

College Vocabulary: English for Academic Success

Review by John Macalister

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

COLLEGE VOCABULARY: ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS SERIES. Series Editors: Patricia Byrd, Joy M. Reid, and Cynthia M. Schuemann, 2006, Boston: MA. Houghton Mifflin Company, \$10.47 per volume.

Let's start with a couple of true/false statements.

1. Students without an adequate vocabulary struggle at university.
2. Some words are more useful than others.

If you think both are true, then read on. These books may be for you.

The four volumes of *College Vocabulary* form one strand of the Houghton Mifflin *English for Academic Success* series, which aims to prepare students for degree study (the other strands in the series are oral communication, reading and writing). The target vocabulary in these books is taken from the *Academic Word List* (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000), a list of 570 word families that occur frequently in tertiary level study. Knowing these words is, therefore, very important for such students and thus time spent directly studying them is time well-spent. *College Vocabulary* provides the materials for such study, with each volume dealing with a quarter of the AWL words.

Although each volume has a different author, the approach taken in each is similar. By and large, principles of vocabulary teaching are evident and successfully operationalized. Different aspects of "knowing" a word are covered, and words are presented in meaningful contexts. Attention is paid to the importance of repeated encounters with a word, and typographic signals assist the student: a new target word is written in bold, a previously introduced target word underlined.

Another pleasing feature is that students are introduced to self-study techniques, such as dictionary use and flash cards. Furthermore, while the range of techniques is limited, different ways to use them are introduced at different levels. Many students may also appreciate the opportunities for further independent study provided through website addresses.

Apart from the fact that each volume contains a different set of target AWL words, the difference between these volumes is that as they span the four levels of the series,

College Vocabulary 1 is aimed at low intermediate and *College Vocabulary 4* at advanced. At first glance, the difference appears to be in the cognitive load of the “carrier topics”—“Libraries” at level 1, “Ethics” at level 4, for example. But an informal analysis of the words introduced at each level suggests that attention has been paid to dealing with the most frequent words from the AWL before the least frequent. That is as it should be.

So, who would find these books useful? They are most likely to suit students preparing for tertiary study in a supervised rather than an independent learning situation, and are clearly targeted at users of American English rather than any other variety. Furthermore, the many culturally-specific illustrative examples of the words in use suggest that the books are very probably intended for the U.S. market rather than learning environments elsewhere.

For teachers in that situation, however, these books demonstrate good vocabulary learning principles and will ensure that students know the words that are essential for tertiary study. The main challenge may be getting students to look past the rather drab monochromatic presentation of the material.

Reference

Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 213-238.

About the Reviewer

John Macalister is a lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and has previously worked as a teacher educator in Namibia, Thailand, Cambodia, and various countries in the Pacific. His teaching and research interests include second language reading and writing, and language curriculum design.