



## A nursing academic word list



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### ABSTRACT

This corpus-based lexical study aims to explore the most frequently-used nursing academic vocabulary across different sub-disciplines in the nursing field. A 1,006,934-word corpus called the Nursing Research Articles Corpus (hereafter NRAC), which contains 252 English nursing research articles from online resources, was established for this study. A Nursing Academic Word List containing the most frequently-used nursing words in nursing research articles, was developed from the corpus. A frequency and range-based nursing academic word list including 676 word families, which accounts for approximately 13.64% of the coverage in the NRAC under study, was produced to provide a useful academic word pool for non-native English learners who need to read and publish nursing articles in English. The findings suggest that it is necessary to generate field-specific academic word lists for EFL nursing students to strengthen their academic reading and writing proficiency. Pedagogical implications are made for English for Nursing Purposes instructors, English for Academic Purposes researchers, material designers and nursing graduate students.

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## 1. Introduction

Since knowledge of vocabulary has a direct influence on language learners' reading and writing proficiency, the acquisition of vocabulary is considered to be the most important component of learning a foreign language (Nation, 2001). Due to the increasing demand for teaching EFL learners in their specialized study fields, great attention has recently been paid to the specialized vocabulary used in academic texts. Academic vocabulary, which plays a significant role in academic texts, consists of words with a high frequency and a wide range of occurrence across scientific disciplines, which are not usually found in basic general English texts (Farrell, 1990). Some researchers claim that the majority of non-native English speakers find it hard to acquire academic vocabulary, especially if the objective is to acquire a high level of literacy in the target language (Cobb & Horst, 2004). Graduate students in Taiwan are required to write a thesis/dissertation including English and Chinese abstracts as part of their graduation, irrespective of their chosen field of specialization. In addition, some universities even require their graduate students to publish research articles in international journals or study abroad for one year. Hence, the university in which the author teaches offers an academic English course to improve nursing graduate students' skills with regard to writing English abstracts for academic papers. Although these students have learned English for at least seven years in an EFL context, their English proficiency level is still at a low-to-intermediate level. Moreover, the findings from two recent studies show that nursing students in the EFL context have little success in reading textbooks and academic research articles in

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English (Huang, 2010; Yang, 2011). Thus, it can be assumed that nursing graduate students find it difficult to read and write academic papers.

Although a number of word lists of academic words have been established in other disciplines, no list has exclusively targeted the nursing field. Since it is considered to be both important and essential to create a nursing academic word list, which is useful for nursing graduate students in all sub-disciplines, this study aims to establish such a list to serve as a guide for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors and material designers in English for Nursing purposes (ENP) curriculum preparation and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbook design, to provide further evidence for EAP researchers who are interested in producing field-specific academic word lists and to facilitate nursing students' acquisition of academic vocabulary. An academic word list targeted exclusively for nursing students can be taught and directly studied in the same way as the words from West's (1953) General Service List of English words (GSL) and Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL). A nursing academic word list may play an important role in setting vocabulary goals for language courses, guiding learners in their independent study, and informing course designers in designing material, selecting texts and developing learning activities. For teachers, the findings of the study can be incorporated into EAP writing and reading courses. They can incorporate the word-forms and word families found in the study into their academic reading course by directing students' attention to these words and requiring students to use these words in their writing. Materials designers can develop academic English textbooks specifically designed to teach nursing academic vocabulary, and nursing research article reading and writing, which in turn can effectively improve nursing students' academic reading and writing proficiency. Finally, for researchers in applied linguistics and EAP, the findings of the study may serve as a useful basis for further research into the establishment of field-specific academic vocabulary. The study could be of special significance to researchers using nursing academic vocabulary to examine the rhetorical functions served by these academic words.

### 1.1. Academic vocabulary

According to Nation (2001), words in English academic writing can be classified into four categories, namely, high-frequency words, academic words, technical words and low-frequency words. High-frequency words are English words that are frequently used in basic conversation, reading and writing. Many word lists based on word frequency have been developed for students to learn essential and important words. The most widely used collection of high frequency words is West's (1953) General Service List of English words (GSL). West (1953) used a variety of criteria to select the words from a corpus of five million, including frequency, ease of learning, coverage of useful concepts and stylistic level. The GSL contains 2,000 word families. Although the GSL has been criticized for its age and size, it accounts for 90% coverage in fiction texts, 75% of nonfiction texts and approximately 80% of the running words in academic texts. These word families are valuable for ESL and EFL learners to concentrate on because they provide learners with realistic goals to learn vocabulary. Language learners have numerous opportunities for exposure to these words.

Academic words, not usually found in basic general English texts, refer to words that account for a relatively high proportion of running words in all academic texts. According to Thurston and Candlin (1998), this set of vocabulary is most problematic for learners to acquire because learners are generally not as familiar with it as they are with technical vocabulary in their own field. The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), which is the most widely cited academic word list in the literature, consists of 570 words families that are not in the most frequent 2,000 words of English. Since the list occurs reasonably frequently over a wide range of academic texts, it is regarded as a useful learning tool for learners with academic purposes (Coxhead & Nation, 2001).

Technical words are those used in specialized topics, fields or disciplines. These words are reasonably common in a certain subject area but not so common elsewhere. They differ from subject area to subject area and cover about 5% of the running words in an academic text. Technical words include a variety of types which range from words that do not usually occur in other subject areas (*defecate, dialysis, diastole, edema, eczema and peritoneal*) to those that are formally like high-frequency words but which have specialized meanings (*dressing, complaint, terminal, discharge, stool*) when used in nursing (Nation, 2001).

Low-frequency words are rarely-used terms that are not extensively dispersed and occur in low frequency. Some words may only occur once or twice and may be encountered only occasionally; yet, this is the biggest group of words in any field. Low-frequency words cover around 5% of the running words in an academic text. Low-frequency words include all the words that are proper names, words that users rarely meet in their use of the language, not high-frequency words, and technical words for other subject areas (Nation, 2001). Nation (2001) claims that "one person's technical vocabulary is another person's low-frequency words," which shows the fluctuation of low frequency words (p. 20).

These four different categories of words play different roles at different stages of language learning. Based on their learning purposes and stages, learners can decide which category they need most. For example, Laufer (1992) argues that, if L2 readers want to successfully comprehend academic research articles, they need to know 95% (about 3,000) of the words contained in academic reading texts. In other words, they need to be familiar with both West's (1953) GSL and Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) vocabulary, the most recently compiled word list containing 570 word families. Coxhead and Nation (2001) claim that AWL vocabulary is common in academic texts of different genres and fields, and is considered to have the advantage of being accessible to language teachers, unlike technical vocabulary. Learners may, in fact, find the technical vocabulary in their own field more familiar than academic vocabulary. However, previous studies have found that academic vocabulary in academic texts is most problematic for the majority of non-native English speakers to acquire because learners

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