

Tutor's Review

Oxford, (2014). *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press

ISBN: 978-0-19-433350-4

Jenny Kemp

University of Leicester

Introduction

There has long been a need for an EAP dictionary suitable for use by international students on both pre-sessional and in-sessional courses, particularly as words can often have a specific meaning and function in academic English (e.g. Coxhead, 2013) which can vary from discipline to discipline (Highland and Tse, 2007). It is therefore perhaps surprising that it has taken so long for one to appear in the UK market. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English (OLDAE) purports to be "the only learner's dictionary to focus exclusively on academic English" (p. v) "bridging the gap" (p. vi) between the general English dictionaries available and the more specialist dictionaries which are not solely aimed at second language speakers.

There have been other dictionaries with an academic leaning. Cambridge University Press produced the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary in 2009, but it was for the US market, and although available in the UK it does not seem to have been widely used. This is understandable: it included much more everyday lexis (e.g. *alarm clock*) and somewhat dated examples from the Cambridge International Corpus of which the following is just one example: *Is that movie available on tape yet?* (Cambridge, 2009, p. 977). The uniqueness of this latest contribution from the OUP lexicographical tradition is that it is aimed at international students of CEFR level B1 and above studying in a British higher education context, that it sticks to academic examples throughout, and also that it has a particular focus on writing (p. v).

Basics

The dictionary is informed by Oxford's own 85-million word corpus of academic English, the OCAE, of sources of academic reading. This includes textbooks for undergraduates, journal articles and monographs; but it should be noted that it does not include sources of academic writing, such as essays or theses, despite the dictionary having a writing focus. When constructing their core headwords list the lexicographers "paid due attention" (p. v) to vocabulary studies, notably Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) and Paquot's

Academic Keyword List (2010), but understandably misses out on Gardner and Davies' (2013) much more recent comprehensive Academic Vocabulary List. Neither is there mention of the Academic Formulas List of Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010), containing useful phrases for both academic writing and speaking. The OLDAE lexicographers also consulted subject specialists, mainly in the Social, Physical and Life Sciences, but with two notable omissions, namely Management and Media. Nevertheless, this does not mean these fields are underrepresented in their corpus.

Fortunately, words such as *university*, not found in the AWL as it is in West's General Service List (1953), are found here. However, with surprisingly little collocational information: this is certainly a dictionary to help with academic reading and writing, not academic life in general. For instance, no examples in entries for the word family of *supervise* relate to PhD supervision. This is of course unsurprising considering the corpus used, but it does mean that it is unlikely to be a dictionary that will help a student write to their tutor or supervisor, despite the claim that the dictionary can help them write an academic email (p. AWT1) and a very useful page of general information on writing academic emails (p. AWT48).

In addition to the main entries and dictionary guide, the dictionary comprises an Academic Writing Tutor and reference section, as well as a CD-ROM. These are discussed in detail below.

Dictionary entries

As is to be expected, the dictionary covers the various aspects of word knowledge, chiefly meaning(s), pronunciation and patterns of use, including collocational and lexicogrammatical information. AWL words are indicated, and there is also information regarding near synonyms and opposites where useful. Definitions are given using a 2,300-word vocabulary wherever possible (p. v). Following common practice, examples contain the most common patterns but are not extracted directly from the corpus. This adaptation is necessary to help make the sentences more useful for guidance in academic writing when the corpus itself is a corpus of reading texts. Nevertheless, examples are drawn from various contexts, to illustrate usage in different fields. One particularly useful feature is the collocation information provided. This is in bold, highlighting to students the importance of this aspect of word knowledge. Collocates are also helpfully grouped: thus *comparative research/study* is in a different set from *comparative literature/psychology*.

Spelling is mainly British, but a user can search using the American spelling, as they will find the item listed with a cross-reference to the main entry. Where the predominant international usage is the non-British spelling, this is used in the main entry. However, apart from the preference for *-ize* over *-ise*, this does not seem to be consistent, the decision being based on the usage of each individual word. For example, *fetus* is the main headword rather than *foetus*; yet we do not find *pediatrics* but the British *paediatrics*. Where the non-British

spelling is chosen, the reason is usually given for the choice. Thus the entry for *fetus* informs that *foetus* is found “in non-technical contexts” and not in scientific writing (p. 321). Where American pronunciation is different, this is given. Syllabic consonants are also acknowledged, though the diacritic is omitted: thus *commercial* is /kə'mɜ:ʃl/ whereas most dictionaries opt for the somewhat confusing /kə'mɜ:(r)ʃ(ə)l/.

There is also some supplementary information. A few entries have word family boxes, but these are provided less often than would perhaps be useful. More frequent are blue ‘study boxes’ dotted throughout the dictionary: ‘language bank’ boxes expanding vocabulary on a particular theme, such as cause and effect, and reflective writing; and ‘thesaurus boxes’ comparing similar words. Although in the latter explanations are given for the differences between words, the collocation information could be much more fully exploited to increase learner awareness of differences.

Supplementary resources

A somewhat traditional Reference section gives grammatical advice related to different parts of speech (e.g. articles), structure (e.g. relative clauses, punctuation) and also common themes (e.g. numbers). Useful lists include geographical names, affixes and abbreviations. Yet perhaps terms for statistical analysis, a periodic table and units of measurement might have been useful additions.

The research-informed *Oxford Academic Writing Tutor* (OAWT) forms a distinct 48-page glossy polychromous section of the dictionary. It includes general advice on topics like ‘The Writing Process’, ‘Answering The Question’ and ‘Writing A Research Proposal’ but also contains more discipline-specific guidance such as ‘Case Studies 1: Business’ and ‘Writing a Literature Review 1: Physical and Life Sciences’. The authentic ‘model’ texts are taken from sources as varied as the *Journal of Electron Microscopy*, *Behavioral Ecology* and *Socio-Economic Review*. Use is made of colour and highlighting to draw attention to signposting, reporting verbs and other linguistic features. There is advice on organisation and grammar as well as vocabulary.

The OAWT is definitely useful, but the real appeal of the OLDAE writing package is the *iWriter* on the CD-ROM, which is an engaging interactive version of the OAWT. Moreover, it allows the user to write their own assignment within a chosen framework. The CD-ROM also contains the full dictionary, with sound, as well as various word lists: the vocabulary used for definitions; discipline-related lists for Humanities and Social, Physical and Life Sciences; and the AWL, for which there are also interactive exercises. Furthermore, the user can create their own word lists. One drawback to the dictionary entries is that the user must select ‘collocations’ in settings for these to be visible, and even once this is done, they only appear in the left-hand side bar until clicked on. Nevertheless, once the student is aware of this, the collocation information becomes very accessible and could easily be referred to when writing an essay.

Conclusion

Overall, Oxford achieve their aim of bridging the gap in the market, as the OLDAE is a practical and accessible reference resource with a strong focus on the written academic context. Learners will need guidance from teachers if they are to exploit this resource to the full, particularly as they tend to overlook the fundamental importance of depth of vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, the OLDAE shows all the signs of becoming the standard, not only as a dictionary recommended to students, but also for classroom use on EAP courses.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

jak26@le.ac.uk

References

- Cambridge, 2009. *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Coxhead, A., 2000. A new Academic Word List, *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), pp.213-238.
- Coxhead, A., 2013. Vocabulary and ESP. In B. Paltridge and S. Starfield, eds. 2013. *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*, pp.115-132. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Gardner, D. and Davies, M., 2013. A New Academic Vocabulary List, *Applied Linguistics Advanced Access*: doi: 10.1093/applin/amt015 First published online: August 2, 2013.
- Hyland, K. and Tse, P., 2007. Is there an "academic vocabulary"? *TESOL Quarterly*, 41 (2), pp.235-253.
- Oxford, 2014. *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paquot, M., 2010. *Academic Vocabulary in Learner Writing: From Extraction to Analysis*. London: Continuum.
- Simpson-Vlach, R. and Ellis, N.C., 2010. An Academic Formulas List: new methods in phraseology research, *Applied Linguistics*, 31(4), pp.487–512.
- West, M., 1953. *A General Service List of English Words*. London: Longman, Green & Co.