Abstract for the general public

Learning a language takes several years of motivated dedication, and learning the words of the language is a large part of the process. For university students studying in English, the formal academic vocabulary they need to acquire to succeed may be very challenging. Not only do they have to understand complex texts in English, they also need to produce them. Recent research carried out in different contexts worldwide show that even after years at English-medium universities, students fall short of mastering academic vocabulary. In Poland, a study conducted in 2018 showed that roughly 50% of BA-level students lack appropriate knowledge of academic words, even if the language is in fact their working tool. This is a problem that needs to be solved, and it must be done within the time constraints of university education. One way to speed up lexical learning is to embed key (academic) words into routine tasks, such as writing.

This project aims at investigating how different types of writing may facilitate academic vocabulary learning. Specifically, I will explore whether some target words can be learned when learners embed them in argumentative essays (a typical task in higher education), written under time pressure or not, or in the sentences they write. In the process, I will look into how the complexities of essay writing, particularly under time pressure, may facilitate or impede lexical learning. The expectation is that the need to deal with too much information when writing will make the learning of academic words more difficult. Another expectation is that essay writing, especially without time pressure, will promote the learning of more words than the writing of sentences.

Writing tasks is a reality in higher education, and if we can use those tasks to speed up lexical learning, we can only benefit our students. This project will help us better understand how the writing process assists word learning. In the process, I hope to better equip university educators to promote the effective and efficient learning of academic words.