



Fostering Academic Vocabulary Use in Writing

Though research has established a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic success and identified features to guide the L2 word learner through academic tasks (see Nation, 2013), less is known regarding student perceptions of academic vocabulary and the conscious decision-making process of these learners while they are writing. In this pilot case study, 9 advanced students at an Intensive English Program in California wrote an essay, completed a survey on vocabulary strategy use, and participated in an interview to illuminate lexical choices they had made in their compositions. The insights gleaned from these data were then analyzed for patterns, and 10 classroom applications were devised to help L2 academic writing teachers address the vocabulary needs of their students.

Introduction

More than 25 years ago, a study published by *TESOL Quarterly* drew attention to the importance of vocabulary knowledge in academic writing. Santos (1988) investigated the reactions of 178 university professors in multiple disciplines to two essays written by nonnative speakers. The findings concluded that the professors judged content and language separately and were tolerant of linguistic errors when they could understand the content. They were not so tolerant, however, of lexical errors, judging them most serious, even unacceptable. Santos determined, “It is precisely with this type of error that language impinges directly on content; when the wrong word is used, the meaning is very likely to be obscured” (p. 84). Santos concluded that writing courses should include instruction on “vocabulary building and lexical selection” (p. 85).

Though Santos is not alone in this recommendation, many instructors remain unsure about how to incorporate word learning in

writing classes. This pilot case study examines the in-class essays written by advanced pre-university L2 learners and their comments during follow-up interviews to gain insight into how learners identify the features of their training that have been most useful to them. We identify some key vocabulary difficulties faced by L2 university writers and suggest classroom applications for addressing them.

Background

The lexical decisions made by L2 writers draw upon many aspects of word knowledge (Coxhead, 2012; Nation 2013). Effective writing entails not only knowing a lot of words, but knowing them well. To know a word well enough to use it in writing presupposes knowing its form, meaning (concepts, referents, and associations), and use (grammatical function, collocations, register, frequency; Nation, 2013). Writing also requires productive knowledge of words that are high frequency, those used only in academic settings, and those that are technical terms for particular disciplines. More specifically, writing necessitates lexical richness, or the ability to use an appropriate proportion of high-frequency and academic words (Laufer & Nation, 1995). Word use in writing is difficult even when learners recognize the words and know them receptively; the task of bringing receptive word knowledge into productive use is more difficult and takes more time and practice than is often recognized (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Lee & Muncie, 2006; Webb, 2005). Finally, considerable lexical challenges in academic writing result from its formal register, which is rarely used outside academic discourse. Learners' abilities to use an academic register reflect their identification with the academic community and require both the opportunity and desire to use it (Corson, 1985; Nation 2013).

There are thus many facets to the lexical demands placed upon the L2 academic writer. In the following section we examine students' perceptions of the lexical choices they encounter as they undertake a writing task.

The Present Study

The aim of this study was to explore the lexical decision making of advanced college-bound ESL students in their writing. This article seeks to address the questions:

1. Are learners familiar with register?
2. Do they make a conscious decision to use academic words in their essays?

3. What factors influence the lexical choices they make in composition?
4. What techniques can help them use academic words more effectively?

Procedures

Nine advanced-high students at an Intensive English Program (IEP) in California participated in this study. They ranged in age from 18 to 32 and had been in the US between 5 and 14 months. There were four native speakers of Chinese, three of Arabic, one of Vietnamese, and one of Spanish. Five participants were male; four were female. All but one had received an undergraduate degree in their home countries, and most anticipated entrance into an American university within the year.

At home, the students read an essay of about 800 words titled "Identity in a Virtual World" (Chan, 2012) from their course textbook *Mirror on America: Essays and Images From Popular Culture*. They were then given one hour in class to write approximately 250 words on the advantages and disadvantages of living in a virtual world for which they could consult the source text, a dictionary, and online resources. During the next class, they completed a survey providing personal background information, including IELTS or TOEFL scores, and on their study and use of 21 vocabulary strategies (see Appendix A for the questionnaire). They were then interviewed about specific lexical choices they had made for this assignment (see Appendix B for the interview questions). The participants were not informed that the focus of the study was vocabulary use.

Two readers, both ESL instructors for more than 15 years, rated the compositions for content and mechanics and highlighted three words or phrases in each essay that were deemed of interest because of either particularly felicitous use of academic vocabulary or inappropriate lexical choices. In addition, the percentage of academic words used as identified by the Academic Word List (AWL; Coxhead, 2000) was calculated by Vocabprofile from the *Compleat Lexical Tutor* (Cobb, 2013) and assigned a score (AWL Use). Finally, the participants were asked during an interview to explain how they had chosen these lexical items, and their comments were examined in light of the background information obtained on the survey: test scores, familiarity with vocabulary strategies, essay grade, and percentage of AWL words in order to ascertain any noticeable trends between knowledge of academic register and scholastic achievement.

Insights From Interviews: Learner Perceptions

The Importance of Academic Words

Findings from the interviews suggest that all nine participants, regardless of performance on this essay or previous standardized tests, recognized the importance of academic vocabulary in composition. Student 2, for example, explained that he uses more formal words in his essays than when speaking with friends “because that will help me write in advance level.” Many of the interviewees indicated that when they make revisions to their writing, it is often to replace a word or expression with something more academic. Student 7 stated she would go back to her essay to change a term because she “can think about other academic words.” Similarly, Student 4 explained he would revise his work if he “found another academic word can describe what I want to say.” Student 5 also changes a word “if it’s too informal.” When asked about specific words they had chosen for the present essay, the interviewees emphasized the importance of register. Student 3 claimed that he chose the word *constraints* because he thought it was academic. Student 6 used the word *frivolous* for the same reason, though it is, in fact, not on the AWL. When interviewees were asked about the weakest and strongest parts of the essay they had written for this study, register was clearly something they bore in mind. Student 1 thought the best part of his essay was “using more complex words,” and Student 5 mentioned her “advanced vocabulary.” In contrast, Student 7 thought her “word choice maybe not so good,” and Student 8 considered inappropriate lexical register to be one of the weakest parts of her essay, which was, in her words, “not so academic.”

Obstacles to Effective Word Choices and Use

Some of the learners were quick to point out what they perceived to be obstacles in their writing. The most common reason given was time constraints. Student 8, who complained that the vocabulary in her essay was not sufficiently academic, indicated that she was not pleased with her sentence *We cannot make sure the virtual world for people is good or bad* and had wanted to change it, but had not had enough time. Students 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 also mentioned time as being an important factor in whether they go back to check word choice or attempt to find more academic terms. Student 6 correctly cited *however* and *beneficial* as examples of academic words, but his overall AWL Use on this essay was the lowest (2.07%), and he believes this is because, when pressed for time, he opts for the first word that comes to him, regardless of the register.

Not all learners were aware of their inappropriate lexical choices, though. All nine participants asserted that they were aware of the im-

portance of academic words, but two interviewees with low AWL Use were not able to correctly identify the register of particular terms. Student 1 (AWL Use 2.93%) considered idioms such as *under the weather* and *born with a silver spoon* appropriate for essay writing. Student 9 (AWL Use 3.49%) used *stuff* in her essay because she thought it was academic. “[I learned the word *stuff*] from my teacher. . . . This describes objects, things, but I think it’s much more a formal style.” In contrast, Students 2 and 7, with high AWL Use (7.28% and 8.14%, respectively), had a better understanding of which words were academic, correctly citing numerous examples such as *initiate* and *enhance*. One of the biggest obstacles to effective word choice therefore appears to be an unfamiliarity with which words are academic and which are not.

Factors Influencing Effective Word Choices and Use

The academic vocabulary these participants used most effectively tended to be words or phrases they had turned to for many of their written assignments. Students 6, 8, and 9 mentioned learning the utility of linking adverbs in all types of essays. Student 6 stated, “[I try to use] connectors and transitions. They’re already in my mind because I have been practicing since January.” Others remembered exactly when and where they had learned a word they tended to use and reuse in their writing. For instance, Student 3 had learned *constraints* at his IEP “two months ago.” Student 4 had been taught *according to* by his Taiwanese professor. Student 5 was confident she had used the expression *shutting out their real life completely* correctly because her Saudi teacher in high school had used *to shut out*, and the student had asked her instructor about it after class. Student 2 mentioned learning the word *benefits* from a teacher in his home country years ago. He found the word useful and has subsequently put it in many compositions:

I learned (the word benefits) before I come to America when I was trying to make my own website which was about e-commerce. My teacher was trying to tell me, he said that in Arabic, he said ‘This is the benefit that you will get to your customer,’ and he said ‘benefit,’ he said it in English also and . . . it’s like a good word.

It is interesting to note that these students readily integrate familiar categories of words (e.g., transitions) or specific terms that have been pointed out to them in a meaningful and memorable way.

Confidence

On the other hand, when students have not had sufficient encounters with a term, they may not feel comfortable using it in an

essay. Only Student 4 claimed to enjoy taking risks. He used *vanquish* because he had seen the word in a book and thought it would be good for academic writing. Though he was only “50% confident” that he was using the word correctly, he thought it was worth trying it in his paper. “I want to use the word that I didn’t use before. ... I don’t want to be the safe way.” In contrast, Student 5 indicated that she does not use words and expressions when she is not certain that the context is appropriate. “It may not be the right place [to put a new word],” she said. Similarly, Student 1 mentioned, “[Sometimes] I want to change (a word) to be convenient with the context.” These comments suggest that when students have exposure to words in diverse contexts, they are more willing to try them with different topics or under different circumstances and that they are aware of the importance not only of using academic vocabulary, but of using it appropriately.

These interviewees were generally sure of vocabulary they had learned and practiced in class, but they expressed the most confidence with terms that they had used in graded writing because the words had already passed the scrutiny of teachers. Student 7, for instance, indicated she was relatively confident that she had used *undeniable* correctly because “I used it in a past essay and my teacher didn’t cross it out.” These learners are most likely not alone in assuming that if something is not corrected by the teacher, it is acceptable and can be safely used again.

Discussion

This study has important implications for both instructors and researchers. While the need for teaching academic vocabulary to ESL students preparing to enter the university has been well argued (Paquot, 2010; Santos, 1988) and is generally an integral part of the ESL college-readiness curriculum, these findings suggest both that students do not always know the register of a word and that they have difficulty using academic vocabulary effectively and appropriately. Some of their mistakes indicate that they may benefit from being explicitly taught the register of a new term. Moreover, they are more confident and use new vocabulary felicitously when they have learned the word in a meaningful way, when they have had multiple exposures to it and in different contexts, and when they have had the opportunity to use it productively and receive feedback on its use.

Although the population and the relevant task examined here provide many insights into the lexical choices made during academic writing, practical factors limited the sample size and the length of time available for interviews and follow-up. In addition, the tool to measure academic vocabulary use counted only single-word items, so

some lexical phrases that might affect overall register were not identified. Finally, unlike research on reading and vocabulary acquisition, in which the text and words analyzed can be presented and measured in a controlled way, the variety of responses from essay writing makes the data more difficult to investigate in a systematic fashion.

Suggestions for future research include the investigation of how students learn to recognize and use the academic register, whether there is a relationship between quality of word choice in essays under varying circumstances, such as when more time is allotted, and whether there is a relationship between academic vocabulary use and essay scores. Though many questions remain concerning lexical choices made while writing and how best to investigate the process, qualitative studies elucidating learner perceptions (including Coxhead, 2007, 2012) appear to carry valuable implications for the English language instructor and can provide insight into effective classroom applications.

Classroom Applications

In light of these insights provided by developing writers, the following applications are proposed to raise learner awareness and provide meaningful and engaging practice. Though they have been designed in light of the needs and goals of learners preparing to enter the university, some are relevant to other populations, such as international students already pursuing a degree in an English-speaking country and high school students. For learners in matriculated classes, the extent to which they are able to make use of these techniques may depend on their instructors and their own ability and motivation to work autonomously. A wide range of activities and games are highly recommended to help learners develop academic vocabulary use in all four skills. However, improvements in writing production require writing practice; the following applications are intended not to replace but to complement the myriad of other techniques focusing on reading, listening, and speaking.

Students Need to Be Explicitly Taught the Register of New Words

1. When introducing a new lexical item, explicitly state the register. It is not uncommon for instructors to give a word's part of speech because it is considered an integral part of what it means to know a word; register, too, is essential to word knowledge. Recognizing that the word *stuff* is informal and thus generally not appropriate in an essay is nearly as important as knowing that it is a noncount noun. Furthermore, several participants in this study indicated that they make a concerted effort to remember academic terms because

they know how important they are in their compositions. Mentioning a word's academic register could spark the attention of college-bound students. For more interactive teaching styles, write both the target academic word and an informal synonym on the board and ask students to guess which is which. Follow up by asking them to explain how they came to their conclusion (word length, Latin or Greek roots, etc.). For more activities differentiating between academic and informal vocabulary, see *Word Knowledge* (Zimmerman, 2009) and in particular pages 95-112.

2. Encourage students to use a learner's dictionary to verify that a given term would be appropriate for the target genre. *The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* is one of several that list academic words and label the register (formal/slang/technical, etc.). An engaging way to get students to use a dictionary is by organizing a race. Divide students into teams and make sure each team has at least one paper or electronic dictionary that indicates whether words are academic or not. Place index cards with vocabulary words around the classroom. For every card with an academic word, there should also be a card with an informal synonym. Teams take a card, look up the word, write on the card whether it is academic or informal and indicate their group number, and then put the card in a box or envelope marked *Academic* or *Informal*. The group with the most cards wins. To discourage guessing in place of dictionary use, points can be deducted for incorrect answers.

Students Try to Use Words to Which They Have Had Multiple Exposures

3. Point out examples of academic words or phrases in samples of well-written compositions and note how they are used. (This could include grammatical behavior, context, connotation, etc.). Models have been found to be an excellent aid in the writing process. According to Coxhead and Byrd (2007):

Academic writing does not exist as a task on its own but is inextricably linked to the reading of academic texts. ... Additionally, in the L2 writing class, reading provides learners with language development opportunities and scaffolding as well as meaning and ideas to use in their own writing. (p. 133)

Essay samples can be found in textbooks, anthologies, and websites such as Cambridge English Language Assessment (2014) at <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/> and Educational Testing Service (ETS),

Graduate Record Examinations (2014) at https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/analytical_writing/issue/sample_responses.

4. Give text-correction or improvement activities in which learners find words in the wrong register and offer replacements. Special attention should be paid to additional changes required because of grammatical behavior or collocations. Examples taken from the students' own writing will be particularly beneficial (see Appendix C).

Students Remember Words They Have Learned in a Meaningful Context

5. Allow students to explore register by creating texts with the same information but in different genres. For instance, these could include an email to a friend and a letter to a professor, or a diary entry and an academic essay, or even a memo to colleagues and an article in a scientific journal. Two examples:

- Write an email to a friend and an email to a professor to explain that you have to return to your country temporarily for a family obligation.
- Select a TOEFL or IELTS writing topic. The ETS website does not list writing topics, but they can be found on numerous other sites and in ETS prep materials for purchase. Write a Facebook post and an essay on the topic. A sample question might ask you to imagine that you were going to invent a new product. Your post and essay would need to include specific details to answer the questions: What would it be? And why is it needed?

6. Encourage using the process approach to writing. In the pre-writing stage, groups can brainstorm appropriate words for a given topic or genre, highlight academic words, and attempt to improve upon terms that are not the correct register. In postwriting, give students the opportunity to revise their work, reformulating sentences when necessary so that academic words are used appropriately and effectively.

7. Teach students how to use Vocabprofile at <http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/> (Cobb, 2013) to calculate the amount of academic vocabulary in their essays. This will enable them to check the percentage of AWL terms used, and it can be an incentive to increase that number. Introduce this during the revising or editing stage of the writing process, but emphasize that effective and appropriate academic word use is more important than the sheer quantity of words.

Students Are Concerned About Using a Word in a Different Context if They Have Not Already Seen It Used in a Similar Way

8. Provide ample controlled and guided practice with the same lexical item in different contexts. This will help students become more aware of the various ways it can be used and thus feel more comfortable incorporating it in their own writing. In addition, point out the academic words or phrases most commonly used in certain rhetorical modes, such as *on the other hand* for a compare-and-contrast essay. In this pilot study, the most effective use of academic vocabulary was achieved when students latched on to pet expressions that they found easy to fit into a composition regardless of the subject matter, and learners can be encouraged to add such phrases to their repertoire for use in multiple contexts.

9. Encourage students to look for sample sentences using a target word to ensure that they are using it correctly. Exercises using corpora will allow them to become more familiar with authentic linguistic patterns. Appendix D offers a sample activity, but *Using Corpora in the Language Classroom* (Reppen, 2010) provides an additional wealth of ideas (see in particular pp. 61-71).

Students Feel More Comfortable Using Words That Have Already Passed the Scrutiny of Their Teachers

10. Guide students in keeping a lexical journal. One approach might be to identify two to three words per paper for students to check either form or meaning. Direct them to write these words in their journals, and add the definitions of the words after checking a learner's dictionary to ensure they have the correct sense if there is more than one meaning. They can also note more informal words with the same meaning, copy sample sentences from the dictionary, and write their own sentences with the words. Students should indicate questions they still have about the word; address them either while reviewing the journal or during class time set aside for this purpose. When students have used a word incorrectly or inappropriately, ask them to compare the word they have used and the word that they meant in their journals. For example: "Their failed business venture resulted in the loss of millions of bucks." (*Compare: bucks/dollars*) Or: "His analyze of the problem lacked depth." (*Compare: analyze/analysis*) (adapted from Lowry, 1999).

Final Observations

This pilot case study has shed light on the complexity of lexical decisions made by ESL writers and has provided some guidance for addressing vocabulary in the classroom. These pedagogical applica-

tions should help foster the acquisition of the requisite vocabulary depth, including register, at the university level and boost learners' confidence in their academic writing.

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Appendix A English Learning Questionnaire

The following survey is being conducted to better understand how non-native speakers of English learn the language. There are no “right” answers. However, it is important that you respond sincerely. If you don’t understand a question, you can use a dictionary to help you or ask us to explain. This questionnaire is voluntary. Thank you very much for your help.

Please choose one answer for each question. If the statement does not apply to you, for example, if you cannot answer question 7 because you have not taken the TOEFL or the IELTS, leave the question blank (do not write anything).

1. Number assigned to you by the researchers: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Sex: Male Female
4. Native Language: _____
5. Other Languages and Level: _____
6. ALP Level: _____
7. How long have you been in the United States? _____
8. What is the highest educational degree you have obtained? _____
9. Last TOEFL or IELTS score: _____
Date: _____
 TOEFL IBT TOEFL PBT IELTS
Reading _____ Listening _____ Speaking _____
Writing _____ Total _____
10. When do you expect to enter the university? _____
11. Major: _____
12. Which of the following have helped you learn English? Check all that apply: _____

Technique	A teacher has shown me how to use	I use	Comments (optional)
<i>(EXAMPLE): Translation exercises</i>	<i>x</i>		<i>I used to do this, but now I don't.</i>
a. Guessing a word			
b. A bilingual dictionary			
c. An English-only dictionary			
d. Word prefixes and suffixes (like un- and -tion)			
e. My knowledge of parts of speech (noun, verb...)			
f. My knowledge of when a word is formal or informal			
g. Listening to learn new words			
h. Reading class assignments to learn new words			
i. Other reading to learn new words			
j. A vocabulary notebook			
k. Lists of vocabulary words			
l. Flash cards			
m. Memorization techniques			
n. Repetition out loud to remember words			
o. Comparisons with my native language to remember words			
p. Associations between a word and a sound or picture			
q. Collocations (words commonly put together such as "to <u>throw</u> a party")			
r. New words when I speak			
s. New words in an essay or other writing assignment			
t. Translation exercises			
u. Summarizing exercises			

Appendix B Interview Questions

For this study, you were asked to read a text and write an essay. Please answer the following questions about that text and essay.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being nothing and 5 being a lot, how much did you know about the subject of the text before you read it?

2. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not interesting at all and 5 being very interesting, how interesting did you find the subject? _____

3. Do you remember using any words or expressions from the text that you read in your essay?

yes no

4. Did you use a monolingual (English only) dictionary to help you write the essay?

yes no

5. Did you use a bilingual dictionary to help you write the essay?

yes no

6. Do you use more formal words when you are writing an essay in English than when you are speaking to your friends?

yes no

7. Do you use more formal words when you are writing an essay in your native language than when you are speaking to your friends?

yes no

8. Are there any words or expressions you try to put in your essays because you think they are good for essay writing? Can you give an example?

yes no Example:

9. How often do you re-read your essays and change a word or expression?

never rarely sometimes often always

10. Why do you change a word?

11. How do you think a university professor would respond to your essay here? What grade would you receive? Why? In your opinion, what is the best part of your essay? What is the weakest part?

For each highlighted word:

12. Do you remember where you learned this word? Did a teacher explain this word to you? Is there a similar word in your native language?

13. Why did you use this word? Was there another word you almost used instead? What?

14. How confident did you feel that you were using the word correctly?

15. If not confident, why did you use it anyway?

16. If confident, what did you know about the word that helped you?

___ definition

___ part of speech (verb, noun, adjective...)

___ spelling

___ the context the word can be used in

___ the grammar related to the word (For example: There is too much traffic but NOT There is too many traffic.)

___ the words that are usually used with it (For example: I took the exam but NOT I wrote the exam.)

___ the register of the word (formal English or conversational English)

Appendix C

Text Improvement Exercise From a Student Essay

Suggested corrections have been added to the text and underlined

Directions: This essay contains 10 words that are too informal. They have been ~~crossed out~~. Replace them with academic terms.

In “The Omnipresence of Learning,” Samuel ~~says~~ states, “We learn everywhere... everyday... in every way. Knowledge is all around us.” I would like to add that we have the opportunity to learn every day if we have the motivation to do so. ~~I guess~~ In my opinion, encouraging and motivating students is one of the most difficult aspects in education.

The Theories and Models of Learning and Instruction in Trends and Issues in Instructional Design and Technology (Reiser, 2012) reveal how we can encourage our students to stay motivated. The most interesting theory for me was the “Situated Learning Theory” (p. 38), which emphasizes the importance of the cultural context on learning. The example in the book ~~talks about~~ depicts a child in Brazil who sells candies in the street. He learns how to ~~manage numbers and math~~ calculate better than his classmates who are learning standard mathematics in school.

~~The book explains~~ Reiser reports that “learning from a situated perspective occurs through the learner’s participation in the practices of a community, practices that are mutually constituted by the members of the community” (p. 38). ~~I think so too~~ strongly agree. We learn in a specific cultural context that ~~makes us think in one way instead of in another way~~ shapes our thinking. However, our roles in the community can be affected by motivation as well.

The child in the streets of Brazil probably learns math because ~~he wants to make big bucks~~ is economically motivated. ~~I’m not saying that he wants~~ He may not necessarily hope to create a business in the candies field. He may not have any other options for survival, and selling candies in the street is his ~~only way to make money~~ source of income. Whatever his motivation, it prompts him to learn math at an early age. The key in his situation is his motivation.

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Appendix D Corpora Activity

The first suggested correction has been added in italics

Directions: Your team must find and correct the mistakes with verbs commonly used in academic texts. For every item, provide a sample sentence you found in a concordancer that helped you determine whether the sentence was correct. Careful! Not all the sentences are wrong. The first team to finish, wins!

1. The scholar refused to abandon to work on her project.
The scholar refused to abandon work/working on her project.
2. The amount of sunlight a plant receives will affect in its growth.

3. We cannot assume that the outcome will be the same if the experiment is repeated.

4. The second amendment, or the right to bear arms, derives by English law.

5. The word processor eliminated that you need to rewrite your essay in subsequent drafts.

6. The Democratic Party established in the United States in 1828.

7. The uprising was not identified as an actual revolution until several years later.

8. Susan B. Anthony was involved to the American Woman Suffrage Association.

9. The American Civil War was occurred between 1861 and 1865.

10. State law prohibits to smoke.
