ACADEMIC PAPER

Choosing texts for today's students: Do they understand language?

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Abstract

This study examines the language demands of a textbook chapter and a journal article from the course readings for first-year students in a hospitality degree. The classroom teacher and an academic developer compared the language demands of the two texts using the "Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy" (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2008), a framework of steps in literacy development, and explored vocabulary frequency using the "Web Vocabprofile" (Cobb, n.d.). This paper presents the results of the study and compares the teacher's criteria for selecting reading materials with the students' evaluation of the materials. The process described should help university teachers make more informed decisions about their selection of readings.

Keywords: academic words; textbook choice; EAL students

Introduction

One of the most important decisions that tertiary teachers make on behalf of their students is the selection of texts. In addition to conveying knowledge, texts or readings project an image of the discipline for undergraduates, setting both academic and professional standards (Driver & Eizenberg, 1993), as well as modelling the literacy skills that the students need to acquire. However, it would appear that little time is allocated by departments to text selection as an important aspect of curriculum design, and it rarely involves a team of teachers (Fink, 2005). While checklists exist, they seldom give clear criteria for language beyond vague references to style or clarity, so mainstream teachers may feel unable to make informed decisions about language.

In this paper we argue that all university programmes need to consider the language demands of their texts in the light of the vocabulary levels of an increasingly diverse student body. Vocabulary understanding is a predictor of success in reading (Laufer, 1997) and a consistent marker of educational proficiency (Corson, 1997). It is therefore critical that teachers gradually induct students into academic vocabulary, especially students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This paper adds a further dimension to the call

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for curriculum developers to reflect on the needs of an internationalised student body already voiced in this journal (Jordan, 2008).

We contend that teachers can analyse the vocabulary demands of their texts without specialist linguistic knowledge. We demonstrate how the results of an electronic vocabulary scanner enabled us to rank texts according to their demands on vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, results of the scans provided lists of academic words used in the texts and the number of times each word occurred. This process enabled the teacher to focus directly on new and difficult words, and helped develop his understanding of the demands of the discipline discourse on students.

The current study of texts arose from conversations between the first author, an academic developer, and the second author, a hospitality teacher, about suitable texts for a linguistically diverse class with widely varying experience of reading English. This research was part of a wider national project, the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), which looked at the impact of academic development on student learning in New Zealand. Our focus was a first-year paper, "Hospitality fundamentals", in the hospitality degree, which is designed to provide a foundation understanding of the discipline and a broad overview of the various specialisations students can select for their major within the degree. The paper prescriptor states:

> This paper introduces students to the discipline of hospitality management with an emphasis on strategic functions within hospitality operations. Key issues addressed include concepts related to service elements, ownership, and management style. It has been designed to encourage and enable further study within subsequent hospitality papers. (Student Handbook, 2008)

In a profession where the primary focus is on the practical delivery of hospitality services to customers rather than its theoretical underpinnings, the teacher was aware from previous semesters of the lack of enthusiasm among his students for reading academic texts. He and the academic developer discussed the problem and decided to investigate the students' understanding of the vocabulary in academic texts by using a vocabulary levels test (Nation & Gu, 2007) to ascertain receptive vocabulary knowledge. The test consisted of 48 items, which ranged from the most frequently used words to academic words. Test results ranged from 100% to less than 12% correct answers. English as an additional language (EAL) students made up 22% of the class, and it was predominantly these students who had problems with understanding academic words and would therefore have most difficulty reading academic texts.

This case study focuses on the implications of choosing texts for a linguistically diverse class rather than on the vocabulary level of the class. It shows how, in reaction to knowledge about vocabulary and student language development, the teacher developed a series of progressive steps that facilitated students learning to read academic texts. Readings were chosen to induct first-year students gradually into hospitality and challenge them to engage with professional debate. The readings focused on practical issues in services management, event management, food and beverage management, and tourism.

The course started with a case study about a restaurant visit: a simple narrative which allowed the teacher to introduce critical reading skills, and led to an assignment requiring analysis and synthesis of information. Later readings progressed to a textbook chapter and journal articles, the latter with reading guidelines which provided comprehension questions and vocabulary support to guide weaker readers. This paper reports on the comparison of two mid-semester readings, a textbook chapter and a journal article, as well as the students' reading experiences and the teacher's considerations in text selection.

Engagement with reading materials

Complaints by teaching staff that students do not appear to complete reading tasks (Richardson, 2004) are familiar but often puzzling to many academics. Are the materials too difficult? Are the students inadequately prepared in their reading skills? Is it even possible to

select texts that cater for the linguistic diversity in today's classes? Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002) pointed out that reasons for lack of engagement with text by learners may vary. Some students may not even buy the textbook, others may not be motivated to focus on print material, and many have little time left in their university and employment timetables to allocate to private study. The relatively recent inclusion of hospitality within university programmes has led to a need for texts at all levels of university study and this has prompted hospitality teachers to differentiate between materials appropriate for first-year as opposed to postgraduate students. While the more motivated students may attempt to read texts no matter how demanding, many will give up in frustration if they find the readings beyond their competence. It is this group of students who can benefit from a teacher's careful consideration of the demands of the texts on the reading ability of the students.

Appropriate text selection can pre-empt student disengagement and is, therefore, a critical step in teacher planning. Altman, Ericksen & Pena-Schaff (2006) state that this selection process (for a textbook) should involve teachers examining graduate profiles, course objectives, time restrictions, teaching approaches and student abilities, and should draw on criteria for textbook selection. The criteria they suggest cover content (aspects of topic relevance, depth and timeliness of coverage, rigour and diversity) and pedagogy (layout, writing style, appropriateness for different learning styles, organisation, review points, glossary and relation of visual elements to text). It is our contention in this paper that the complexity of language merits more differentiated consideration than just "writing style".

One major consideration for university teachers of first-year classes is the type or genre of text, for example, textbook or journal article. A textbook typically introduces aspects of the discipline and explains new material (Richardson, 2004), while a journal article might aim to develop new ideas on a particular topic through evidence-based argument. Textbooks written for a novice readership usually recognise the need to introduce discipline discourse and induct the reader into specialist vocabulary gradually. Typically, many texts focus on new words by highlighting the specialist words of the discipline in the running text, listing them at the end of the chapter where they first occur and defining them in a glossary. Journal articles, on the other hand, are usually written for a specialist audience and assume discipline knowledge. They may list keywords at the front of an article, but these are for research purposes rather than student clarification. In most journal articles vocabulary is used without elaboration unless new terms are coined. Teachers need to be aware that these assumptions by writers of journal articles make far more demands on the reader, especially the first-year student.

Vocabulary and comprehension

There is widespread recognition that comprehending a text is not possible without understanding the vocabulary in the text (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Maloney, 2003). Laufer (1997) claims that vocabulary is the best predictor of success in reading and that the relationship of vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension is stronger than other components of reading such as background knowledge and reading strategies. Furthermore, an improvement in vocabulary knowledge can often be attributed to an improvement in reading comprehension. This relationship between comprehension and vocabulary holds true for both English as a first language (EL1) and EAL speakers.

Words that occur frequently in a text – that is, high frequency words – tend to be learned before words that occur less frequently (Nation, 2001). Learners will therefore benefit if they focus on the high frequency words that they do not know but are most likely to meet in a particular text. These high frequency words are listed (Nation, 2001) as the first 1,000 words and the second 1,000 words according to the occurrence of the base word in a word family (for example, run, which includes running, ran, re-run, run-off). These two word lists cover 80% of individual words in most written texts. Ideally, 98% coverage or understanding of the vocabulary of a text is needed for readers to comprehend a fiction text without having to look up unknown words (Hu & Nation, 2000). So how many words does a reader need to know to read an academic text? One conservative estimate is that EL1 adults have basic word vocabularies of fewer than 15,000 words (Nation, 2001). Some researchers conclude that individuals with an English vocabulary of fewer than 10,000 words "run a serious risk"

(Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1997, p. 158) of not reaching the reading comprehension level necessary for entering university studies. This contrasts with EAL students (including those with English language entry qualifications for university) who may know fewer than 5,000 words (Nation, 2001) – approximately equivalent to the average EL1 new entrant at primary school.

However, one encounter with a word is not enough for the learner to know it (Nation, 2001). According to Nation and Wang (1999), at least ten exposures are necessary for a word to be acquired, but even then acquisition cannot be guaranteed. If we consider that words processed at a higher involvement load are retained better than words processed at a lower involvement load (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001), then it is logical that teachers can promote vocabulary development through interactive classes. Opportunities to use the new vocabulary are critical for learners if they are going to master it (Corson, 1997).

Academic texts

In academic texts, often referred to in the literature as technical or specialised texts, the technical words are not those most crucial to understanding (Coxhead & Nation, 2001). Non-technical words can be more of a problem for the reader as they carry much of the meaning of the text. For example, researchers looking at the vocabulary in a genetics text (Cohen, Glasman, Rosenbaum-Cohen, Ferrara, & Fine, 1979) found that two-thirds of the words denoting time sequence (e.g.,eventual, perpetual, succeeding, ensuring, receding, progressively, simultaneously, progressively, consecutively, intermittently, subsequent, successive) were unknown to EAL learners. Only 16.67% of these words are from the first and second 1,000-word lists, but 25% of them are from the academic word list (AWL). This list, identified by Coxhead (1998), consists of 570-word families that are reasonably frequent in a wide range of academic texts, although not in other kinds of texts. The AWL is therefore important for university learners because approximately 35 words per page of most academic texts will be from the AWL (Nation, 2001). Knowledge of the AWL adds coverage of 8 to 10% of an academic text (i.e., one unknown word in every 20). Students who have mastered the AWL are therefore likely to be able to comprehend 10% more of the text than students who have not mastered it. The first 1,000, the second 1,000 and the AWL give students 90% coverage of an academic text. To read with minimal disturbance from unknown vocabulary, readers probably need 98% coverage (Hirsch & Nation, 1992).

Knowing the technical vocabulary is very closely related to knowing the subject area (Nation, 2001) as definitions occur systematically in academic work and teachers tend to organise lectures around key terms in a topic area. Often, knowledge of the specialist technical vocabulary and knowledge about the topic go together. It is the technical vocabulary that textbooks highlight by providing definitions and a glossary at the end of the book. The academic words, on the other hand, are unlikely to be included in the glossary or defined in the chapters as they appear. These words, largely of Greek and Latin origin (Corson, 1997), are often assumed to be part of a common Western heritage and easily understood (e.g., analyse, concept, identify). However, they are not easy to learn because they refer to abstract ideas and do not occur frequently in everyday texts. It is this vocabulary, which non-European EAL students find difficult to master (Corson, 1997), that can become a "literacy ceiling" (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001, p. 117) as it is a barrier to academic progress. Corson (1997) believed that the use of academic vocabulary is taken as evidence of being in control of the conventions for formulating meaning in an academic way and positions students for academic success. This study examined texts from the point of view of the academic vocabulary demands they make on students in their first year at university. The following questions were asked for the research focus:

1. What are the differences in academic vocabulary demands between two prescribed readings on a first-year degree course in hospitality?
2. How do some first-year students experience different texts?
3. What are the decision-making processes of the teacher in selecting reading texts for first-year students?

Methodology

A linguistic analysis of two texts prescribed in the course was carried out using two different genres – a textbook chapter and a journal article – as representative of the discourse types that the students were expected to read. A journal article by Lawrence and McCabe (2001) about event management and a textbook chapter from Walker's "Introduction to hospitality management" (2007) on food and beverage management were selected from the course readings for scrutiny. These texts were analysed for their language demands on the reader using the Learning Progressions (TEC, 2008), a framework which describes progressive steps in literacy development. An initial analysis of the two texts was carried out by mapping them against criteria for vocabulary, language and text features, comprehension and reading critically, from the "Read with understanding" section of the Learning Progressions. Comparisons of salient features only are presented.

For a closer look at the vocabulary demands of the texts, Tom Cobb's "Web Vocabprofile" was used to show the percentage of the first 1,000 most frequently used words, the second 1,000, the AWL, and off-list words (i.e., words not in the first three categories). All proper nouns, which are in the off-list category, were left in the texts, but page headings were eliminated so that their constant repetition did not skew the results.

Students in the first year of the hospitality degree were invited to join the research project in semester one, 2008. A survey was carried out to find out about students' reading habits and attitudes to the texts they had studied during the semester, and was followed up with an invitation to discuss the issues in more depth in a focus group. This method was used because it allowed the researchers to explore the reasons for the students' survey responses in greater depth. Only 14 (nine females and five males, all under 25) out of 73 students responded and they attended two focus groups (11 in one session and three in another). Twelve of the 14 students in the focus group were identified as European New Zealanders and two were EAL speakers, one of Chinese and one of Indian ethnicity. Those who volunteered all performed in the top quarter of the class in the vocabulary levels test: out of a possible 142 correct answers, they all scored above 132. It is significant that no low performing students volunteered. This case study provides another angle on linguistically diverse classes by reporting on the experiences and expectations of the better performing students in a cohort.

The teacher and the academic developer met regularly to discuss the student data and the teacher's considerations of the texts. These meetings were recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy. Written reflections in emails were also included in the project data. The students and the teacher have been given code names to ensure their anonymity.

Findings

We start by examining the demands of the texts, then present the students' experience of the texts and conclude with the teacher's decision-making in selecting them.

Analysis using the Learning Progressions

Vocabulary
The textbook chapter requires a large reading vocabulary which includes academic words (e.g., alternative, maintain, percentage) and specialised words (e.g., perform computations, contribution margin). The large number of acronyms and abbreviations (e.g., MBA, AAA, SMERF) makes demands on short-term memory as they are introduced in rapid succession. The boxed case studies introduce informal discourse – gone to his head, go-getter nature – not found elsewhere in the text. The journal article requires a large reading vocabulary that includes general academic words (e.g., category, networking, participants), specialised words (e.g., merchandising, facilities, convention management, learning outcomes) and an ability to understand complex noun phrases (e.g., accommodation capacity).

Language and text features
In the textbook chapter, sentences are mostly short and limited to one or two subordinate clauses with more complex structures occurring in the details about regulations:

> If a guest becomes intoxicated and is still served alcohol or a minor is served alcohol and is involved in an accident involving someone else, then the server of the beverage, the barperson, and the manager may be liable for the injuries sustained by the person who was harmed, the third party. (Walker, 2007, p. 221)

Further features include complex noun phrases (e.g., assistant food and beverage manager), idioms and multiword units (e.g., to be at the top of their game) and parallel structures of noun phrases (e.g., the director attends staff meetings, food and beverage meetings, executive committee meetings, interdepartmental meetings, credit meetings and P and L statement meetings). Readers need to recognise text features specific to the textbook such as bold face for new words, and visuals and charts to clarify or illustrate text.

In the journal article there are complex paragraph structures using the passive voice (e.g., the introduction was seen as a means to enhance), impersonal forms (e.g., it was stressed to the team), nominalised forms (e.g., the practical application of conference management theory) and parallel structures (e.g., to develop, organise, manage and attend). There are also a number of complex sentence structures throughout the text. For example:

> [A key objective of the day was] to expose delegates to a range of regional conference venues with the importance of site selection and venue inspection as a component in the conference planning process being emphasised. (Lawrence & McCabe, 2001, p. 205)

Other features include genre-specific aspects such as the abstract, the reference list and the practice of isolating keywords at the start of the article.

Comprehension

In the textbook, new vocabulary is introduced gradually and new concepts are given with sufficient elaboration to make them understandable. Quizzes and summaries help the reader summarise and synthesise old and new information, and internet exercises offer extension work in applying knowledge to real-world situations. In the journal article, readers need to understand the function of each section (keywords, literature review, findings, discussion). The length and complexity of many sentence structures is a challenge for the reader (see previous section). Readers need to summarise and synthesise old and new information and the writers assume the reader's prior knowledge (e.g., the expectations of conference clients as well as educational terminology).

Reading critically

In the textbook chapter, the writer presents an ethnocentric North American view (all dollars are US dollars), with little or no suggestion that cultures outside the USA may have different perspectives on international hospitality management. This makes parts of the text largely irrelevant for readers outside the USA. Pedagogically, factual knowledge and memory work are emphasised rather than critical reading. Moreover, the reader needs to take a critical stance in relation to the journalistic use of superlatives in the biographical profiles, such as "highest quality restaurateurs". In the journal article the authors report on a solution to a problem. Readers need to reflect critically on the solution and to evaluate the writer's possible bias about the intervention. Sophisticated reading skills are required to analyse whether the positive evaluations presented can equate to a positive endorsement for change.

The VocabProfiler

Further data about the vocabulary in the texts were obtained through the VocabProfiler. The results are listed in Table 1.

The results of the VocabProfiler scans show that the textbook chapter has more of the first 1,000 most commonly used words and fewer AWL words than the journal article. The percentage of academic words in the journal article is nearly double that in the textbook chapter. However, there is a slightly higher number of off-list words in the textbook chapter than in the journal article.

	Lawrence and McCabe: Managing conferences in regional areas	**Walker: Chapter 6: Food and beverage management**
First 1000 words	65.82%	70.90%
Second 1000 words	9.93%	9.36%
Academic word list	12.31%	6.64%
Off-list words	11.94%	13.03%
Words in text	7,018	12,971

Table 1: Results of VocabProfiler scans

Students' experience of texts

All 14 of the focus group students ranked the journal article as more difficult to read than the chapter from the textbook. The journal article took students on average 45 minutes to read while the textbook chapter, which was approximately double the number of words, took them twice as long. However, reading time varied – one student took three hours to read the 12,971 words, another skimmed the text for the main points in 20 minutes rather than trying to read every detail.

When asked about their preferences for class readings – a textbook or a number of journal articles – 13 of the students stated that they would prefer to have a textbook. The reason given was that textbooks were easier to use. Craig, the one dissenting student, said that a textbook would make the year just "like another year of school" and that a blend of textbook and journal articles would be optimal:

> If you have journal articles to support the textbook, it's okay, but when you're trying to learn something from a journal article, it's quite hard. (Craig)

Another student explained that journal articles were too full of big words and did not help him clarify the meaning. A majority of the students within the focus groups felt that journal articles were aimed at people who already knew the industry, so they would be more suitable as a follow-up to a textbook introduction. If given the chance to choose between a textbook and a journal article, they would select whichever text was easier because that would motivate them to read for their assignment work. Another student reported:

> Journal articles try to make a point and prove a theory; textbooks and case studies are more like a story. But reading journal articles is a skill we need to acquire – it's a way of professionalising. (Dan)

The students all cited relevance as a key criterion for a good textbook. The textbook chapter for their course focused heavily on the USA, "so you had no idea what it was about. I remember thinking, this doesn't really relate" (Sue). Students said that if it was just the case studies that were American, that was acceptable, but if the text was American-based it became irrelevant. They suggested that an Australasian edition would be ideal because they had to learn New Zealand laws and regulations. Students said that a textbook needed to be informative and interesting, with case studies, lots of real-life examples, and layout features such as visuals, colour and white space so they could make notes in the margin alongside the text. It also needed to be well written and organised, with summaries, quizzes and short questions for revision.

At least 75% of the students in the focus groups did not know that their chapter reading came from a textbook, nor did they realise that the textbook was available in the library. Sue, who did use the textbook, followed up the websites at the end of the chapter, while the other 13 said they would have done this had they known about them. Asked how they would describe the textbook to other students, some commented on its size. Eric said that, "it had everything in it, so you can just find things. You don't need anything else". Frank was impressed that the textbook had definitions for new words and concepts. The students felt that most of their

readings were too long as they just needed "the important stuff". They pointed out that the teacher gave them everything, "including the stuff we don't need to know. We just want some points from the articles". They thought the textbook reading was self-explanatory. After the focus group discussion, the students who did not know there was a textbook were more motivated to read it. However, Eric said he would only want to read it if it was actually necessary: "that's why [the teacher's] PowerPoint is good as it gives you the bare essentials".

When asked about the value of the reading guidelines provided by the teacher, two of the students in the focus group said that they were "just more work"; even if they really helped, "it was like having to do twice the amount of reading". Frank thought that the textbook summaries were more helpful than guidelines because guidelines, he claimed, interrupted the reading whereas, "summaries encourage you to recap at the end without stopping the flow". Three others in the focus groups failed to use them because they did not realise their purpose. In the class survey, however, EAL students reported that the reading guidelines were very useful.

Academic vocabulary

Students said that academic words were more difficult to learn than specialist words because specialist words were explicitly taught. All agreed that they were more motivated to learn and remember them because they were able to apply them to their work in the hospitality industry straight away:

> You see a picture with it, like you cut the vegetables, you get a picture and remember it. It's not like having a word like analyse. (Gillian)

Academic words, they said, were harder to understand. The majority tried to understand new words rather than use a dictionary, but three said they skimmed through the text and if a word was difficult they looked it up in the glossary or in a dictionary. Frank said that the glossary helped him, "to understand better because it gave a definition. When we study for the exam we can just read those". They agreed that the tutorial discussion could make a difference to their understanding of texts. The teacher guided the students through the text step by step, explaining vocabulary and pointing out specialist terms and keywords. They said that the parts he highlighted were "the interesting bits".

Text selection from the teacher's viewpoint

When the teacher first assumed responsibility for the course, he decided to look for appropriate texts to replace the journal articles previously used, which he personally found "a hard slog" and considered more suitable for master's level. He saw the advantage of journal articles in offering a range of perspectives so that students could have more than one opinion on any given topic, and balanced this consideration with the ease and compactness of a single textbook. He was also concerned about the cost, relevance and currency of a textbook. The teacher asked colleagues to suggest texts that would provide the basics for later specialisation. As no suggestions were forthcoming, he compiled readings for the topics required and ensured that the introductory reading - a case study - was straightforward. More demanding texts such as journal articles and textbook chapters followed. The teacher said that he would welcome it if students from one class chose the readings for the next group who were going to do the same course: "it would be a positive thing … just as long as it did not become too simplified".

In discussion with the academic developer about language levels, the teacher ranked the journal article and the chapter from the textbook the same in terms of difficulty. His criteria for judging difficulty level were language use, content and genre (a case study was easy, while a journal article was hard). The teacher selected and sequenced texts according to their relevance to the topic and whether readings were stimulating yet easy. He supported all the course readings with extensive scaffolding in tutorials by highlighting key points and elaborating on new concepts.

Discussion

Comparison of journal article and textbook chapter

This discussion focuses on the analysis of the journal article and the textbook chapter, before examining the students' experiences and finally discussing the teacher's experience of evaluating texts. The journal article and the textbook chapter were fundamentally different texts. The frequent use of the passive voice, lengthy noun phrases, long sentences with complex subordination and paragraphs with complex structures made the journal article difficult to read. The textbook chapter, on the other hand, included text features that made reading easier: a bold face highlighted new words and there was more frequent use of visuals, charts and tables than in the journal article. The boxed case studies provided variety by breaking up the running text, included a higher proportion of idioms and metaphors than the rest of the text and introduced a journalistic style. These latter features make demands on many EAL readers but may provide light relief for EL1 readers. However, the textbook chapter made demands on the reader through its heavy use of acronyms common to the profession.

Both texts required the reader to understand academic words but a closer analysis of the vocabulary demonstrated that the journal article had nearly 100% greater use of academic words than the textbook chapter. These words tend to exclude weaker students as their meaning is not transparent. However, they play a key role in developing more complex thinking and it is important for all students to master them in order to have access to academic meanings (Corson, 1997). Although the textbook chapter had a higher percentage of off-list words, many were proper nouns that occurred in the context of the boxed texts. The charts and tables were also dense in off-list words but a skilled reader could skim the framework and note the factual content for future reference. However, these off-list words can be frustrating if not carefully elaborated and repeated so readers can understand them without recourse to the glossary and chapter notes.

In summary, the textbook chapter was easier to read because of a far lower percentage of academic words and because of the clarification it provided of new specialist words. This study does not argue for or against textbooks or journal articles in first-year papers. It looked at the two sample readings in one first-year paper in hospitality management and demonstrated how tools can support the teacher's text selection by identifying linguistic features of texts. These tools demonstrated that the journal article (with its high percentage of academic vocabulary, lengthy noun phrases and complex sentence structures) was a very demanding text for first-year students. The textbook chapter, on the other hand, provided support for vocabulary development while still making demands on the reader in terms of proper nouns, acronyms, complex structures in regulatory rulings and a range of language registers. These language demands need to be carefully balanced in teacher text selection.

Students' reactions to the texts

All focus group students were in agreement about the text rankings – they said that the textbook chapter was easier to read than the journal article. They appeared to equate journal articles with difficult reading and textbooks with easier reading, which may not be the case. All students except one wanted a single textbook in the first-year programme. However, whatever the genre, they delayed starting an assignment when the readings for it were difficult. Format also played a major role in their assessment of readings as they unanimously criticised a cluttered, densely written journal article with a small font. They found texts off-putting if they were long. Size, in fact, seemed to determine whether they would engage with a reading in the first place. Even amongst this group of students with high vocabulary scores, some laboured for hours over detailed text. Others used skimming strategies to get an overview of the material for future reference.

Students seemed to have a clear understanding of the difference between specialist and academic words. They said they were motivated to learn specialist words as they could apply them to their paid employment, but academic words were neither concrete in meaning nor transparent and were therefore difficult to understand and remember. Despite being high-performing students, their approach to reading texts was "instrumental", as they wanted only

what was required to complete assignments and tests. They wanted clear answers and expected the teacher or the text to provide them. Many who did not appear to practise skimming and scanning techniques were irritated by "stuff that we don't need". Such students saw the textbook as sufficient on its own and felt that searching for additional library items was unnecessary. Only one of the 14 students interviewed was prepared to engage with more difficult readings that would challenge their thinking, which illustrates the potential problem of developing critical reading skills in a one semester course for first-year students with a single textbook (Richardson, 2004).

These high-performing students did not want to use reading guidelines because they saw them as involving extra reading with no added benefit. However, their rejection of reading guidelines does not mean that they were not useful for the weaker students in the cohort. In their survey answers, 90% of the EAL students reported using the guidelines. It is also worth bearing in mind that these students would probably have had even more difficulty with the journal article than the focus group students. In view of the linguistic diversity of the class, the guidelines supplemented the scaffolding for weaker students and had the advantage that students could use them independently. In this way the teacher was able to provide support without slowing down the whole class.

In some areas even the high-performing students needed more support than was provided. Although able to access websites and use databases, one student (the top scorer in the vocabulary test) was unable to locate the book section of the library and felt unable to follow borrowing procedures. There appeared to be a mismatch between their competence in the real world and in the electronic world. However, the focus group students felt that if the textbook and its supplementary features had been shown to them in class, they would have been motivated to look for it in the library. We are reminded by Thurston (2004) that reading is no longer a key aspect of the youth culture of today which focuses very strongly on the visual image: hence the importance of providing library orientation in class time for first-year students.

The teacher's decision-making

Our third research question concerned the decision-making processes of the teacher in selecting reading texts for first-year students. The teacher ranked the journal article and the textbook chapter as equally difficult, in contrast to the focus group students who all agreed that the journal article was more difficult. The students' ranking concurs with the results of the VocabProfiler, which demonstrates that the journal article makes greater demands on academic vocabulary. However, the teacher's judgment is significant as he is the person who selects the readings. One explanation for the teacher's lack of awareness of the added complexities of the journal article could be that university teachers use academic language as part of their everyday professional communication. For them the differences between straightforward academic text and very dense academic text are not marked by readings they can or cannot master. For this reason they may fail to remember their own steps in mastering their disciplinary knowledge. Dreher and Singer (1989) gave an explanation for teachers overlooking the language difficulty in a text, pointing out that they "may fail to notice the problem of new ideas without clarification because they automatically fill in the gaps in the text, based on their prior knowledge" (Dreher & Singer, 1989, p. 101).

The teacher's realisation that his own expertise seemed to create a barrier to evaluating text difficulty was a salutary experience. So how could he have evaluated the language difficulties of the texts for first-year students more accurately? While the framework of the Learning Progressions requires familiarity to implement effectively, it does allow a teacher to build up a comprehensive profile of the demands of the text. The VocabProfiler, on the other hand, is easy and efficient to use. It focuses on vocabulary, in particular vocabulary frequency, but has immediacy and relevance. The use of the tool not only provided the teacher with a more analytical approach to vocabulary in texts than before, it also helped to develop their understanding of student learning through language.

As far as the textbook is concerned, the teacher's ability to listen to the student voice informed his decision-making about texts and he is now working on combining local material

(e.g., regulations) with standard, proven textbooks in e-mode, so that his students have access to a cost-effective and relevant textbook.

Conclusion

Tools can help demystify the language components of texts. By using the Learning Progressions and the VocabProfiler described here, mainstream teachers will be able to identify the linguistic demands of texts and make informed decisions about the discipline discourse in their texts, often independently of language experts. Both the VocabProfiler and the Learning Progressions can guide teachers to choose readings for first-year university classes and beyond. In this study, the teacher's engagement with and enthusiasm for the VocabProfiler was a key factor in the success of the collaboration between the academic developer and the hospitality teacher. The academic developer demonstrated its application to discipline texts; the teacher in turn demonstrated to his colleagues in hospitality how useful it was and suggested further applications (e.g., for checking the vocabulary demands of exam questions, marking criteria and study guides). This ripple effect provides an example of academic development working effectively to improve student learning. The tools that analyse language also help mitigate against teachers' possible blindness to the elaborated code they develop in their professional discourse and provide an objective evaluation of difficulty levels. This case study also shows how the student voice, here primarily from the high-performing students, can contribute significantly to an understanding of difficult materials and to pedagogical decision-making.

While no attempt can be made to generalise findings from one case study, we would urge teachers to explore the insights of high-performing students. They have an important voice as they may be able to bridge the distance between the teacher's expectations and the needs of at-risk students, and contribute to establishing a fair benchmark. In our research we planned to find out about the needs of the linguistically disadvantaged in the class, but then discovered unexpected aspects in our discussion with the high-performing students. This gave us a new perspective on the experience of readings for first-year students. If the competent students find the texts difficult and refuse to read around the topic, then those less competent are likely to be even more challenged. Our in-depth discussions with the high-performing students in the focus groups revealed that some readings were challenging for this group of students and served more to frustrate than to educate. Frustration, whether from too little vocabulary (Hazenburg & Hulstijn, 1996; Laufer, 1997) or from other barriers to learning, can lead students to surface learning. As Richardson (2004) pointed out in the context of using a single textbook, engaging with text for knowledge transmission often comes at the cost of a critical approach. The teacher's decision in our case study to choose less dense text to introduce critical analysis in the first assignment could set a positive pattern for the whole first semester paper for first-year students.

The findings about reading guidelines confirmed our surmise that they are helpful for students who struggle to read academic texts. They are also an important support for the teacher as they provide unobtrusive scaffolding that does not limit high-performing students in a multilevel class.

Teachers in the 21st century are challenged by the multicultural, multilevel class where all students need to find reading materials stimulating and readable. Further research could examine what teaching strategies would bridge the vocabulary divide between those who need to master the academic word list and those who have already mastered it. Research could also explore mainstream teachers' assessment of the language difficulty of their discipline discourse in readings and the reader's approach to off-list words. Another area for further research might be whether relevant and reasonably priced e-texts could be made available for small populations like New Zealand by providing country-specific regulations within large-scale introductory texts. Changing times demand changing customs, so instead of textbooks influencing learning, "learning should influence textbooks" (Driver & Eizenberg, 1993, p. 15).

Corson (1997) identified vocabulary competence as a key element in success at university as it enables students to comprehend and formulate meaning in an academic way. In our

research, the discipline teacher learned to support student vocabulary development by encouraging students to focus on the academic words in the readings. As mentioned above, this is especially relevant in practical disciplines like hospitality where students need scaffolding to encourage them to engage with texts, to reinforce learning through reading and to develop academic ways of communicating their discipline knowledge.

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