ESL Baseline Word List for Teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language

This list is sorted in order by relative word importance.
By American Literacy Council Staff.

7,000 English words are listed here that happen to use letters consistently to represent the speech sounds that are typically desired when pronouncing English words. From a corpus of 44,000 words, 36,000 were omitted from this list because their standard dictionary spellings included extraneous letters and ill-formed vowel signals which are necessarily confusing and misleading for persons learning English as a second language.

In contrast, the 7,000 words below are quite consistent in their use of letters to represent sounds that are expected. They are no different from the short phonic word lists provided when teaching reading to children. Because these words are already in phonic format, they are least confusing to ESL students. Use these words to create phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and stories as introductory materials for ESL teaching and mentoring.

Avoid use of the 39,000 words mentioned above where a learner is confronted with words like bomb (Bom-BEE?), quite (Quit-EEE?). Actually there are 17 variant ways to signal the “EE” sound as in “FEET.” Some words have no “E” even though they are spoken with the “EE” sound – such as debris, ski, and esprit. These types of words add up to 36,000 out of 44,000. Eventually an ESL student will confront those 36,000 words, but if a foundation is mastered first by using this baseline list where letters are used consistently to represent speech sounds, that foundation can be a spring-board for going further. Some book authors purposely write with an abbreviated vocabulary to gain larger readership, and this list presents English words “as good as they get” related to consistent use of the 26 letter alphabet. Use them to write stories, worksheets, practice sentences, suitable for various age levels.

Consider also the temporary use of SOUND-WRITE software from the site at http://AmericanLiteracy.com because students can type these words or sentences into a computer from a worksheet of short suggested sentences. The computer then pronounces the words automatically so that a foreign-born person can hear them over and over as solitary words, or as sentences where content adds interest and meaning.

The number following each word indicates how many times (typically) that word is used in random English newspapers and books. See also the other list like this that’s arranged to show these words alphabetically.
Click here - http://AmericanLiteracy/ALC2/ESL/ESL-baseline-alpha.pdf

Some technical notes:
1. Many English words have double letters dropped randomly into words – address, terrify, supple, and thousands more. These words were included in this list despite their lack of phonic purity because they’re unlikely to be confusing for ESL students in most cases.
2. Words like “NEEDS” ought to end in a “Z” not an “S” but since half the plural forms of English words demand a “Z” sound and half do not, these words were included in this list – phonic impurity notwithstanding. In many cases a foreign born person may not hear the difference between the “S” sound and the “Z” sound in their early learning experience. ESL students will be able to communicate whether they can distinguish these two sounds or not. If all “S” signals are pronounced as “S”, they will still be understood.
3. Most words like "NATION" were omitted from this list because 2/3 of the time "TION" requires us to make the sound of "SHUN" whereas 1/3 of the time it does not. Those types of words can be added to student sentences later after they’ve mastered these foundational words and become comfortable with sounding out syllables.
grit:1
grumblers:1
grumbling:1
grumblings:1
grumps:1
gunshot:1
gunshots:1
gush:1
gusher:1
gust:1
gull:1
gutted:1
handout:1
hanger:1
hangers:1
hangman:1
hangouts:1
haphazardly:1
harass:1
harassment:1
haboring:1
hardily:1
hardiness:1
hardpan:1
harmfully:1
harmlessly:1
harmonica:1
harp:1
harpoon:1
harvested:1
hash:1
hazelnut:1
heeded:1
hep:1
hiccup:1
hiccough:1
hiccoughs:1
hiccup:1
hiccupping:1
hiccups:1
hilltop:1
hilly:1
hinder:1
hindering:1
hinders:1
hobnob:1
hoodee:1
hoodoo:1
hoodwink:1
hoisted:1
hooting:1
hoots:1
hops:1
horeradish:1
hotbed:1
hotbox:1
hothead:1
hotheads:1
hotrod:1
hotshot:1
hows:1
howsoever:1
hue:1
humbler:1
humbug:1
hypnotism:1
hypnotist:1
immodest:1
immodesty:1
impound:1
impounding:1
impoundments:1
impounds:1
impoverish:1
incorrectly:1
incumbents:1
indelibly:1
indignantly:1
indignity:1
indigo:1
infections:1
infertility:1
infest:1
infertility:1
inhabit:1
inhabitable:1
inhabitancy:1
inhabitant:1
inhabitation:1
inhabiting:1
inhalant:1
inhalation:1
inhalator:1
inhaler:1
inheritor:1
inheriting:1
inheritors:1
inheriting:1
inkblo created:1
inking:1
inks:1
inked:1
innards:1
inns:1
inrush:1
inset:1
insets:1
insolvably:1
insomnia:1
insomnia:1
insomniacs:1
instep:1
instill:1
insular:1
intendants:1
interbreed:1
intercom:1
intercostal:1
intone:1
intrepid:1
inventing:1
invents:1
investing:1
invincibly:1
inwards:1
italic:1
jamboree:1
jamming:1
jasper:1
jellyfish:1
jest:1
jigger:1
jiggle:1
jiggling:1
jig:1
jigsw:1
jolt:1
jot:1
jotted:1
jotting:1
juggler:1
jugs:1
jumbo:1
jumper:1
junks:1
jut:1
kabob:1
kabobs:1
kib:1
kilt:1
kilter:1
kilts:1
kindling:1
larva:1
lasts:1
launchers:1
launder:1
laundered:1
launderings:1
leech:1
leads:1
leek:1
leeward:1
left handed:1
left handers:1
leftist:1
leftists:1
leggy:1
lender:1
lenders:1
lentil:1
leper:1
lepers:1
leprosy:1
lesbian:1
lesbians:1
lilt:1
lily:1
linsede:1
lintel:1
lisping:1
lisp:1
listless:1
listlessly:1
livel:1
lizard:1
lizards:1
lob:1
logoff:1
logon:1
loan:1
lol:1
lones:1
memoranda:1
memorandums:1
memorize:1
memorialize:1
memorialized:1
midship:1
longrun:1
longs:1
longshot:1
loops:1
loosening:1
loose:1
looser:1
lost:1
losing:1
louter:1
louters:1
lou:1
lumberyard:1
lunches:1
lunchroom:1
lunchrooms:1
lurches:1
lures:1
luring:1
lurk:1
lurks:1
lushes:1
lushness:1
lusterware:1
lustful:1
lustily:1
macaw:1
macroscopic:1
madcap:1
maddens:1
madder:1
magn:1
maggot:1
manifesting:1
manifesto:1
manifests:1
manikin:1
manikins:1
mariner:1
mark:1
markers:1
marky:1
marital:1
marts:1
martyrdom:1
marvelling:1
marvels:1
mascara:1
mascot:1
masterfully:1
mastering:1
masterly:1
medic:1
medics:1
medley:1
melodically:1
melon:1
memento:1
mementos:1
memorably:1
memoranda:1
mementos:1
memo:1
mushy:1
mushrooming:1
mustily:1
| voids:1    | whammy:1          | whitecaps:1          | wintertime:1        | yonder:1     |
| vomit:1   | wheelbase:1       | whitehaired:1       | wintering:1         | zap:1        |
| vomited:1 | wheelchair:1      | whiteheads:1        | wittily:1           | zapped:1     |
| vomits:1  | wheelchairs:1     | whiten:1            | wittingly:1         | zapping:1    |
| vortex:1  | wheelers:1        | whitening:1         | wizards:1           | zebras:1     |
| vouch:1   | wheezed:1         | whoppers:1          | woebegone:1         | zeppelins:1  |
| voucher:1 | wheezing:1        | whopping:1          | woeful:1            | ziggy:1      |
| vouchers:1| wheezes:1         |                       | woes:1              | zigzags:1    |
| vouching:1|                       |                       | wooting:1           | zip:1        |
| warranty:1|                       |                       | workbag:1           | zippers:1    |
| washable:1|                       |                       | workbooks:1         | zipped:1     |
| washbasin:1|                      |                       | workbooks:1         | zoom:1       |
| washboard:1|                      |                       | workbasket:1        | zooming:1    |
| washbowl:1|                       |                       | workbasket:1        | zooms:1      |
| washhouse:1|                      |                       | yadas:1             | zoos:1       |
| washroom:1|                       |                       | yak:1               | zoot:1       |
| washstand:1|                      |                       | yaks:1              |              |
| washtub:1 | whines:1          |                       | yams:1              |              |
| weed:1    | whiny:1           |                       | yaps:1              |              |
| weedened:1| whiplash:1        |                       | yardman:1           |              |
| weeps:1   | whisking:1        |                       | yardmaster:1        |              |
| wellborn:1| whisks:1          |                       | yelping:1           |              |
| wellspring:1| whisperings:1    |                       | yelps:1             |              |
| wets:1    | whist:1           |                       | yip:1               |              |
| wham:1    | whitecap:1        |                       | yon:1               |              |