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Combining English foreign language (EFL) spelling and vocabulary acquisition: Facilitating literacy acquisition

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Novel phonemes and foreign orthography create challenges for Hebrew and Arabic speaking children in Israel who begin to acquire EFL literacy in the third grade. Policy makers are compiling lists of corpus-based frequent lexical items to be taught initially in order to provide novice learners with language that will assist them to understand, communicate, read and write at a CEFR A1 level (Nikolov, 2016).

To facilitate the combined teaching of meaning and spelling, we mapped over 700 frequent words into orthographic/morphological categories: closed syllables with short vowel sounds; open syllables with long vowel sounds; words containing split digraphs; words with vowel teams; words with R-controlled syllables; words with consonant-le syllables; words with consonant digraphs; words with geminates (before a short vowel); multisyllabic words with unaccented vowels and words with prefixes or suffixes. Frequency of short vowels in closed syllables support research (Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004) and make this orthographic convention a first choice regarding EFL literacy instruction for textbook writers and teachers. We explored teaching orders of these words and conventions, considering the limited teaching hours available in schools.