From the Editors

Words for what? Contrasting university students' receptive and productive academic vocabulary needs

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A B S T R A C T

With the objective of determining what academic vocabulary students use productively, and exploring the relationship between receptive and productive academic vocabulary, this paper continues the dialog on what constitutes academic vocabulary. By adopting a set of principled criteria (ratio, dispersion, discipline specificity and range) and by approximating the procedures from a recent study of academic vocabulary, the academic vocabulary found in students' writing is identified and subsequently compared to the academic vocabulary found in published academic writing (indexical of receptive purposes). Nearly 600 words emerge as being represented significantly more frequently in students' academic writing than in their non-academic writing, demonstrating that students distinguish in their writing between academic and non-academic vocabulary. Furthermore, the investigation finds significant differences between students' productive academic vocabulary and academic vocabulary serving receptive purposes, suggesting that students' productive and receptive academic vocabulary needs are far from identical. The findings reported here are intended to serve as a tool for EAP educators working to help students develop academic vocabulary fit for purpose, as well as an incentive for EAP researchers to continue to explore the nature of academic vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is well established as an important topic within English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Several recent contributions to the broader area of EAP have considered the question of what constitutes academic vocabulary and indeed debated the meaningfulness of academic vocabulary as a construct (Durrant, 2014, 2016; Gardner & Davies, 2014, 2016; Hyland & Tse, 2007). However, and with some exceptions (notably Durrant, 2014, 2016; Paquot, 2010), the majority of research has addressed academic vocabulary in texts students are more likely to encounter receptively than to produce. In the spirit of continuing this important dialog and developing EAP pedagogy relating to vocabulary, the present paper puts focus on the necessary but somewhat neglected distinction between receptive and productive academic vocabulary.

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1.1. Overview and research focus

EAP scholars and practitioners commonly classify some words as 'academic' on the basis that they are used more frequently in academic than non-academic settings. Because academic vocabulary has a strong enabling function vis à vis other dimensions of academic communication (Corson, 1997; Coxhead, 2000, 2016; Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Laufer & Nation, 1999), knowledge of these words is beneficial.

However, research suggests that significant numbers of students, particularly students whose first language is not English, are challenged by academic discourse(s) because of insufficient vocabulary knowledge. For example, Evans and Green (2007) surveyed Cantonese speaking students at Hong Kong's largest English-medium university and concluded that "inadequate receptive and productive vocabulary in English is the main problem confronting the almost 5,000 students who participated in the survey" (pp. 13–14).

While there appears to be consensus among scholars regarding the value of vocabulary in EAP–and many students' need for support in this regard–the question concerning *what words* students actually need to know for successful academic communication is still very much up for debate. Much existing pedagogical advice regarding students' academic vocabulary is based on the assumption that the vocabulary needed in order to engage in communication in academic contexts can be gathered in a list, such as Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) or, more recently, Gardner and Davies' (2014) Academic Vocabulary List (AVL).[1] While the merits of such collections of academic vocabulary are recognized by scholars who find them "useful in establishing vocabulary learning goals, assessing vocabulary knowledge and growth, analyzing text difficulty and richness, creating and modifying reading materials, designing vocabulary learning tools, determining the vocabulary components of academic curricula, and fulfilling many other crucial academic needs" (Gardner & Davies, 2014, p. 306) other researchers adopt a more critical stance. Criticisms have included the idea that "the different practices and discourses of disciplinary communities undermine the usefulness of such lists" (Hyland & Tse, 2007, p. 235), and that "no single wordlist is likely adequately to meet the needs of all EAP students" (Durrant, 2016, p. 50).

A further potential critique is that most lists of academic vocabulary are based on journal articles, textbooks and other expert genres, meaning that they primarily indicate which academic words students need to know receptively, i.e. to enable them to read academic texts.[2] While the case could be made that expert writing represents a desirable norm for academic writing in general (i.e. disregarding level of writing; see e.g. Nation, 2008, p. 129), it is highly questionable to what extent such writing is an appropriate (or even feasible) target to set for students' written assignments (Ädel, 2006, pp. 206–207; Hyland & Milton, 1997, p. 184; Nesi, 2016). To this end, Gardner and Davies (2016, p. 63) are careful to make a distinction between "established disciplinary writing" as an "[established] target" and "emerging disciplinary writing" as more appropriately construed as a "process." Evidence of this gap is offered by Pétursdóttir (2013), who tested Icelandic students immediately pre-university on the AWL and found that they knew 47% of the words receptively but only 19% productively (incidentally, 22% of the students did not know *any* academic words productively). This gap is the justification for remarks like Durrant's (2016) that "a pedagogical focus on productive vocabulary is at least as important as one on receptive vocabulary" (p. 50).[3]

Durrant's (2016) critique in this regard raises important questions. First, what are the academic productive vocabulary needs of students writing at university: which words do they need to know in order to engage successfully in productive writing tasks? While Durrant (2016) has established that what is believed to constitute academic vocabulary, words from the Academic Vocabulary List, only partly serves this purpose, his work only partially answers this important question (as will be discussed in the next section). Second, what is actually the relationship between academic productive and receptive vocabulary as indexed by students' written production (academic assignments) and a standardized measure of receptive vocabulary (e.g. the AVL)?

1.2. Distinguishing receptive and productive (academic) vocabulary knowledge

Although there has been considerable debate regarding the dividing line between receptive and productive vocabulary, or whether receptive-productive vocabulary is indeed better viewed along a continuum (Henriksen, 1999), a substantial body of research supports the distinction (cf. Laufer, 1998), and it has implications for how academic vocabulary should be taught and learned.

It is widely acknowledged that learning vocabulary productively is significantly more challenging than learning vocabulary receptively (cf. Mondria & Wiersma, 2004; Schmitt, 2008), not least because, as Durrant (2016) notes, "many of the

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[1] There is a long tradition of cataloging words assumed to be useful for students in academic contexts. Durrant (2016) provides a good overview of the historical role of word lists in the research literature and in pedagogy.

[2] We are aware of only three studies which have considered learner writing in connection with corpus based work on academic vocabulary. Durrant's (2014) corpus investigation finds that students' productive vocabulary is extremely diverse across disciplines, lending support to an argument for discipline-based learning of academic vocabulary. This position is further strengthened in his more recent work (Durrant, 2016) which evaluates the utility of Gardner and Davies' (2014) Academic Vocabulary List for students' writing and finds that AVL coverage varies significantly across text types and disciplines. Finally, the *Academic Keyword List* by Paquot (2010) is, in part, based on students' written production in learner genres but includes an equal proportion of published research expert writing, making it difficult to assess its utility for productive academic vocabulary.

[3] Virtually the same point is made by Paquot (2007, 2010).