Research Project (20% final grade)
Due Nov 28, 2018, 11:59 pm

Hypothetical Scenario: Since a high level of language competence is key to academic and professional success, the University of Toronto Scarborough has established a team of top student researchers from different departments to contribute to a collection of essays to convince first-year students in their respective departments about the value of achieving a high level of Academic English competence that includes having a vocabulary of at least 10,000 word families in their first year of study and developing the habit of thinking in English without having to first translate into their mother-tongues. The goal of this effort is to ensure that students in every department can read and analyze academic texts efficiently as well as communicate orally and in writing with fluency, confidence and impact.

A requirement on this team is that the student researchers have used the Vocabulary Expansion Accelerator (VEA) quite a great deal and are thus able to bring insights from their personal experience using the tool when examining research literature regarding brain training, habit formation, motivation, etc. that would result in accelerated language development and communicative competence. Imagine that you are a member of this team. You are a junior scholar, and you are contributing to knowledge in this project. Your task is to write a well-researched essay on one of the topics below that can be compiled as an online resource to support and inspire students.

You will write a 1000-1200 word essay that explores the current research on your chosen topic and helps university students understand if it is possible for them to train their brains better to achieve dramatic improvement in Academic English within a short time i.e. one semester. Your goal in your essay is to make such a strong convincing argument, supported by research literature, that your essay will be among those included in the collection made available to all first-year students. Provide an appropriate title to your essay (and indicate in brackets what Topic# you have chosen).

You must use a minimum of 4 sources; 2 of these must be peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly books; 2 may be good-quality websites. You may use a journal article from your weekly CTLA01 readings as one of the two peer-reviewed journal articles. You need to provide in-text citations for all references you make to your sources’ words, facts or ideas, and you must provide a bibliography at the end of the essay that lists all sources used. If you have questions about this, please ask Elaine or your Practicum Leader.

Before submission, use the Self-evaluation Checklist to help you evaluate and improve your essay.

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Topic 1: Based on your own experience with VEA, make your argument for whether students in your department should focus their language self-regulated training using VEA SkillBuilder or VEA Language Challenge. Alternatively, feel free to argue that this tool is not useful for developing academic writing skills or skills for writing effective cover letters for students in your department. Whichever way you choose, support your argument using psychology/neuroscience research or other appropriate areas of research.

Some context to help you think about the way you can research this question:
Communicating effectively in writing is key to opportunities and success. Academic writing for university assignments is a huge challenge for many students. Writing at university generally requires students to be analytical and be able to synthesize information from different scholarly sources, and be a co-creator of knowledge. Their writing needs to reflect a clear informed argument, using appropriate academic collocations and hedging, as well as vocabulary related to their respective courses. Given that
most students do not come to university fully equipped with the level of vocabulary, sense of complex grammatical constructions used in academic texts, collocations and hedging expressions, they need a means of training to develop the level of competence to produce language needed for writing at university. Another aspect of writing that is often overlooked in courses that seem to be number-focussed is that students need to have the language competence that will allow them to write effective cover letters to seek Co-op placements or employment.

*Topic 2: Based on your own experience with VEA Highlighter, make your argument for whether VEA Highlighter is an effective tool to help students become aware of academic vocabulary used in academic texts and expand their academic vocabulary needed for efficient academic reading. Support your argument using psychology/neuroscience research or other appropriate areas of research. You can show your critical thinking ability by suggesting at the end some ways in which VEA functionality could be improved so that it motivates students to use it more to improve their reading skills.*

Some context to help you think about the way you can research this question:
Reading efficiently is key to success at university and beyond. A major challenge for students coping with university-level readings is the academic language used in the texts—textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles and other reference materials. Snow (2010) pointed out that since academic language is designed to be concise, precise and authoritative, academic texts use “sophisticated words and complex grammatical constructions that can disrupt reading comprehension and block learning” (p. 450). Given the large amount of reading students need to do every week at university, helping them cope with the demands of academic reading is important.