



## The lexical profile of academic spoken English



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated (a) the lexical demands of academic spoken English and (b) the coverage of the Academic Word List (AWL) in academic spoken English. The researchers analyzed the vocabulary in 160 lectures and 39 seminars from four disciplinary sub-corpora of the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus: Arts and Humanities, Life and Medical Sciences, Physical Sciences and Social Sciences. The results showed that knowledge of the most frequent 4,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words provided 96.05% coverage, and knowledge of the most frequent 8,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words provided 98.00% coverage of academic spoken English. The vocabulary size necessary to reach 95% coverage of each sub-corpus ranged from 3,000 to 5,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words and 5,000 to 13,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words to reach 98% coverage. The AWL accounted for 4.41% coverage of academic spoken English. Its coverage in each sub-corpus ranged from 3.82% to 5.21%. With the help of the AWL, learners with knowledge of proper nouns and marginal words will need a vocabulary of 3,000 and 8,000 word families to reach 95% and 98% coverage of academic spoken English, respectively.

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### 1. Introduction

Understanding academic spoken English such as lectures or seminars is one of the greatest challenges for second language (L2) learners at English-medium universities. A lack of vocabulary knowledge is one of the biggest reasons for these students' poor comprehension of academic spoken English (Kelly, 1991). Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge is a significant factor for successful listening comprehension (Stæhr, 2009). To help students improve their comprehension of academic spoken English, it is essential to explore the vocabulary size necessary to comprehend academic spoken English. Learning Coxhead's (2000) AWL might be the most effective way for L2 students to improve their comprehension of academic written text. However, it is not clear whether the AWL can improve comprehension of academic spoken text to the same degree that it improves comprehension of academic written text because there has been little research investigating this issue.

The aim of this study is to determine the coverage of the AWL in academic spoken English and the vocabulary size necessary to reach 95% and 98% coverage of academic spoken English both with and without the help of the AWL. By doing this, the present research may provide a vocabulary goal for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses which, when reached, may allow learners to understand academic spoken English. This study may also indicate the value of the AWL for improving comprehension of academic spoken English.

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### 1.1. How many words do you need to know to comprehend academic spoken English?

One way to determine the lexical demands of text is to calculate the number of words needed to reach certain coverage points. Coverage is the percentage of known words in a text (Nation & Waring, 1997). It is useful to measure coverage because it may indicate the vocabulary size necessary for comprehension of text. Although there are many factors affecting comprehension, coverage may be the most influential factor (Laufer & Sim, 1985). There have been no studies investigating the coverage necessary for comprehension of academic spoken English. However, L2 research on the coverage needed for comprehending written texts and general conversation may provide some indication of the vocabulary size needed for comprehension of academic spoken English.

Most L2 studies measuring the coverage necessary for comprehension have been conducted on written text. Laufer (1989) suggested that 95% coverage could lead to reasonable comprehension of an L2 academic text. However, Hu and Nation (2000) found that 98% coverage was needed for adequate unassisted reading comprehension of a relatively easy L2 fiction text. Schmitt, Jiang, and Grabe (2011) found a linear relationship between lexical coverage and comprehension. Although they did not find a coverage figure that ensured comprehension, they suggested that the coverage level required may vary according to the degree of comprehension needed. They reported that 98% coverage may be necessary if comprehension test scores of 60% or higher are needed. This supports Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski's (2010) suggestion that two lexical coverage thresholds based on the degree of comprehension are used: 95% for minimal and 98% for optimal comprehension.

While research findings on the relationship between coverage and reading comprehension have been consistent to some extent, studies investigating the relationship between coverage and listening comprehension have had rather inconsistent results. Bonk (2000) found that learners occasionally had good listening comprehension at 80–89% coverage and suggested that learners with effective coping strategies may achieve adequate listening comprehension at far below 95% coverage for short texts. However, further analysis of Bonk's results by Schmitt (2008) indicated that learners with coverage of 90% or less may not have had adequate listening comprehension while those with coverage of 95% or more had adequate comprehension. To date, Van-Zeeland and Schmitt's (2012) study may be the most comprehensive research on the relationship between lexical coverage and listening comprehension. Examining L1 and L2 learners' comprehension of informal narratives, they found that the lexical coverage necessary for listening comprehension depends on the desired degree of comprehension. They suggest that 98% may be a good coverage goal for "very high comprehension" while 95% may be the best text coverage goal for "good but not necessarily complete" comprehension of informal narratives (p. 18–19).

The variation in findings suggests that the coverage necessary for comprehension may vary according to discourse type and the degree of desired comprehension. Comprehension of academic spoken English, on one hand, may be easier than comprehension of written texts or radio programs. This is because the aural input of academic spoken English is supported by speakers' facial expression or gestures (Harris, 2003) and other media such as handouts, textbooks and visual materials presented on the board or overhead projector (Flowerdew, 1994). On the other hand, comprehension of academic spoken English may be more difficult than comprehension of informal conversation (Van-Zeeland & Schmitt, 2012) because vocabulary used in informal conversation may consist of more high-frequency words than those used in academic spoken English.

Taken together, research suggests that coverage of 90–99% may provide adequate comprehension of academic spoken English. The present study chose 95% and 98% coverage as the lower and upper boundaries indicating comprehension of academic spoken English. These coverage points were chosen because 95% and 98% coverage may indicate reasonable (Laufer, 1989) and ideal (Nation, 2006) comprehension of written text and these figures are supported by Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) and Van-Zeeland and Schmitt (2012).

A considerable number of corpus-driven studies have provided information about the vocabulary size necessary to reach 95% and 98% coverage of different types of written discourse such as graded readers (Nation, 2006; Webb & Macalister, 2012), newspapers (Nation, 2006), children's literature (Webb & Macalister, 2012) and novels (Nation, 2006). However, fewer studies have paid attention to spoken discourse, and all of these studies have dealt with general conversation rather than academic spoken discourse. Nation (2006) found that including proper nouns, 3,000 word families accounted for 95% coverage and 6,000–7,000 word families provided 98% coverage of unscripted spoken English. Similarly, 3,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words and 6,000–7,000 word families plus proper nouns and marginal words were needed to reach 95% and 98% coverage of TV programs (Webb & Rodgers, 2009a) and movies (Webb & Rodgers, 2009b). Van-Zeeland and Schmitt (2012) suggest that to reach 95% lexical coverage of spoken text, learners would need from 2,000 to 3,000 word families. Taken together, these studies suggest that coupled with proper nouns and marginal words, 2,000–3,000 word families and 6,000–7,000 word families are needed to reach 95% and 98% coverage of general spoken English, respectively.

### 1.2. Coverage of the AWL in academic spoken English

Coxhead's (2000) AWL is the successor of Xue and Nation's (1984) University Word List. Based on the principle of specialized occurrence, range and frequency, the AWL lists 570 word families derived from a 3.5 million token corpus which consisted of four sub-corpora: arts, commerce, law and science. The AWL covered 10.0% of the tokens in Coxhead's academic corpus. The coverage provided by the AWL across the four disciplines ranged from 9.1% (science) to 12% (commerce).

Since the AWL was created, there have been a large number of studies investigating the distribution of the AWL in academic written English, most of which have reported positive results which are in line with Coxhead's (2000) findings. Cobb and Horst (2004) and Hyland and Tse (2007) are two studies examining the distribution of the AWL in

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