Academic and Career Skills Top Tips

Expanding your vocabulary
… for students studying in an additional language

One of the most difficult tasks when studying in another language is coping with the range of vocabulary required. You need to be able to understand and use a wide range of general vocabulary, the common academic vocabulary, and the specialised vocabulary of your discipline. Sometimes, it feels as if you are “drowning” in new words!

To cope with academic reading and writing, you will need to expand and enrich your vocabulary. You will need strategies to:

- understand new words when you meet them in readings, lectures, etc
- choose which words to learn
- learn new words

Here are some strategies you could try. (Most of these ideas are based on the work of Professor Paul Nation of Victoria University. You will find Nation’s most recent publication in the References list.)

Understanding new words

1. **Guessing words from context**:
   - Use the grammatical and meaning clues in the sentence and in adjoining sentences to guess the meaning.

2. **Using word parts**:
   - Learn useful word roots, suffixes and prefixes. Several of the sources in the reading list at the end of this sheet contain lists of word roots, prefixes and suffixes.

3. **Using a dictionary**:
   - Use a monolingual dictionary. Check all the definitions of the word, and take note of information on word frequency, grammatical features, collocations, etc. (*Cobuild* and *Longman Advanced* dictionaries contain a range of useful information.)

Choosing words to learn

1. **High frequency words**:
   - These are words that are worth learning because you’ll meet them frequently. You should learn words in the 2000 word list and the Academic Word List. If you know all the words in these two lists, you are likely to know nearly 90% of words in any academic text (Nation, 2001, pp. 17-18). Also learn those you encounter in your reading that are shown in your dictionary as high frequency.

2. **Words you need for study**:
   - Learn the technical terms commonly used in your discipline. You will find glossaries and subject dictionaries useful sources.

To guess words from context, look at ...
- part of speech
- words & clauses before and after the unknown word
- meaning relationships (e.g. cause & effect)
- connection clues (e.g. conjunctions & linking words)

Then check your guess

The Academic Word List and the 2000 word list

The AWL was developed at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University. You can find the list, and suggestions for how to use it, at [http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/most-frequent](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/most-frequent)

Strategies for learning words

1. Learning new words:

   **Use word cards.** Make sets of cards with a word on one side and the translation in your first language on the other side. You could also add other information on the reverse, such as some of the features described in the box “When you know a word”. Work with small sets of cards when you find the words difficult, and larger sets when the words are easier to learn. Shuffle the cards regularly.

   **Arrange regular learning sessions.** Work on learning words for a few minutes several times a day (rather than have one long learning session) and arrange regular review times (e.g. after an hour, a day, a week, etc).

   **Use recall rather than recognition.** Choose learning activities that require you to **retrieve**, rather than simply recognise information. (For instance, looking at a word on one side of a card and trying to recall its meaning before checking it on the reverse side, is better than reading lists of words with translations beside them.)

   **Keep similar words separate.** Learning sets of “different” words is more effective than trying to learn sets of words with similar meanings or spellings.

   **Use memory aids** (such as creating mental pictures, associating the word with something you know) to help you remember words.

2. Enriching and expanding your vocabulary knowledge:

   **Learn more than just meanings.** “Knowing” a word involves more than simply knowing its dictionary meaning; make sure you learn all the different aspects of a word. (See the box “When you know a word …” for ideas.)

   **Learn how to use words.** We have two “kinds” of vocabulary: receptive vocabulary (those words we recognise and understand when we read or hear them) and productive vocabulary (those words we can use in writing and speaking). If you want to enrich your vocabulary, pay attention to both of these ways of knowing a word.

   **“Use it or lose it”**. The more often you encounter a word, the better you will learn it – read as widely as possible and look for opportunities to use your vocabulary in speaking and writing.

   **Use all the resources available.** Use some of the resources below, visit our website at [http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/](http://ltl.lincoln.ac.nz/), or ask at the Service Point about the workshops, drop-in sessions, and individual appointments we offer.

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When you “know” a word …

According to Paul Nation (2001, p.27), when you “know” a word, you know about its …

**Form**
- how the word is pronounced
- how the word is spelt
- which word parts are (or can be) in the word (e.g. un / happi / ness )

**Meaning**
- what meanings the word has
- what concept the word is associated with (e.g. the branch of a tree and the branch of a business share the same underlying concept)
- what synonyms the word has and what other words it is associated with

**Usage**
- how the word is used in a sentence (i.e. its grammatical pattern)
- what collocations the word has (other words that commonly occur with it – e.g. comply is usually followed by with)
- where and when the word is used (e.g. in writing or speaking? in formal or informal situations? how often is it used?)

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