

Developing academic English Vocabulary through Podcasts.

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It is a widely shared assumption that to be successful in higher education settings students need to develop the academic vocabulary pertaining to their field of study (Lessard-Clouston, 2009; Nation, 2001; Woodward-Kron, 2008).

The acquisition of this specific language is the foundation on which ESP/EAP courses are based. This process is of paramount importance in EFL settings, too. In these contexts, in fact, students need to be proficient in the target language to obtain direct access to a literature more and more available in English, or to function in the increasingly globalised world of work.

For language practitioners this means embarking upon the tough quest to find a suitable textbook whose contents and learning activities match the overall and specific educational objectives informing the language syllabus. Every language practitioner knows how this research of the “perfect text” can be a time consuming work (Swales, 2009).

Today the Internet is a good solution since it offers a useful tool through Podcasting. Podcasts are digital recordings available as MP3 files which can be downloaded and listened to on MP3 players or on PCs either in class or outside the scheduled time (Constantine, 2007; Kavaliauskiene, 2008).

Among the many resources offered online (a list can be found in Kavaliauskiene), a recent and interesting example is the one produced by Martin Mc Morrow from the Student Learning Centre at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand and available at <http://tinyurl.com/6xy9hy> (a link is also available on this journal’s main page).

This online course, was originally developed to help English as a second Language students from this institution develop academic English vocabulary, skills and cultural knowledge. The podcast is linked to another site (<http://www.academicenglishgenerator.com>) which exploits a corpus of 160 academic words by means of writing and listening drills.

The main set of lessons consists of fifteen units dealing with different key academic topics. Each unit focuses on a given amount of academic words (13-17 per unit) introduced by means of a definition and additional example sentences which facilitate comprehension and increase the overall vocabulary load. Every unit fosters lexis comprehension since it contains different activities to help learners get a grip on the vocabulary in question by guided activities like exercises of “matching meaning” or “odd one out”. The podcast reinforces and extends this basic academic vocabulary through recordings where the unit’s content is explained, thus giving the impression of a life-like lecture. Students are, finally, asked to listen to interviews dealing with the unit’s topic and to complete completion exercises on the issues presented in the interview.

The site is updated by the frequent insertion of new themes and word items to make students’ academic vocabulary wider.

From this brief description, which does not fully illustrate the podcast's potentialities, Mr Mc Morrow's work can be considered a laudable attempt to offer teachers and learners of English open access to sound educational content.

Its validity rests on the materials, developed by an English educator for university students, on the variety of its contents and on the activities built for educational purposes and focusing on academic vocabulary. It also has an added value for language practitioners working in an EFL environment because it allows the exploitation of three of the four skills which should inform any foreign language syllabus, namely reading, writing and listening.

This podcast is strongly recommended to those interested in English teaching issues in EFL contexts since it offers slices of "real English" in an appropriate pedagogical milieu in the form of a substantial amount of training activities. It is also worth suggesting to motivate EFL students' learning efforts because they can get the impression of "doing" the same language assignments given to their New Zealand counterparts.

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