Google to the Rescue? Tech-Savvy Strategies for Teaching Academic Vocabulary

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Christina Michaud
Boston University

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The Problem:

- Though learners can provide passable definitions of many words, they cannot use them correctly in speech or writing.

One Solution:

- Search engines such as Google can help learners compare definitions and usage patterns via simple forms of corpus analysis. Learners produce more appropriate sentences for new vocabulary when using these techniques.

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Basic errors in university-level ESL learners' vocabulary logs:

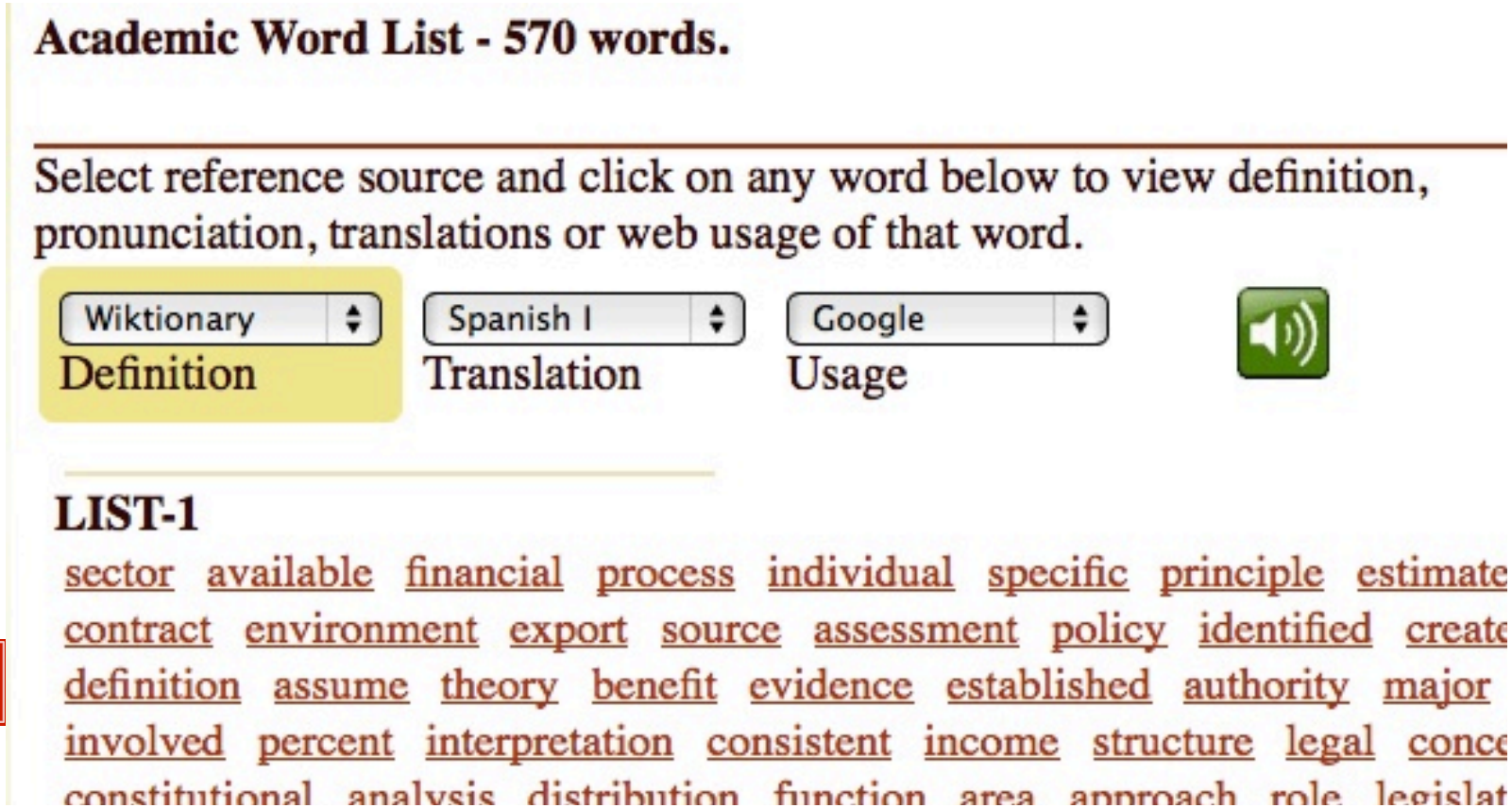
1. He had a **hanker** for a better-paying job.
2. Subsequent events vindicated his **guilty** because he shoplifted again at a department store.
3. It's pretty easy for me to think of something that is not **relevance** to the topic.

General Vocabulary Strategies:

- Use English-language dictionaries, not (primarily/exclusively) L1/L2 translators.
- Compare multiple dictionary definitions of the target word.
- Pay attention to the original sentence (context) of the target word when reading.
- Check dictionaries' example sentences with the target word.
- Use additional information from dictionaries, beyond meaning: part of speech, usage notes, etc.
- Use good reading strategies: decide when to look up a word.
- Prioritize high-frequency words and/or words on the Academic Word List (AWL).

Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL)

- Definitions, pronunciations, translations, and interactive spelling quizzes: http://www.esldesk.com/vocabulary/academic



Learner Checklist: Six Things to Learn When You Learn a New Word

1. meaning (not just translation)
2. etymology (derivation and/or related words)
3. part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc.)
4. usage (regular/irregular, transitive/intransitive/phrasal verb, count/non-count noun, collocations)
5. number of syllables (x) and stressed syllable (y)
   ➔ *write the stress pattern next to/on top of the word to remember how to say it: x-y* (Murphy 2004)
6. pronunciation (consonants and vowels as well as syllables and stress)

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Trickier errors in university-level ESL learners' vocabulary logs:

1. The Taiwanese president is trying to **cop out** the promises he had made a few years ago.
2. People who have no confidence in their situations or positions can easy be **snobbery**.
3. Tom always made **reverting** comments that made our meetings go slowly.
4. Their rights have been **confined** and neglected by the government for too long.
5. It is frustrating to watch luckily **vindicated** criminals walk out without serving time in prison.
6. I **conjure** you sincerely to reconsider this business project.

Therefore, even with good strategies,

learners still struggle, and teachers need **practical ways to scaffold these strategies in the classroom.**

One possible solution: Corpus Analysis

Typically focused on researchers, teachers, and upper-level language learners:

- Genre-based approaches
- English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approaches
- Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

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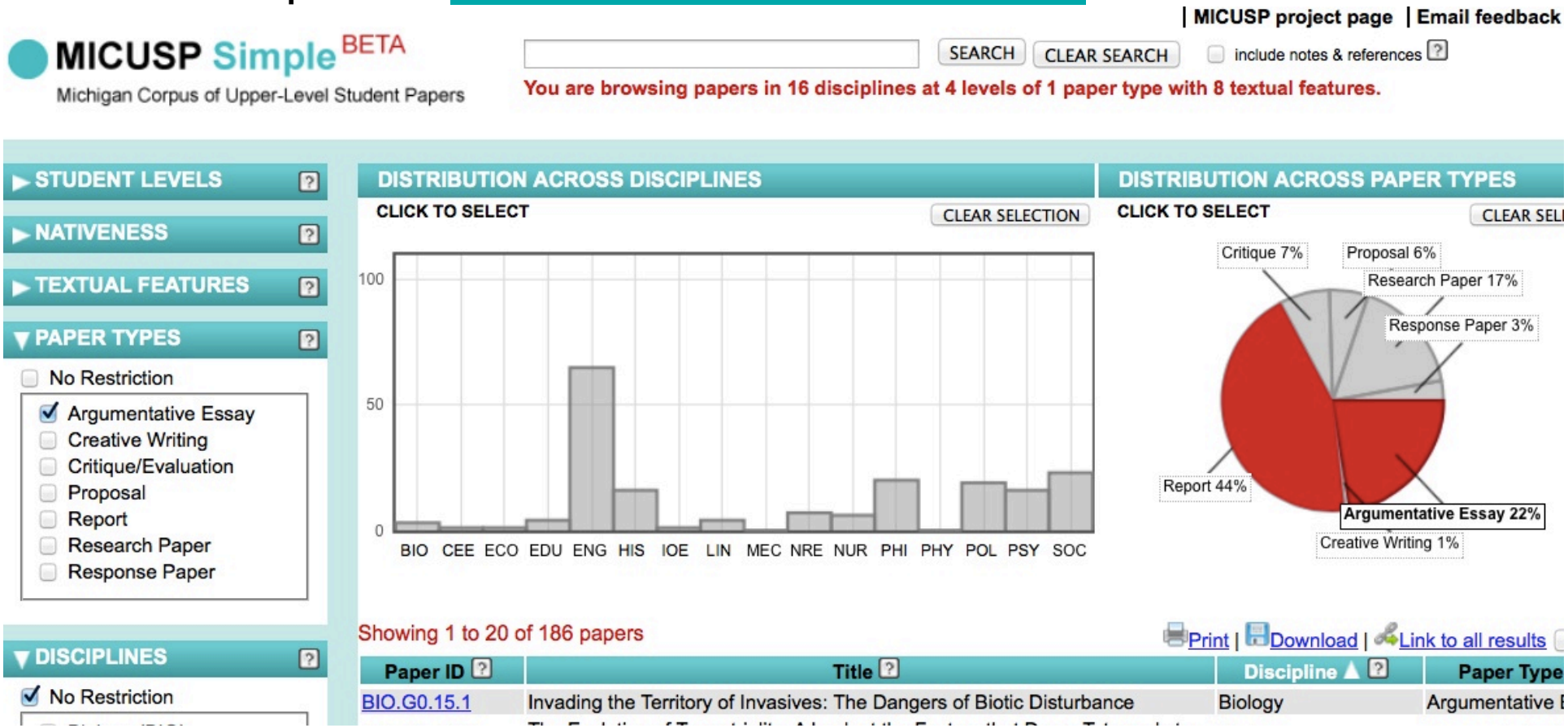
Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP)

- Free, searchable database of academic writing in the disciplines: http://micusp.elicorpora.info



Google to the Rescue? Tech-Savvy Strategies for Teaching Academic Vocabulary

- Free
- Ubiquitous
- Surprisingly fully-featured

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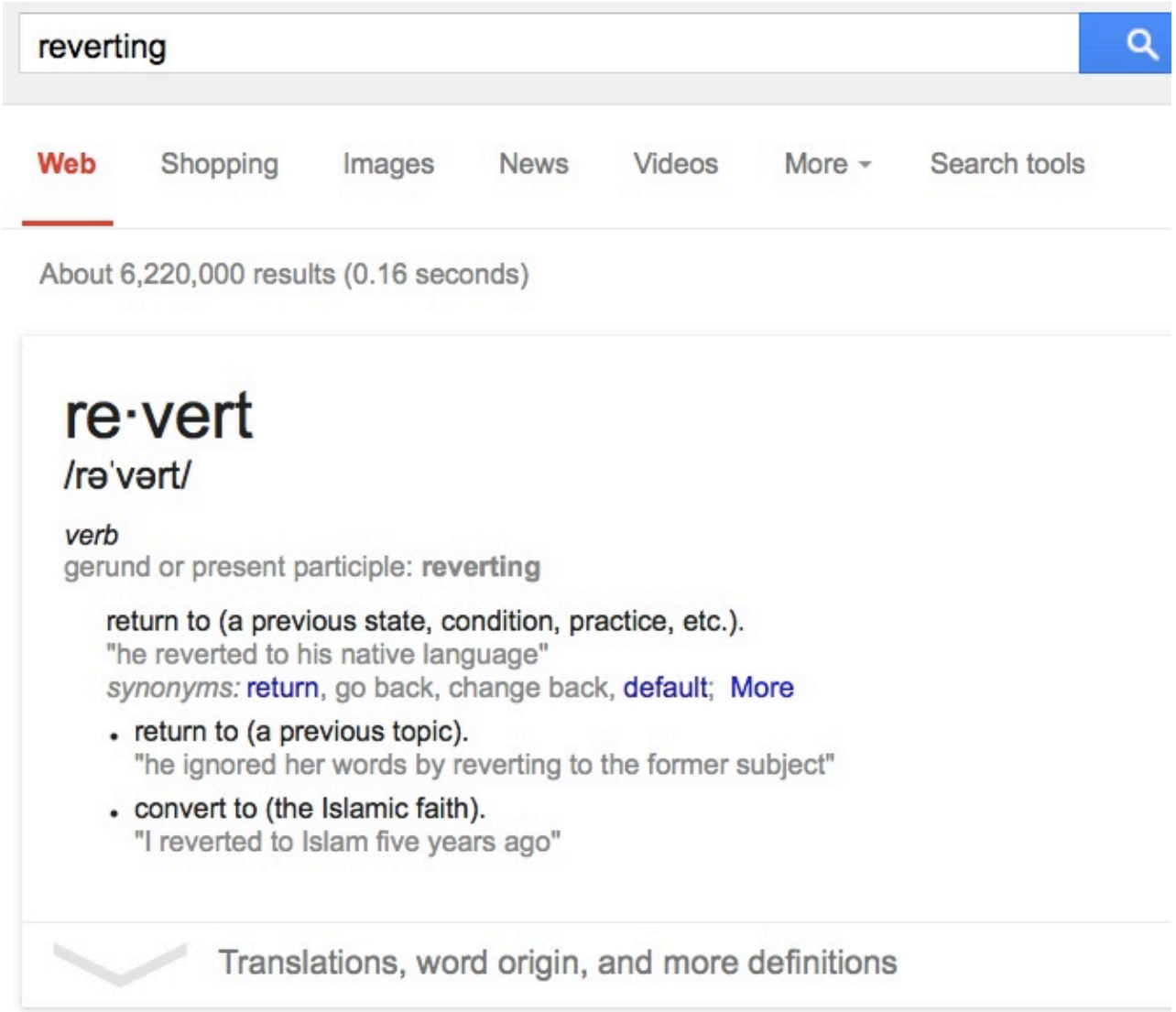
Using Google for Student Corpus Analysis:

- Frequency
- Connotations
- Collocations
- Usage



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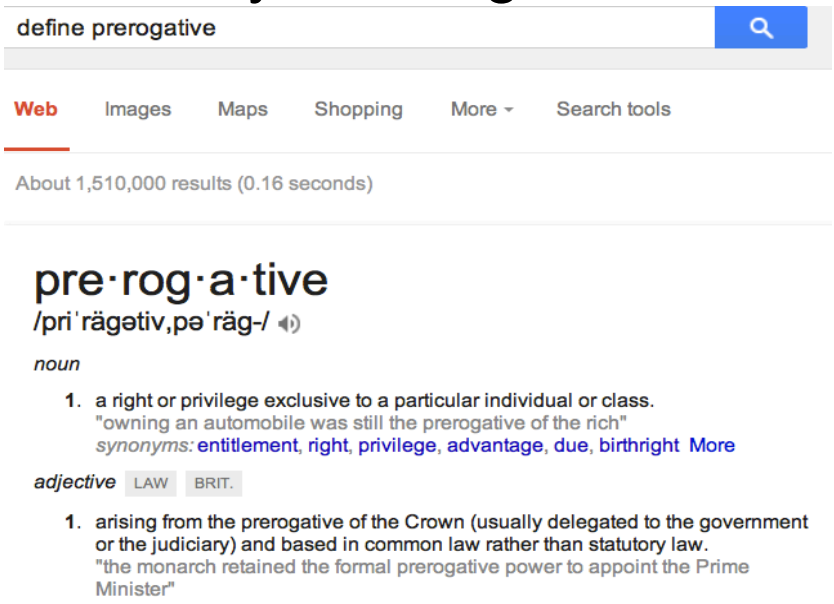
Helping Learners Analyze New Words (example 1)

1. He has **prerogative** to do a lot of things.
2. It's not fair to use the **prerogative** to obtain a better job.
3. Old men should have **prerogative** to enter the park first.
4. It is such a **prerogative** that we can study at this great university.
5. He owns **prerogative.**
6. My friend, who is the son of the vice president, has a lot of **prerogatives**.



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A closer look: “He owns **prerogative.**”

“owns prerogative” → 30 results
“owns a prerogative” → 6 results
“owns the prerogative” → 22,900 results

“has prerogative” → 3280 results
“has a prerogative” → 91,000 results
“has the prerogative” → 336,000 results

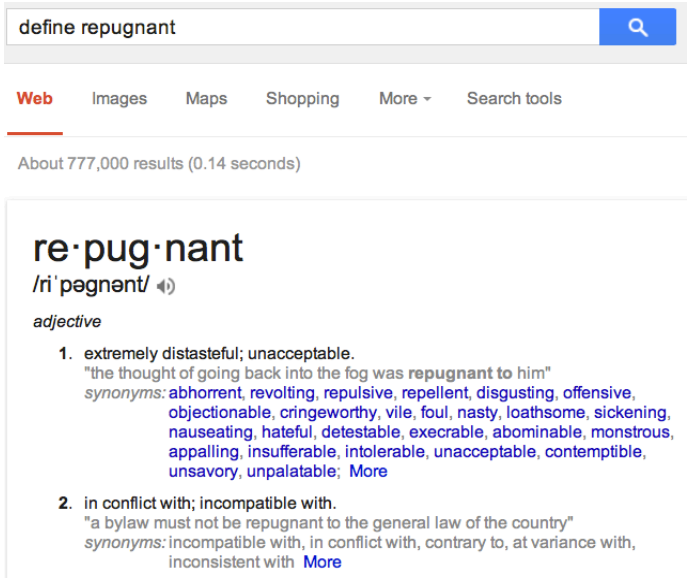
Helping Learners Analyze New Words (example 2)

1. His annoying sound makes me feel **repugnant.**

2. My mother's food makes me feel **repugnant.**

3. The leftovers made me **repugnant.**

4. She found it **repugnant** when he was asking if she wanted that food.



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A closer look:
"The leftovers made me **repugnant.**"

"me repugnant" → 8590 results

repugnant
in a sentence
→

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When (and how) should students implement these techniques?

- For homework—to help with initial stages of vocabulary analysis (flipped classrooms)
- For follow-up homework—to analyze errors in own/ classmates' sentences
- In class, in groups—to analyze errors in own/classmates' sentences
- In class, individually during full-group discussion—to quickly access information to troubleshoot a word/concept

Helping Learners Avoid Plagiarism

Teach vocabulary itself:

- ”What we call plagiarism [among ESL students in academic writing classes] may more often be a result of lexical limitations, even lexical ignorance and desperation, than cultural differences or outright cheating. […] [W]hat was missing was appropriate directed vocabulary instruction to allow for proper paraphrasing and summarizing" (Folse 2008, p. 3).

Teach responsible Googling.

- Copy/paste dangers
- Citation specifics: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/

Online Plagiarism Quizzes

- Indiana University Bloomington School of Education
  https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/plagiarism_test_practice.php
- Clark College Information and Research Instruction Suite
  http://www.clark.edu/Library/iris/quiz/plagiarism_quiz_home.php
- University of Southern Mississippi
  http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/acceptuse1.php

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- Folse, K.S. (2008). Myth 1: Teaching Vocabulary is not the Writing Teacher's Job." *Writing Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*, ed. Joy Reid et al. Ann Arbor: Michigan.
- Murphy, J. M. (2004). Attending to word-stress while learning new vocabulary. *English for Specific Purposes Journal*, *23*(1), 67-83.

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Thank you!

Christina Michaud
Boston University

cmichaud@bu.edu

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