

Chapter 18

Teaching Students to Use Text–Profilers: A Needs–Based Approach to Tertiary Level English Vocabulary Instruction

Ingrid Barth

The Open University of Israel, Israel

Esther Klein-Wohl

The Open University of Israel, Israel

ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors suggest that teaching students to use freely available text-profiling software represents an innovative strategy and possible solution to needs of non-native English speakers who leave school without an adequate English vocabulary. First the research basis is described for a new text-profiler designed to help students acquire the high-frequency vocabulary they need in order to become effective readers of academic texts published in English. The authors then illustrate relative advantages of this tool and show how these features address specific issues related to learning English vocabulary at college or university. Finally pedagogic implications of teaching students to use text-profilers are presented and suggestions are offered for future directions.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries throughout the world, non-native English speakers (NNES) at colleges and universities are expected to become effective readers of English academic texts in their specific

disciplines. This task can be extremely challenging for students who leave high school without knowing the words that frequently occur in academic texts published in English. Students who lack an adequate English vocabulary constantly interrupt their reading to look up unknown words and tend to spend considerable time and effort on trying to

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decipher strings of words instead of focusing on text content. Consequently, these students may have fewer cognitive resources available for in-depth processing of text content and implementation of higher-order thinking skills.

The open educational resources (OER) movement has enabled anyone with an internet connection to access a wealth of freely available resources developed by academic institutions. Computer-supported language learning (CALL) OERS for self-access and independent study represent potentially powerful tools for helping learners close the gaps between high school English and levels of English required at college or university. However, open access does not guarantee optimal utilization: Not all students are autonomous learners who know how to find CALL OERs and obtain maximum benefit from these resources. Unless teachers show their students how to access and use CALL OERs to extend language learning support beyond the classroom, the potential of these resources may not be fully realized.

As part of a new outreach project, the English department at the Open University of Israel (OUI) has worked with the OUI's Shoham Center for Technology in Distance Education to develop CALL OERs that help students become effective readers of academic texts in English. The first phase of the *Roads to Academic Reading in English* (RARE) project focuses on vocabulary, which is widely recognized as a strong predictor of reading comprehension. The second and third phases of this project will focus on a range of additional skills and strategies required for effective reading comprehension.

The *Roads to Academic Reading* website (<http://telem.openu.ac.il/RoadsToAcademicReading>) provides an integrated set of tools designed to support acquisition of general academic words that frequently occur in academic texts across a range of different disciplines. These tools include a learner-oriented text-profiler preloaded with Nation's (2004) list of the first 2000 most common words in English, based on the British National

Corpus (BNC) and Coxhead's (2000) *Academic Word List* (AWL) of 570 words that appear most frequently in academic texts. As will be shown later, the RARE text-profiler works together with word cards; sets of interactive exercises with explanatory feedback and self-test options. These resources can be used as stand-alone resources for independent study by learners who plan to continue their academic studies, as well as for students at higher education institutions who need to learn high-frequency words that often appear in academic texts in English.

In this paper we suggest that teaching students to use freely available text-profiling software represents an innovative teaching strategy which enables students to make their own data-driven decisions regarding which words in their discipline-related texts they should focus on first. We begin with a brief description of basic issues related to the vocabulary needs of NNES students in general and students who study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in particular. Next we describe research on which the RARE text-profiler is based. We illustrate a number of relative advantages of this tool, and show how these features address a number of specific issues related to vocabulary learning at college or university. Finally we conclude with pedagogical implications of teaching students to use text-profilers and possible future directions.

ISSUES RELATED TO EAP

From our review of the EAP literature, it appears that most EAP courses are designed for three target groups of students: (1) college or university students in a non English speaking country who study their disciplines in their L1 but are required to read discipline-related academic texts published in English, (2) NNES who go abroad to study at a higher education institution in countries where English is the L1 of the majority of students and (3) NNES in countries where English is the lan-

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