

Developing an Academic Vocabulary Curriculum

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It is estimated that international students at the advanced level in academic English language programs in the United States and other English speaking countries should have acquired a minimum English vocabulary of 2,000 head words (plus derivatives), while an average native-speaking undergraduate is estimated to have a vocabulary of about 20,000 words. Without further vocabulary study, therefore, these students will be at a distinct disadvantage when they enter their academic fields. In order to narrow this gap by improving students' knowledge of key academic vocabulary, a vocabulary curriculum for students who need English for academic purposes should focus on the Academic Word List, compiled by Averil Coxhead in 2000.

The Academic Word List (AWL) was developed to meet the specific needs of students with advanced-level English language proficiency who plan to enter undergraduate and graduate programs in all disciplines. Students who know the 570 word families in the AWL in addition to the basic 2,000 words will have mastery of approximately 95% of the vocabulary in an academic text. The remaining 5% is made up of technical words specific to the academic field and low-frequency words for which 'guessing' techniques should be employed. The AWL is made up of items selected according to range and frequency from The Academic Corpus, a written corpus of academic English from 28

fields in the faculties of Arts, Commerce, Law, and Science. This list, therefore, provides essential vocabulary for any academic student, regardless of whether the field of study is Physics, Psychology, or Drama. However, the curriculum should not be limited to the AWL, which focuses on the relatively formal language associated with lectures, research, reading, and academic writing. Selected idioms which are likely to be used informally should also be included so that students can learn to interact naturally with their colleagues and peers in a variety of contexts. In addition, since two-thirds of academic, technical, and low-frequency vocabulary items contain Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes, students should be introduced to the most common word parts to help them decode unknown items.

The design of any academic vocabulary course should rest firmly on research findings into the relationship between memory and the learning and retention of vocabulary. These principles, which were gathered together by Schmitt, N. & Schmitt, D. (1995), can be summarized into the following main points:

- The best way to remember new words is to incorporate them into language that is already known
- Organized material is easier to learn
- Words which are very similar should not be learned at the same time
- Word pairs (native word/English word) can be used to learn a great number of words in a short time
- Knowing a word entails more than just knowing its meaning
- The deeper the mental processing used when learning a word, the more likely

that a learner will remember it

- The act of recalling a word makes it more likely that a learner will recall it again later
- Learners must pay close attention to learn most effectively
- Words need to be recycled to be learned
- An efficient recycling method involves expanding rehearsal
- Learners are individuals and have different learning styles

These principles provide the guiding framework upon which should rest the overall design of a vocabulary curriculum, which also includes addressing student needs, the teaching methodology, the role of teacher and student, the organization of content, activities and tasks, and ongoing evaluation.

The competencies that a learner brings to the learning context can greatly influence the learning outcome. Motivation and knowledge about vocabulary learning techniques are essential elements in the process of acquiring new vocabulary. Students who have identified their own needs and reasons for increasing their English vocabulary and who are enthusiastic about the learning process and tracking their progress can make great strides in a relatively short amount of time. Therefore, learner autonomy and responsibility, as outlined in I.S.P. Nation's principles of vocabulary learning (2001) should be stressed throughout. According to Nation, learners should have knowledge about the type of vocabulary to learn, paying attention to word frequency as a basis for sequencing their learning. They

should also be familiar with memory research which focuses on vocabulary learning and should be able to apply this knowledge to effective individual learning techniques. In addition, learners should be aware of what is involved in knowing a word, such as form, meaning, pronunciation, register, derivatives, and context, thus enriching words that are partially known. They should be competent in using a monolingual dictionary to locate and understand this extensive information about a specific word. They should be familiar with regular language and vocabulary patterns into which new items can readily be fitted and applied to fluency development. They should also know how to make the most effective use of direct, decontextualized learning procedures for learning a large amount of vocabulary in a relatively short period of time. Finally, Nation states that learners should be aware of their progress in vocabulary learning through self-testing and formal evaluation.

A course which incorporates or is designed around the AWL should use activities relevant to the students' needs, focusing on real academic situations, both formal and informal. Classroom practice should be linked to the principles of language learning and to the characteristics of effective vocabulary learners. Skills should be integrated with sequenced exercises and with continuous review and integration of previously-met vocabulary. Finally, provision should be made for multiple methods of formal and informal assessment to address a variety of learning styles.

Bibliography

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