



ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL VOCABULARY LEARNING ONLINE

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Summary

Monica Hill teaches academic and professional English courses at the University of Hong Kong.

Her PhD research was on English vocabulary acquisition by Chinese learners and her other professional interests focus on the integration of IT in learning and the teaching of English for professional purposes.

She has created several online courses at the University of Hong Kong, including Words on the Web and, with Anne Storey, SpeakEasy Oral Presentation Skills.

University students studying in a second or foreign language frequently ask for assistance in improving their English vocabulary to help them better understand academic texts, write better reports and give more concise and informative presentations. As time is limited in most English enhancement courses, vocabulary learning tends to be relegated to self access centres and online resources. To help students work on their own and study the words most useful for their academic needs, two web sites have been developed: the University Word Web and the Professional Word Web. The first presents the words students are most likely to meet in general academic texts, while the second moves a stage further and looks at discipline-specific terminology from Law, Engineering, Social Work, Business and Economics. Selected texts using idiomatic English are also included. Both sites are openly available on the web and have been favourably evaluated by Chinese students in Hong Kong.

Introduction

Students whose first language is not English but who are studying at English medium universities, face an uphill struggle to master the vocabulary needed to cope with academic texts, current affairs and journals. Both students and faculty members have asked for support in English vocabulary development, but there is neither class time nor funding available to work with students on this skill during the existing credit-bearing courses for academic communication in English. To meet this need, self-study materials for English vocabulary acquisition have been transferred to the web, and online courses developed to encourage those most in need of extra-curricular assistance to follow independent learning packages.

Online Resources

Two resources have been created with the differing needs of learners in mind. The University Word Web covers over 1,000 words, including those identified by researchers (Coxhead, 2000, Nation, 2001) as essential for academic communication. The words are sorted by levels of frequency of use and divided into manageable study units of ten words per day - or a Daily Dose of the Dictionary. Each word is presented with its meaning, pronunciation and an example of its use in context.

This in itself is not a particularly novel or interesting way of learning words, and so to perk things up a little there are daily arcade-style games to enable the learners to check their familiarity with the words from that day's selection, and weekly quizzes to track their progress. The site is recommended for use with Year 1 academic English courses for students working in English as a second or foreign language. It is also appropriate for English speaking teenagers (around 12 - 15 years old) who could benefit from help with vocabulary. Login details are given on the welcome page:

<http://ecourse.hku.hk:8900/public/xwords/>

The Professional Word Web follows on from this and was developed by a team of six teachers, each specialising in a different subject area. On the assumption that students will have completed the University Word Web in Year 1, the Professional Word Web moves on to the more technical language related to their studies and covers Engineering, Law, Social Work, Business and Finance and includes a section on idiomatic English expressions. By dealing with words in professional use, the surrounding context can be examined so that students are aware of the normal circumstances in which words can be used and their grammatical features. In particular, the students learn how to:

- critically analyse detailed written texts such as legal documents, case studies and reports;
- use professional terminology appropriately in a written context; and
- understand idiomatic English used in informal professional settings.

Corpus development

Faculty members recommended books, journals and articles that would be relevant for our students and these were scanned into word files to create a two million word corpus of academic and professional texts. These were put into five separate databases that were sorted by subject category and words were arranged by frequency of occurrence to ensure that only the most useful items were included. The words selected for inclusion in the Professional Word Web were identified after careful screening.

Each section of the web site deals with its own specialist terminology, and instead of presenting individual words, tutorial texts have been created so that the words can be shown in contexts similar to their original settings. Again, each word has links to its meaning, pronunciation, examples of further use and additional information such as words that are usually found with the target word (collocations), for example economic theory, economic analysis, economic growth and economic recovery.

Each tutorial is supplemented with a selection of multiple choice exercises and arcade style games to help reinforce the learning process and motivate the learners. The site now consists of 85 tutorials, almost 200 exercises, 85 games and approximately 2,000 target words.

Additional features include a glossary of all items in the site, a student-grown glossary of economics and business-related words they have come across in their reading as well as links to other relevant sites.

The project was funded by a Teaching Development Grant at the University of Hong Kong. The site is openly available at:

<http://ec.hku.hk/vocabulary/tutorial/index1.asp>

Users are not required to register and login unless they wish to keep track of their scores in the tutorial exercises.

Evaluation

The web sites are recommended as supplementary learning material for first and second year students. A total of 137 first year students were given pre and post course vocabulary tests based on items from the University Word Web. Scores increased from 76% to 88%, representing a significant improvement. Qualitative feedback was obtained from 58 students who were invited to review the Professional Word Web. More than 90% of the respondents found the site useful or very useful, with the tutorials, definitions, pronunciation, examples, exercises and glossary receiving 95% approval. Less popular was the glossary of words developed by students which will be revised or removed. Interestingly, the games proved to be the most contentious element with one third of the students reporting that they either did not like computer games, or found them frustrating, or boring.

Although the remaining two thirds reported them useful, funny, enjoyable and motivating, it was noted that the regular multiple choice exercises proved more popular, with a 98% approval rating. This perhaps also reflects the way these students have learned words at school with weekly multiple choice vocabulary tests.

The sites are openly available on the web and may be used as distance learning materials.

References

- Coxhead, A. (2000). A new Academic Word List. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 2, pp. 213-238.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.