

English competence among first-year business students and reading comprehension.

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Characteristics of FH -courses of study

- based on demand from business and industry
- entrance exam
- number of students is limited
- duration of course: 8 – now 6 semesters
- practical professional training
- academic degree

Fachhochschule Wiener Neustadt

- Founded 1994
- 7 courses of study
- 2 400 students
- **Business consultancy: 1 300 students**
- Full-time: intake 185 per annum
- Part-time: intake 70 per annum
- English language programme: intake 55 per annum

The survey



Test	Subject	Test-takers
Quick placement test (OUP)	General English	n=359 (Intake 2003+2004)
3 Vocabulary levels tests (Nation 2001)	Vocabulary size (passive)	n=144 (Intake 2003)

Electronic quick placement test



"The *computer-based version* uses multiple-choice questions to assess students in

- **Listening**
- **Reading**
- Use of English, including **Grammar** and **Vocabulary**
- Not speaking and writing

University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. (no year)
Quick placement test. CD Rom user manual. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (p.4)

Secondary schools in Austria



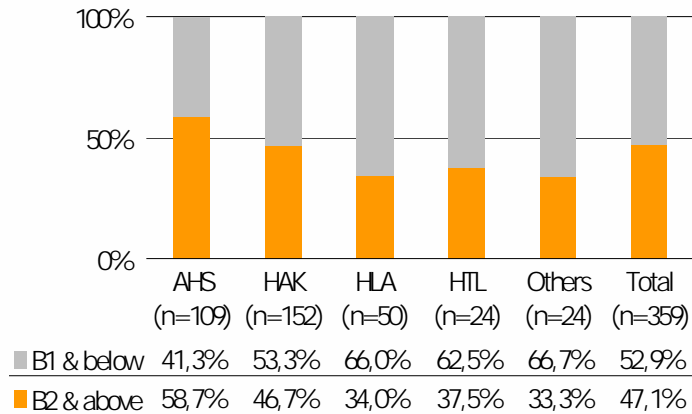
AHS	Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schulen	Secondary Academic Schools/Grammar Schools
	Berufsbildende Höhere Schulen	Secondary Technical and Vocational Schools
HAK	Handelsakademie	College of Business Administration
HTL	Höhere technische Lehranstalt	College of Engineering
HLA	Höhere Lehranstalten für wirtschaftliche Berufe	College of Management and Service Industries
HLA	Höhere Lehranstalt für Tourismus	College of Tourism
HLA	Höhere Lehranstalt für Mode und Bekleidungstechnik	College of Fashion and Clothing

ALTE & CEF levels

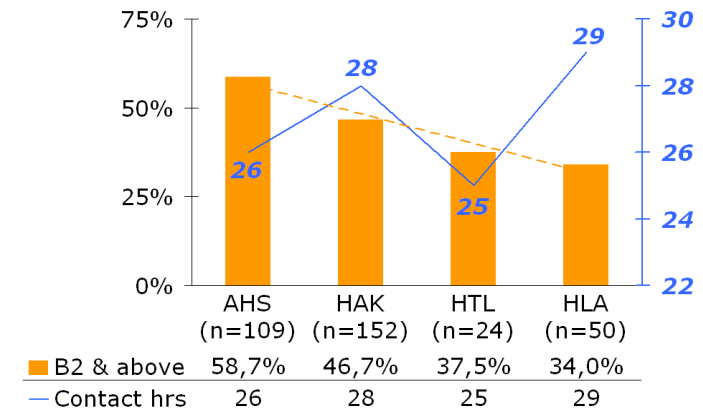


ALTE Level	ALTE Level Description	CEF Level
0	Beginner (Breakthrough)	A1
1	Elementary (Waystage)	A2
2	Lower intermediate (Threshold)	B1
3	Upper intermediate (Independent user)	B2
4	Advanced (Competent user)	C1
5	Very advanced (Good user)	C2

CEF Levels: student intake 2003 + 2004



CEF Levels & contact hours: intake 2003 + 2004



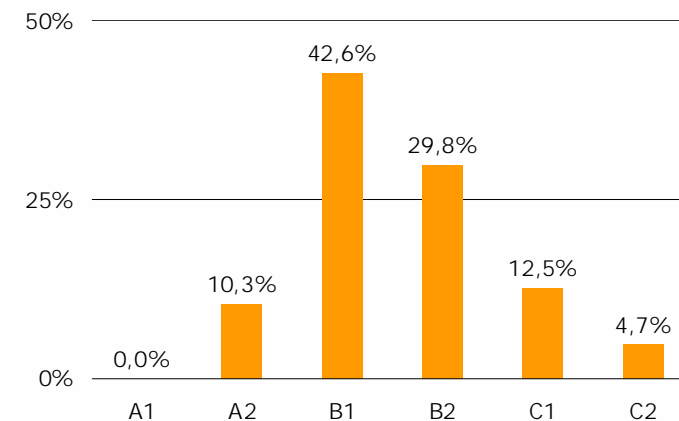
CEF levels



Overall reading comprehension

- A1 very short, simple texts; a single phrase at a time, [...] and rereading as required.
- A2 short, simple texts; highest frequency vocabulary; proportion of shared international vocabulary items
- B1 straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field of interest; satisfactory level of comprehension.
- B2** large degree of independence; appropriate reference sources; broad active reading vocabulary; some difficulty with low frequency idioms.
- C1 lengthy, complex texts; reread difficult sections.
- C2 structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writing; long and complex texts, subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.

CEF Levels: intake 2003 + 2004 (n=359)



Reading comprehension



"Multiple-choice vocabulary tests proved to be

- **highly reliable** and to
- **correlate** very well with tests of **reading comprehension**."

(Read 1997: 304)

Coverage & comprehension



Coverage	Unknown words	Difficulty for native speakers
100%	0	easy
99%	1 in 100	appropriate
98%	1 in 50	difficult

(Carver 1994: 432)

Coverage & comprehension (NNS)



Coverage	Unknown words	Minimally acceptable understanding	Adequate understanding
98%	1 in 50		>50%
95%	1 in 20	>50%	<50%
90%	1 in 10		
80%	1 in 5		none

(Nation 2001: 147, 165)

Vocabulary levels / profiles



- High-frequency words: **2,000-word list** (cf. Michael West's (1953) *General Service List*)
 - **Academic word list (AWL)**: 570 words (Coxhead 1998)
 - Technical words & low-frequency words
 - **3,000-word list**
 - 5,000-word list
 - 10,000-word list
- (Nation 2001: 416-424)

Vocabulary levels



- For **words**, read **word families**
- "A **word family** consists of a headword, its inflected forms, and its closely derived forms." (Nation 2001: 8)
- E.g. *agree, -s, -d, -ing; dis-, -ment* (Nation 2001: 365)

High-frequency words



- Function words: *in, for, the, of, a*, etc.
- Content words: *government, forests, production, adoption, represent, boundary*
- "Almost 80% of the running words in the text are high-frequency words." (Nation 2001: 11)
- "[...] counting the **2,000 most frequent words** of English as the high-frequency words is still the best decision for learners going on to academic study." (Nation 2001: 15)

Academic wordlist (AWL)



- E.g. *policy, phase, adjusted, sustained*
- **570 word families** that are not in the most frequent 2,000 words
- *
- Reasonably **frequent** over a **wide range** of academic texts
- **Not restricted** to specific discipline
- Useful for learners studying humanities, law, science or **commerce**. (Nation 2001: 17)

Academic wordlist (AWL)



- "**non-technical** vocabulary (*essential, maintain, invariable*) **more often unknown** than technical vocabulary." (Cohen & al. 1988 in Nation 2001: 190)
- 2,000 high-frequency words + *Academic Word List* = close to **90% coverage** of running text in most academic texts. (Nation 2001: 197)

Low-frequency vocabulary



- "5000 words seems to be the lexical threshold" (Laufer 1987: 321)
- "The minimal vocabulary level [...] was **3,000 word families**." (Laufer 1992 in Nation 2001: 146)
- "[...] studies have consistently shown the **3,000 word family** to be a minimum for the reading of unsimplified text." (Nation 2001: 146)

Vocabulary profiles: corpora



	Economist (99,957 words)	BBC homepage (47,080 words)
2,000-word list°	83.8%	85.0%
Academic wordlist (AWL)°	6.9%	6.8%
2,000-word list + AWL	90.7%	91.8%
Others°	9.4%	8.2%

°Vocabulary profiles were calculated using T. Cobbs's software at:
http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/cgi-bin/webfreqs/web_vp.cgi

Corpora



The Economist (print edition)

- <http://www.economist.com/printedition/>
- 6 Numbers (15 April - 20 May 2004)
- 99,957 Words (excl. proper nouns & numbers)
- 119 Texts
- Sections: (i) Business; (ii) Finance & Economics; (iii) Special Report (business & economics topics only)

BBC

- <http://news.bbc.co.uk>
- Texts covering period 2 April 2003 - 2 July 2004
- 47,080 words (excl. proper nouns & numbers)
- 134 Texts
- Business news section

Vocabulary levels test



Receptive test:

This is a vocabulary test. You must choose the right word to go with each meaning. Write the number of that word next to its meaning. Here is an example.

- 1 business
- 2 clock 6 part of a house
- 3 horse 3 animal with four legs
- 4 pencil 4 something used for writing
- 5 shoe
- 6 wall

(Nation 2001: 416)

Vocabulary levels test

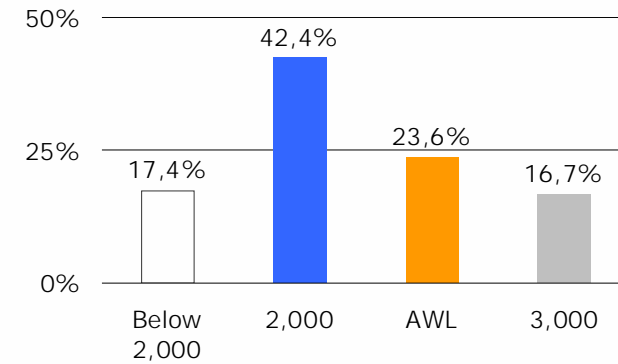


Receptive tests:

- 2,000-word list (30 words tested)
- Academic word list (36 words tested)
- 3,000-word list (30 words tested)
(Nation 2001: 416-419; 421-422)

"[...] a score of at least **25 out of 30** is desirable."
[i.e. 83.3%] (Nation 2001: 196)

Highest level reached: intake 2003 (n=144)



Highest level reached: intake 2003



Vocabulary levels	Highest levels reached	Coverage in Economist-corpus	Unknown words
Below 2,000	17.4%	below 84%	
2,000	42.4%	84%	1 in 6
AWL	23.6%	91%	1 in 11
3,000	16.7%	~93% (?)	1 in 14 (?)

Vocabulary size in first-year students

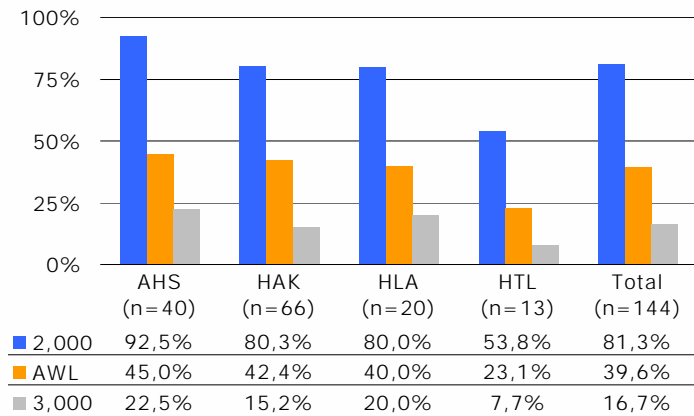


2,000+ Austria (8-9 yrs) (present study)

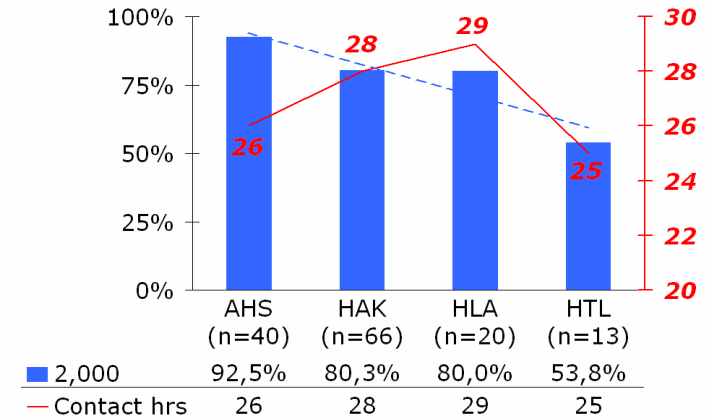
1,200 Indonesia (6 yrs) Nurwani - Read (1999)

500 - 3,000 Laufer (1987)

Vocabulary & school type (intake 2003)



2,000 wordlist & contact hours: intake 2003



Key results and conclusions (1)



Result

"Lower intermediate & below" **50 : 50**
 "Upper intermediate & above"

Conclusion

- ➡ Upper intermediate materials are
 - appropriate for half the intake
 - challenging for the other half
- ➡ "Don't expect too much too soon."
- ➡ Systematic and tight programme to improve "Lower intermediate & below" -set

Key results and conclusions (2)



Result

Max. 2,000 words: 60%
 AWL: 40% (B2: 46% / C1: 57% / C2: 100%)

Conclusions

- ➡ Simplification of authentic materials (even at tertiary level)
- ➡ Systematic vocabulary growth (esp. covering AWL in upper - intermediate materials)

Key results and conclusions (3)



Result

General academic schools (with general interest topics & literature) generate best vocabulary results for **academic Business English**

Conclusion

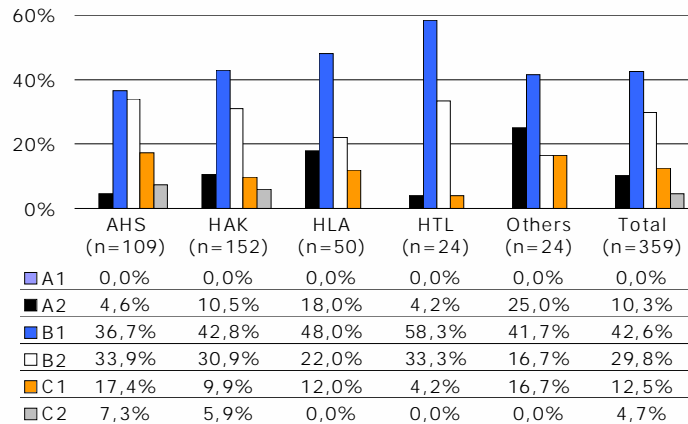
Special interest focus in vocational schools to be compensated for regarding vocabulary

Appendix: References

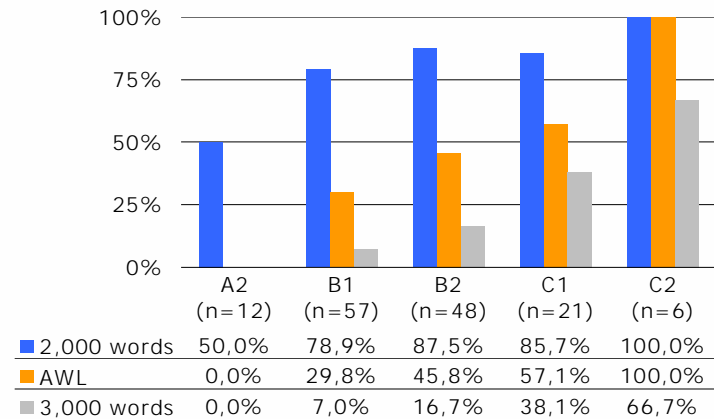


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Appendix: CEF Levels (student intake 2003+2004)



Appendix: Vocabulary & CEF levels (intake 2003)



Appendix: AWL & contact hours (intake 2003)

