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# Single and multi-word unit vocabulary in university tutorials and laboratories: Evidence from corpora and textbooks



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## ABSTRACT

Small-group academic interactions, such as tutorials and laboratory sessions, do not often feature in vocabulary or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research. Yet across many disciplines in tertiary education, students are required to attend and participate in these speaking and listening events. EAP students need to be prepared for them, and their textbooks should help them prepare also. The present study included interview data from lecturers and students which identified specific issues with speaking in small groups in university; corpus-based analysis of tutorials and laboratory sessions which showed large amounts of high frequency vocabulary; and an EAP/ESP textbook analysis showed little focus on vocabulary in tutorials and nothing on laboratories. A total of 176 phrases were suggested in three textbooks as being useful for expressions for speaking in small groups. An analysis of these phrases in the corpus showed that three quarters of these phrases did not appear in the laboratory corpus and two thirds did not appear in the tutorial corpus. Finally, lexical patterns from the corpus were identified and categorised in the same way as existing lists of multiword units in spoken academic English. Implications for pedagogy and materials design are followed by suggestions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research has focused predominantly on writing for the university (Skyrme, 2010), with some attention in terms of academic speaking focused mostly on lectures (Feak, 2013), particularly with regard to discourse (Jordan, 1997) and student problems with understanding content in lectures (Basturkmen, 2016; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2010). Student presentations have been the focus of some research (e.g., Hincks, 2003), and are an area of concern for second language speakers of English (Kim, 2006). Lectures and student presentations are mostly one-way, in that one speaker tends to hold the floor. Basturkmen (2016) notes that there is limited research into academic speaking which involves interaction between speakers, such as between lecturers and students or students and students. This form of 'dialogic interaction' is important for developing understanding of disciplinary content and ability to express complex ideas (Basturkmen, 2016).

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The lexical nature of small-group academic interactions, such as tutorials and laboratory sessions, does not often feature in vocabulary or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research. Yet across many disciplines in tertiary education, students are required to attend and participate in these speaking and listening events. Labs and tutorials are opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of the concepts, theories, and reading issues in the lectures. EAP students need to be prepared for them, and EAP classes and textbooks should support this preparation. However, EAP courses tend to focus on study skills and EAP textbooks often use a functions-based approach for developing EAP speaking skills (Basturkmen, 2016), in the form of functional expressions such as ways to agree or disagree with someone (e.g. *I totally agree*) or give opinions (e.g. *in my experience/opinion*). Do these approaches actually support learners in understanding the vocabulary that they will encounter and have to use in small group interactions at university?

Researchers have also used functions when reporting on the use of lexical bundles (4-word multi-word units) in academic texts. Biber, Conrad, and Cortes (2004), Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010) and Wood and Appel (2014) have drawn on stance expressions, discourse organisers, referential expressions, and special conversational functions as a way to identify, categorise and organize lexical bundles in academic spoken and written texts. Do these categorisations feature in spoken tutorial and laboratory corpora?

The purpose of this article is to focus on vocabulary in small group interactions at university through interviews with lecturers and students, a corpus-based analysis of single words and multi-word units in tutorials and laboratories, and an analysis of EAP textbooks.

### 1.1. Speaking in small groups in the university context

Tutorials and laboratories are typically small group learning opportunities which run alongside lectures, the main spoken academic event at undergraduate level. At postgraduate level, interactive seminars are becoming the main spoken academic event (Basturkmen, 2016; Marlina, 2009). Basturkmen (2016) outlines why interaction is important in academic speaking: it provides confirmation of student comprehension of key ideas, supports the development and confirmation of content knowledge for students, helps with relationship development with others in the class (staff and students), and builds familiarity with disciplinary norms.

While Marlina (2009) reported social and educational benefits of tutorial participation in an Australian university by second language speakers of English, Jones (1999) noted that these speaking environments can cause strain for non-native speakers. In a longitudinal study of Chinese learners in a university setting in New Zealand, Skyrme (2010, p. 212) found that “within the university, speaking was the skill least required and most feared by the students, as it subjected them to public evaluation”.

According to Cosmay (2006), one distinctive feature of university classroom teaching in general is on-line informational elaboration. This feature characterizes the situation where speakers share the same contexts with listeners, and are under the pressure of transferring the information (informational) in real time production circumstance (on-line). In other words, in small group speaking such as labs and tutorials, students need to process information-dense messages and then give response in a limited period of time. Such pressure means that fluency is the key for these students to successfully engage in small group speaking.

Tutorials are more common in soft sciences (e.g., business, art) (Neumann, 2001) and can be highly interactive environments (Hunter and Coxhead 2007). Learners might be required to attend a lecture and also read in advance of a tutorial to be prepared for discussion. Tutorials might reflect some flavour of the local context, such as current events, cultural and historical references, and jokes and stories in lectures (Reinhart, 2002), as well as the use of colloquialisms and local lexis (Coxhead, Hunter, Pierard and Cooke (2008)). These elements of academic speaking can provide challenges for even the most competent, confident and prepared speaker of English as a second or foreign language, particularly if they have spent very little time in a particular context or do not have strong networks of support.

Laboratories are more common in hard sciences (e.g., engineering, biology) (Neumann, 2001). The majority of research on the linguistic features in laboratories has focused on analysis of written texts, such as genre analyses of student laboratory reports (see, for example, Kelly-Laubscher, Muna, & van der Merwe, 2017; Parkinson, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, only one study (Tapper, 1994) has focused on the spoken aspect of laboratories. The focus of that study was to examine the use of directives (particularly pronouns) in laboratory sessions by an international teaching assistant in the Australian context. Laboratories appear to be a neglected area of research in EAP.

### 1.2. Vocabulary in spoken academic contexts

University students need to comprehend both academic spoken and written English: vocabulary knowledge and comprehension are significantly related (e.g., Schmitt, Cobb, Horst, & Schmitt, 2015; van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). Corpus-based studies have contributed a great deal to developing our understandings of aspects of academic lexis (both single word and multi-word units). Numerous studies have focused on written discourse (e.g., Ackermann & Chen, 2013; Coxhead (2000); Gardner & Davies, 2014; Lei & Liu, 2016; Watson-Todd, 2017; Wood & Appel, 2014; Yang, 2015) while studies investigating the vocabulary in academic spoken English are very limited in number.

The academic spoken English research appears follows three main trends. The first trend is to investigate the vocabulary loads of different kinds of academic spoken English. Dang and Webb (2014) showed that a vocabulary size of 4000 and 8000

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