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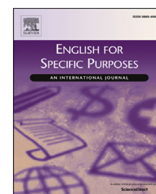

To what extent is the Academic Vocabulary List relevant to university student writing?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of *Academic Vocabulary List* (D. Gardner & Davies, 2014) items in successful university study writing. Overall, levels of use of AVL items are high, and increase as students progress through the years of undergraduate and taught postgraduate study, suggesting that it may be a useful resource. However, significant variation is found across text types and disciplines. While the former is relatively minor, the latter is extensive, suggesting the list is more relevant to some student writers than others. An analysis by items indicates that around half of the words on the list are used very little. Moreover, the items which are frequent differ across disciplines. However, a small core of 427 items was found to be frequent across 90% of disciplines. This suggests that a generic productive academic vocabulary does exist, but that it is smaller in scope than the full Academic Vocabulary List.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

Insufficient vocabulary knowledge has frequently been cited as a key challenge for students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011). In response to this, a substantial amount of research has been devoted to the creation of wordlists to help guide students' academic vocabulary learning (e.g., Campion & Elley, 1971; Cowan, 1974; Coxhead, 2000; Farrell, 1990; Ghadessy, 1979; Lynn, 1973; Praninskas, 1972; Xue & Nation, 1984). Wordlists are based on the important insight that, though the repertoire of vocabulary which students meet during their studies is immense, most text is made up of a relatively small number of frequently recurring words (Nation & Waring, 1997). This suggests that targeted learning of high-frequency items will pay high dividends in helping learners meet their communicative needs.

A major recent addition to this literature has been Gardner and Davies's (2014) *Academic Vocabulary List* (*AVL*). Based on research using the COCA corpus (Davies, 2008), the AVL constitutes a substantial advance on previous academic wordlists, both in terms of the size and representativeness of the corpus on which it is based and in terms of the methodology used. The AVL therefore seems in a strong position to become a standard reference for academic vocabulary.

Before this list is put to use, however, it is important that its relevance for students of EAP be independently evaluated. At least two considerations might make us question this relevance. First, some researchers have argued that differences between

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the vocabulary of different disciplines are so extensive that no single wordlist is likely adequately to meet the needs of all EAP students (Durrant, 2014; Hyland & Tse, 2007). Accordingly, it has been suggested that vocabulary teaching should be discipline-specific, rather than using generic academic wordlists (Chen & Ge, 2007; Hyland & Tse, 2007; I. A. Martinez, Beck, & Panza, 2009).

Second, the AVL is based entirely on texts which students are likely to *read* (primarily academic journals and magazines). This focus on receptive needs is typical of most wordlists (Paquot, 2007 is a rare exception), probably because of the historically limited availability of corpora of student writing (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). However, this restriction to receptive vocabulary may limit lists' usefulness. As Durrant (2014) has argued, research has shown that the link from meaning to form is harder to establish than that from form to meaning and that productive use of vocabulary requires more knowledge (e.g. of register and grammatical and collocation associates of words) than receptive. Moreover, many of the coping strategies which help readers make up for lacks in knowledge when reading (e.g. inferring meaning from context, skipping unknown words) are not available to writers. This implies that a pedagogical focus on productive vocabulary is as at least as important as one on receptive vocabulary. It is therefore important to establish the extent to which lists like the AVL are useful for these purposes.

In response to these issues, the current study evaluates the relevance of the AVL to university student writing. Because any generic vocabulary list needs to demonstrate its relevance to a wide range of students, it will determine both the levels of coverage achieved by the AVL across a corpus of student writing as a whole and the variation in levels of coverage across key variables. Primary among these variables is that of discipline. As noted above, disciplines are known to differ widely in their vocabulary use, so a major challenge for any generic list is to meet the needs of students across a range of disciplines. Second, it will look at variation across student levels. Previous research has suggested that there can be significant variation in the vocabulary used by undergraduates and postgraduates, and also between undergraduates in different year groups (Durrant, 2014). Moreover, if the AVL represents a good target for students, we might expect its use to increase across levels, as students gain in mastery of academic language. Finally, it will consider variation across text genres. This variable has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in previous studies of academic word lists. However, it seems intuitively likely that vocabulary use will differ across different text types. Since different academic programmes tend to emphasize different genres (Nesi & Gardner, 2012), it will be instructive to determine the extent of variation across this variable.

1.2. Word lists and EAP

There is a long history of interest in the idea that vocabulary teaching can and should be rationally structured (see Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; McArthur, 1998 for historical reviews). This interest is essentially an attempt to deal with the fact that the quantity of vocabulary in any natural language is enormous, and that it is impractical for most learners to acquire a lexicon of this magnitude. Wordlists are based on the premise that some words are likely to be more useful to learners than others, and that it is possible to identify in advance which are most worthy of attention.

The majority of work in this area has been based on the idea that words should be prioritized according to their frequency of occurrence in the target language. The point has been expressed clearly by Mackey (1965, p. 177), who argued that "since items occurring the most frequently are those which the learner is more likely to meet, they are the ones which are selected for teaching".

The argument for frequency-based wordlists is provided greater force by the fact that word frequency distributions tend to be highly skewed, so that a relatively small number of words are used with very high-frequency, while the majority of words are infrequent. This means that most of the tokens which learners are likely to meet come from a relatively small set of high-frequency items. Nation and Waring (1997) cite evidence that the most frequent 1,000 words of English account for ('cover') 72% of the words occurring in a wide range of written texts. Because of the heavy skew in coverage, each new set of 1,000 words added after this delivers increasingly diminishing returns (an additional 8% for the second thousand, 4% for the third, 3% for the fourth, etc.). Reviewing a range of studies, Nation and Waring (1997) conclude that learners of general English should initially focus on 3,000 high-frequency words and then shift their attention to strategies that will help them to deal with unknown words and to learn new items as they meet them. For learners with a specific purpose – such as EAP – they recommend learning the most frequent 2,000 words of general English and then focusing on specialized word lists.

For students of EAP, it has been widely claimed that specialized vocabulary teaching should not focus on discipline-specific words. Researchers have argued that such words are difficult for EAP teachers to deal with effectively and that they are relatively unproblematic for learners (Cowan, 1974; Farrell, 1990; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The emphasis has, rather, been on what have been called *sub-technical* (Cowan, 1974) or *academic* (Nation, 2001) vocabulary – words which are distinctive to academic language but are found across a wide range of disciplines.

This avoidance of discipline-specific vocabulary has been criticized in recent years, however. Surveys of non-native speakers of English studying at English-medium universities have undermined the claim that discipline-specific vocabulary is unproblematic for students (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Wu & Hammond, 2011). Moreover, a number of corpus-based studies have suggested that there may not be a usefully large set of vocabulary which is frequent across disciplines (Durrant, 2014; Hyland & Tse, 2007; I. A. Martinez et al., 2009).

In response, writers defending general academic English have pointed out the limitations of discipline-specific syllabi when individual students increasingly need to engage with content from across disciplinary areas (de Chazal, 2013; Eldridge, 2008). They have also noted the practical problems of delivering closely-tailored courses with the limited resources of most EAP units (Eldridge, 2008). Whichever position we take on this debate, it is important that we do so on the basis of a sound

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