BOOK REVIEW

Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English. 2014

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Deny A. Kwary

As the title suggests, the Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English (OLDAE) is aimed at those who need to use academic English in their studies. The Introduction of the dictionary mentions that the OLDAE provides "an exclusive, detailed focus on the language of academic writing (p. v)." To discuss the merits and demerits of this dictionary, there are four parts that are reviewed: the selection of headwords, the components of the entry, the usage notes, the language banks, the back matter, and the CD-ROM.

1 The selection of headwords

There seems to be inconsistencies in the OLDEA regarding the headwords included in the dictionary. In the Introduction, it is mentioned that 'general academic' words are the main focus of this dictionary. However, in the inner cover page, there are labels used to show words that are mainly restricted to a particular subject area, for example. biology, finance, and linguistics. Therefore, in the entries, we can find technical words such as cytoplasm (labelled biology) and liquidity (labelled finance). However, there is no entry for annuity, a word which is usually found in business and financial texts. If we analyze those three words using the academic text in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2015), we can see that the frequencies of annuity, liquidity and cytoplasm, are 527, 323, and 183, respectively. Perhaps the frequency of annuity in the Oxford Corpus of Academic English (the corpus used to draw up the headword list) is lower than that of liquidity and cytoplasm, so the word annuity is not included as a headword in the OLDEA.

D. A. Kwary (✉)
Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
e-mail: deny@kwary.net

2 The components of the entries

The entries in the OLDEA contain the components that are useful for both text reception and text production. In the case of text reception, the definitions are written using a limited number of defining vocabulary, i.e. 2300 words. This is smaller than the number of words in the defining vocabulary of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Turnbull 2010), which contains 3000 words. In the case of text production, we can find example sentences, collocations, and word patterns. The number of example sentences provided in the OLDEA is more than the number of entries. There are 50,000 corpus-based example sentences accompanying the 22,000 words, phrases and meanings. Examples are very important in helping learners determine the correct use of a word (Chan 2012) and strengthen users' understanding of how to use the word in text production (Kwary and Miller 2013). In addition to the examples, the users are also assisted in the text production with a list of collocations and word patterns. In the entry of measurement, OLDEA does not only list the collocations, but they are integrated in the patterns, for example. ADJECTIVE + MEASUREMENT accurate, precise,…; VERB + MEASUREMENT include, require,…; and MEASUREMENT + NOUN error, bias, … Consequently, the users have a number of well-grouped options or words to use when they want to write a text using the word measurement.

3 Usage notes

OLDEA provides 80 Thesaurus notes, Which Word? notes, and Grammar Points. All of these are very useful for those who want to write an academic text. The Thesaurus notes start with the similarities of the group words listed (e.g. convincing, compelling, persuasive, and strong), and then continue with the specific usage for each of the words in that group. This will enable the users to select the right word in writing academic English. This function of the Thesaurus notes is quite similar to The Which Word? notes which help the users to see the differences between words that are often confused (e.g. consent vs. permission). When two or more words need to be differentiated based on the grammatical aspects, the words are put in the Grammar Points (e.g. each vs. every).

4 Language banks

The language banks in the OLDEA provide a concise assistance to students in writing academic English. For example, when a student is asked to write a reflective writing, this student can see the Language Bank under the entry reflective. The Language Bank explains the main purpose of a reflective writing and the expressions (together with the example sentences) commonly used in reflective writing.

5 Back matter

In addition to the main part of the dictionary that contains the dictionary entries, there are two groups of resources put in the back matter of the dictionary. The first group consists of the Oxford Academic Writing Tutor. The contents are quite comprehensive. Some of the 25 topics listed are Answering the Question (e.g. in an exam essay), Writing Essays (explanation; argument; compare and contrast), Presenting Data, and Writing a Dissertation. The explanation includes the structure of the writing, the expressions to be used, the example paragraphs, as well as the explanation on the grammar (called Grammar Notes). The second group of the back matter is called the Reference section. In this section, we can find a list of irregular verbs, the passive (i.e. how to form the passive and when to use the passive in academic writing), punctuation (when to use a particular punctuation mark), numbers (how to write numbers in academic writing, mathematical expressions, measurement in Britain and America, etc.), word formation, and other references which are useful for academic writing.

6 CD-ROM

The OLDEA comes with a CD-ROM that can be fully installed in a computer, so that we do not need to insert the CD-ROM whenever we need to use the OLDEA in our computers. The screenshot of the first page of OLDEA when we open it in a computer is shown in Fig. 1. On the left hand top, we can see three menus: Dictionary, Word lists, and My lists. The Dictionary menu provides an access to the dictionary entries. The Word lists contain the Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000), Defining vocabulary, and four lists of words related to four disciplines: Humanities, Life science, Physical science, and Social science. The users can also create their own vocabulary list using the My lists menu.

In addition to the three menus on the left hand top, there are five more menus placed at the bottom (see Fig. 1). They are the iWriter, iGuide, Mini Dictionary, Exercises, and Reference. The iWriter provides models of 25 different types of writing. The contents are the same as those in the Back Matter of the printed dictionary, i.e. the Oxford Academic Writing Tutor. However, the computer version is more interactive as it provides outline frameworks into which we can add our own content directly. The iGuide is a menu to help the users become familiar with the information available in the OLDEA. The iGuide enables the users to understand the internal structure of dictionary entry (e.g. the abbreviations, the symbols, and the components of dictionary entry) by taking some interactive activities (like quizzes). The Mini Dictionary is the same as the menu called Genie in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary CD-ROM. When the Mini Dictionary menu is clicked, the OLDEA will function like a tooltip or a small pop-up window. This means that when a user hovers the cursor or the pointer over a word that he or she is writing or reading, that word will automatically be placed in the search box of the dictionary and the entry will be shown directly. This enables a quick access to the dictionary entry. The Exercises provides interactive activities to understand or to test the users
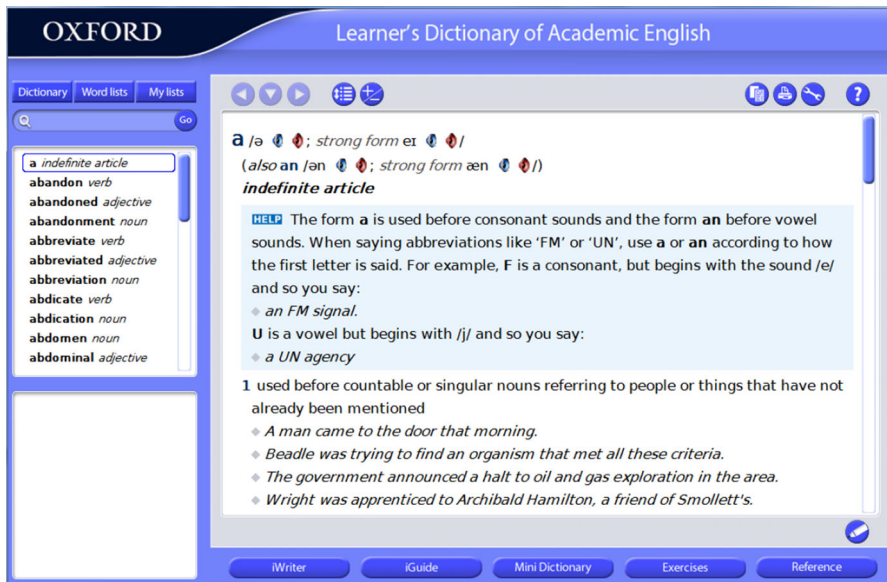
Fig. 1 The Screenshot of OLDEA installed in a computer

knowledge on the words listed in the Academic Word List of Coxhead (2000). Finally, the Reference menu provides the same information as the Reference section in the back matter of the printed dictionary. The placement of these five menus should be reconsidered. Since they are placed at the bottom of the screen, there is a possibility that the users do not realize that they are there. Placing them on the top of the screen will make these menus easier to be noticed by the users.

Based on the review above, it can be concluded that the OLDEA is an excellent tool for students who want to pursue their studies in English speaking countries and for those who want to write academic English. The resources provided in the OLDEA are both comprehensive and concise to meet the needs of students of academic English.

References

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