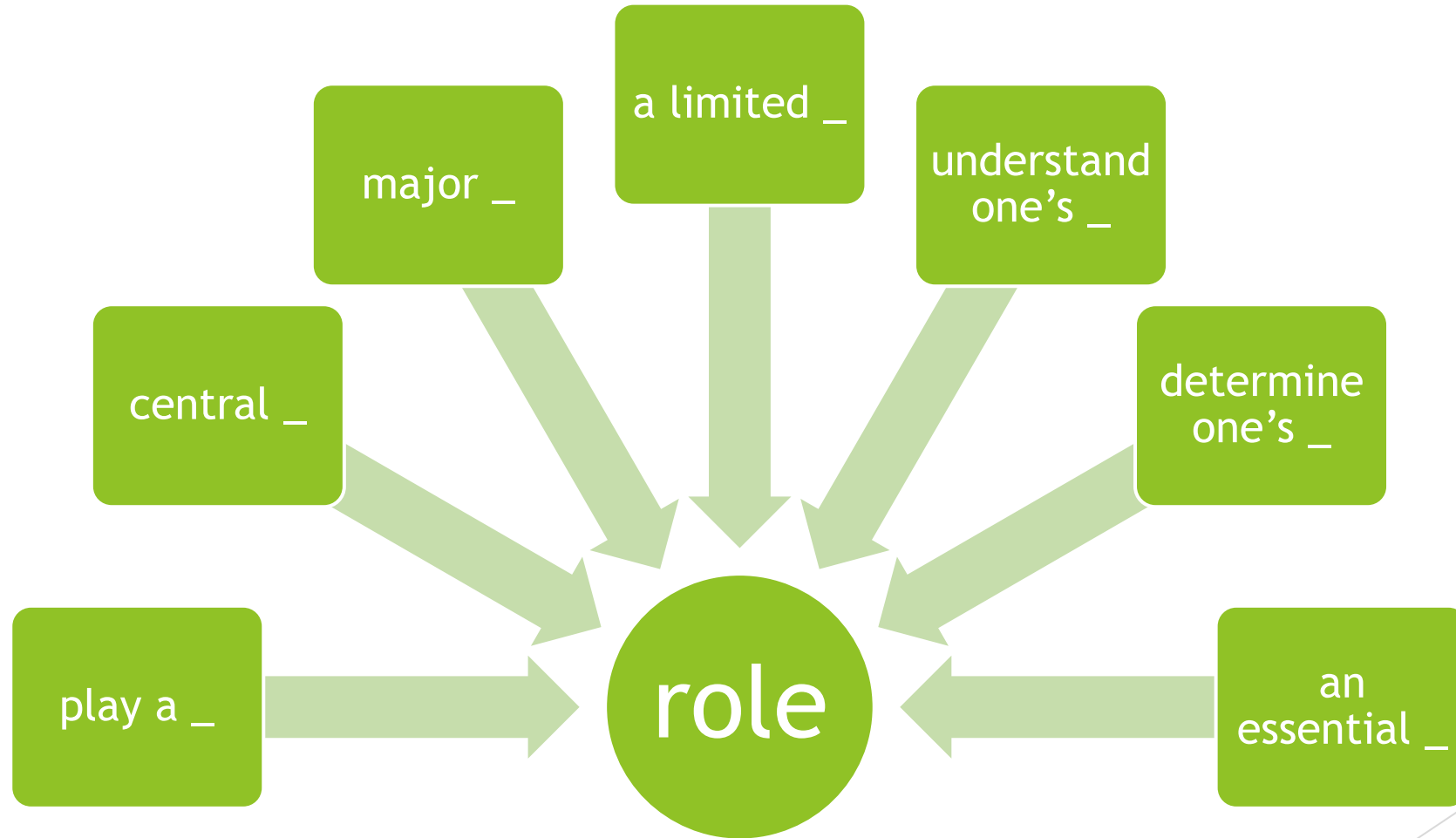
- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call
- got \_\_\_\_ feet
- freezing \_\_\_\_
- have a bad \_\_\_\_
- in \_\_\_\_ blood

# Review Practice

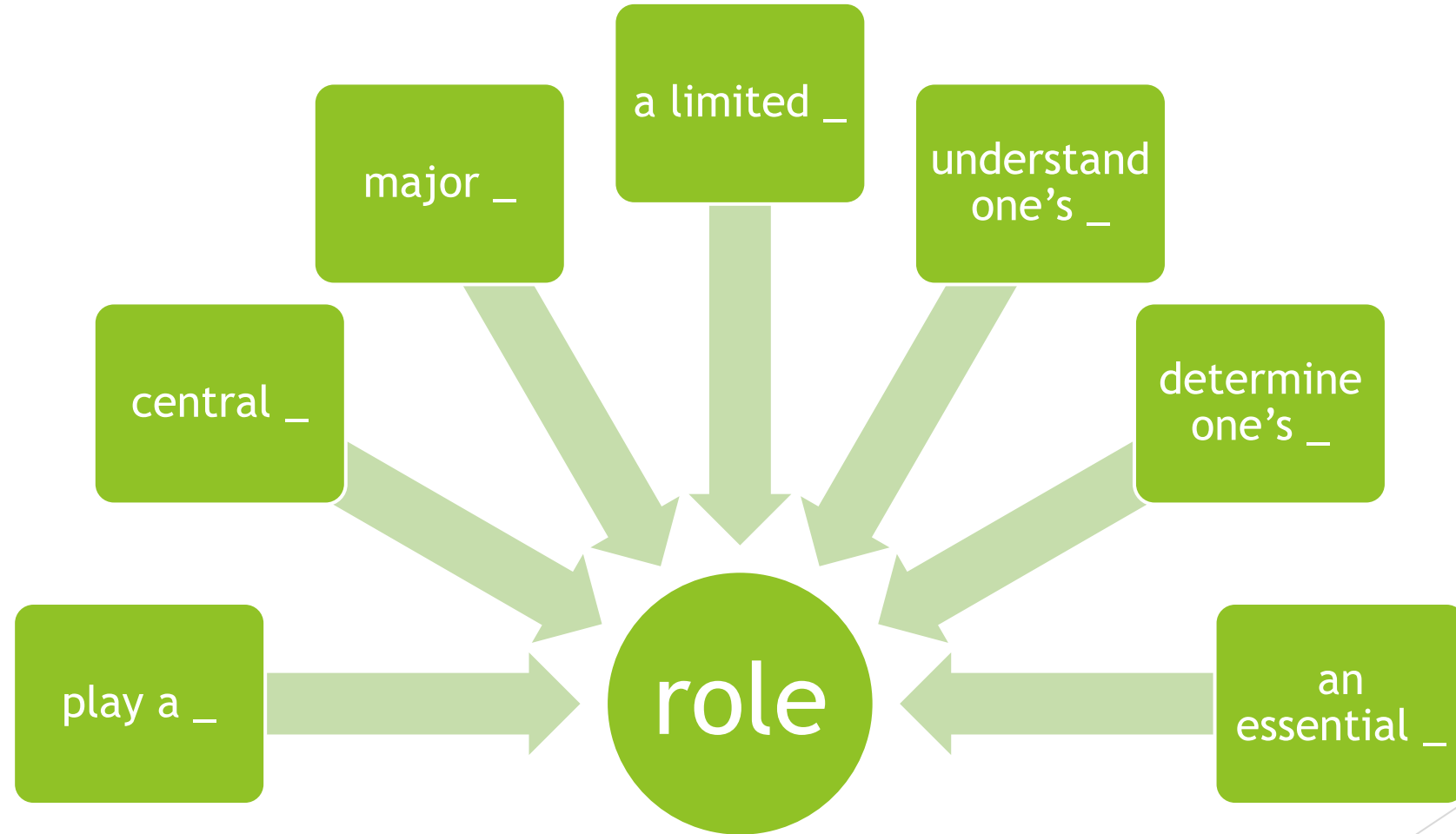
What one word fits in all the following blanks?

- stone \_\_\_\_
- a \_\_\_\_ drink
- \_\_\_\_ war
- \_\_\_\_ call
- got \_\_\_\_ feet
- freezing \_\_\_\_
- have a bad \_\_\_\_
- in \_\_\_\_ blood
- she was out \_\_\_\_

# Receptive (or review) Practice



# Activation Practice



Talk about the family (government, religion, etc) in your society and use as many of these terms as you can.



# Sources and Resources

## On-line collocation dictionaries and tools

<http://oxforddictionary.so8848.com/>

<http://www.ozdic.com/>

<http://www.just-the-word.com/>

<http://miscollocation.blogspot.com/p/about-us.html#TOP>

# Sources and Resources

## Frequency Lists and Corpus Tools

<http://www.englishprofile.org/index.php/wordlists>

<http://www.newgeneralservicelist.org/>

[www.wordfrequency.info](http://www.wordfrequency.info)

[http://www.lextutor.ca/freq/lists\\_download/phrase\\_list\\_martinez.htm](http://www.lextutor.ca/freq/lists_download/phrase_list_martinez.htm)

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>

<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

# Sources and Resources

## Tests and Practice Sites

<http://www.better-english.com/strongcoll.htm>

<http://quizlet.com/33178234/the-phrase-list-most-frequent-phrasal-expressions-1-flash-cards/>

<http://www.lex tutor.ca/tests/associates/>

<http://www.englishvocabularyexercises.com/>

# Sources and Resources

## Papers

Beyond Single Words: the most frequent collocations in spoken English, Shin and Nation, 2007

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/publications/paul-nation/2008-Shin-Collocations.pdf>

A Phrasal Expressions List, Martinez and Schmitt, 2012

<http://www.englishvocabularyexercises.com/>

The most frequently-used multi-word constructions in academic written English: A multi-corpus study; Dilin Liu, 2003

[http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S088949061100045](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0889490611000457)

# Sources and Resources

## Papers

Why and How to Use Frequency Lists to Learn words, Tom Cobb

<http://www.lex tutor.ca/research/>

A Framework for the Inclusion of Multiword Expressions in ELT,  
Martinez, 2013

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/01/15/elt.ccs100.full.pdf>