

Knowledge of academic vocabulary in relation to social and personal variables: A quantitative sociolexicological study

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Recent research shows that some students starting higher education have difficulties with academic language. Inadequate academic language skills may compromise academic success. Several institutions for higher education acknowledge this problem and outline policies to detect and support students with insufficient academic literacy skills. Yet, more research is needed to support the development of such measures.

This study focuses on knowledge of academic vocabulary among Belgian pupils in their final year of secondary school right before starting higher education. We examined the relation between knowledge of Dutch academic lexis and certain personal characteristics and social background of the pupils. The study was performed using a questionnaire containing 75 lexical items. 462 students participated. The study examines three different types of academic words: originally Dutch words, French/Latin/Greek loans and English loans.

Results show that mastery of academic vocabulary is related to several factors, both personal characteristics of the student (gender, curriculum, intended study after secondary school), and aspects relating to social background (native language, language spoken at home, nationality, country of origin). Furthermore, English academic loans proved to be the most difficult category for the students.

Information on students with a risk profile can be useful in designing policies to prepare them for studying in an academic language based environment. This way as many students as possible are given equal opportunities at the start of their academic education.