English for Specific Purposes 43 (2016) 62–68

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

English for Specific Purposes

journal homepage: http://ees.elsevier.com/esp/default.asp

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

Dee Gardner*, Mark Davies

Department of Linguistics and English Language, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 26 April 2016

Keywords:
Academic vocabulary list
Disciplinary writing

ABSTRACT

In this paper we offer our comments on "To what extent is the Academic Vocabulary List relevant to university student writing?".

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1. Introduction

In Philip Durrant's article in this issue, he analyzes the coverage of our Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) across 31 disciplines of university student writing (BAWE Corpus), concluding that only a relatively small subset of AVL lemmas (427 of 3,000) appear to have an impact across the disciplines, with most of the AVL not being worth students' time and attention. We appreciate the opportunity to address these and other conclusions in the article, and we believe that healthy dialogues such as these can move the field forward in productive ways.

Before beginning our response, we wish to acknowledge some major contributions of Durrant's article: first, he has done an excellent job of contextualizing the historical role of word lists in the research literature and in academic instruction; and second, validation studies such as this are absolutely crucial before pedagogical word lists and other corpus-generated products are put into widespread use. In short, we need to know the true possibilities and limitations of such tools. In the case of the AVL, we knew from the outset that our list was fairly raw because it was generated through quantitative statistics without any post-hoc subjective assessments and refinement. We also recognized that the list was not perfect by any means—that a few of the words on the list were suspect—but we were determined to leave the list "as is." Durrant's study of BAWE student writing brings the AVL to a real-world application, where we can begin to unpack the list and make much needed recommendations for its implementation. In our original article (Gardner & Davies, 2014), we were constrained by the need to establish the linguistic viability of the list, and we had very little space to discuss details of application.

Our main concerns with Durrant's article have to do with the constructs the author attempts to establish, his assumptions about the role of the AVL in academic research and instruction, and what we consider to be unwarranted conclusions based on these issues. By addressing these concerns, we also hope to clarify some misconceptions about the relative value of corpus-generated pedagogical word lists in language education and research. Our concerns are as follows.

Concern 1. We take strong exception to the author's use of university student writing (mostly undergraduate) to represent "disciplinary writing," especially when it is used to judge the utility of the AVL, which is based primarily on a

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Dee_Gardner@byu.edu (D. Gardner), Mark_Davies@byu.edu (M. Davies).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.03.001
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Table 1
427 AVL lemmas with Impact in the BAWE Corpus.

AVL Frequency Tiers	#	%
1–500	357	83.6
501–1,000	66	15.5
1,001–1,500	3	0.7
1,501–2,000	0	0.0
2,001–2,500	0	0.0
2,501–3,015	1	0.2
Total	427	100.0

higher overall level of disciplinary materials (published articles, research reports, etc.). For us, the author's findings are actually a nice validation of the AVL, both in terms of the lemmas that actually do cross over the disciplines of student writing, as well as those that do not. This is because the AVL is based primarily on established disciplinary writing (the target), whereas the BAWE corpus is based on emerging disciplinary writing (the process). The fact that the author found a statistically significant difference in the presence of AVL lemmas by educational level is a partial validation of this argument, although this finding is downplayed in the article itself.

A second validation is the very fact that BAWE student writers did not consistently use the breadth or depth of academic vocabulary found in the AVL. We do not see this as diminishing the value of the expanded AVL (as the author does), but as an indication of the level of writing being analyzed—the BAWE Corpus of student writing. To illustrate this point, we analyzed the 427 AVL lemmas presented by the author as having utility in the BAWE Corpus, and provide the results in Table 1.

It is clear that the list of 427 AVL lemmas comes primarily from the highest frequency tiers of the AVL, with 83.6% falling within the 1–500 tier and 15.5% falling within the 501–1000 tier—a total of 99.1% in the top 1,000 lemmas of the AVL. Only three lemmas from the third tier (APPENDIX-noun, EFFECT-verb, SITUATE-verb) and one lemma from the sixth tier (FIRSTLY-adverb) are beyond the 1,000 rank. The author might choose to look at this as additional evidence that the expanded AVL (beyond the 1,000 rank) is of little or no use to students, whereas we view this as commenting on the academic sophistication of the BAWE student writing.

To further illustrate this point, Table 2 contains examples of conceptually-related AVL lemmas with their corresponding frequency ranks on the AVL. The data is borrowed from a study in process (Hart & Gardner, in process). It is clear from these examples that the AVL contains many sets of conceptually-related academic words that are situated on a cline from less sophistication to more sophistication, corresponding to their relative frequency rankings. Additionally, the lemma alternatives in each set are thesaurus-like—i.e., they exhibit similarities in meaning, but also nuanced differences. We would fully expect the BAWE students, as developing disciplinary writers, to employ more words towards the less-sophisticated end of the cline than towards the more-sophisticated end (characteristic of "the process"). However, the university textbooks, published articles, and other materials that such students are typically asked to negotiate in their disciplines (the target) will certainly contain a higher proportion of more sophisticated AVL lemmas than the students' own writing. The fact that the more sophisticated lemmas (above the 1,000 rank) do not show up with regularity in the BAWE Corpus is completely understandable, but that does not mean they are unimportant targets for both students' understanding of advanced texts and the development of more mature academic writing.

To put this all another way, we would fully expect that a discipline-based corpus of primary or secondary school writing would contain even fewer sophisticated AVL lemmas and perhaps even be at the level of the "Basic Meaning" words in Table 2, which we often refer to as pre-AVL words and concepts. Again, the absence of sophisticated academic vocabulary in the compositions of developing writers is not evidence that such words are unimportant now or at some future date for those writers. In this regard, "frequency" must be considered as being relative—i.e., AVL lemmas at the top of the list will almost always have higher overall frequencies in academic materials than those at the bottom of the list, but this advantage will tend to narrow as the level of sophistication of the materials increases.

Another way of expressing our concern with the author's interpretation of his data is to consider what would happen in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) scenario if the key technical vocabulary within a specific discipline were determined by BAWE student writing, rather than the vocabulary used by the specialists within that discipline (scholars, textbook writers, etc.); or if the value of the discipline-specific vocabulary used by such experts were determined by whether or not their students used that vocabulary in their writing; or if we determined the technical words from the vocabulary used in the BAWE corpus and then judged their merits by the vocabulary used by 15- to 18-year-old adolescents in their academic writing.

Table 2
Sample of conceptually-related AVL lemmas with AVL frequency ranks.

Basic Meaning	Part of Speech	AVL LEMMAS (rank)
Pressure	Noun	INFLUENCE (216), DEMAND (257), COERCION (1387), COMPULSION (2069), EXIGENCY (2522)
Imagine	Verb	ASSUME (233), HYPOTHESIZE (1084), ENVISAGE (2086), CONJECTURE (2806)
Major	Adjective	SIGNIFICANT (45), FUNDAMENTAL (400), PROMINENT (666), LARGE-SCALE (999), CONSEQUENTIAL (2541)
Obviously	Adverb	EXPLICITLY (746), UNEQUIVOCALLY (2300), CONSPICUOUSLY (2336),MANIFESTLY (2619), DEMONSTRABLY (2816)

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