

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN IMPROVING EFL LEARNERS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22643769>

Abstract: This thesis investigates the critical function of academic vocabulary acquisition in enhancing the written production of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students. Academic writing demands precise lexical choices, formal register control, and adherence to disciplinary discourse norms. Insufficient mastery of sub-technical and general academic vocabulary often hinders learners from formulating coherent arguments, synthesizing literature, and adhering to the conventions of academic discourse. This study analyzes how direct pedagogical instruction using structured vocabulary lists, particularly Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL), influences lexical diversity, syntactic density, and academic register in student writing. Drawing on empirical data from a quantitative-qualitative pre-test/post-test framework, the findings demonstrate that explicit academic lexical interventions lead to measurable gains in lexical sophistication, reduce repetitive general-service word usage, and directly elevate overall writing performance.

Keywords: Academic vocabulary, Academic Word List (AWL), EFL academic writing, lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, sub-technical vocabulary.

Introduction

Academic writing in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context presents a complex cognitive and linguistic challenge. Beyond grammatical accuracy, advanced academic literacy requires the strategic selection of precise, discipline-neutral words—frequently termed cross-disciplinary or sub-technical vocabulary [1]. While learners may exhibit communicative fluency in General English (GE) drawing primarily from West's General Service List (GSL), they frequently struggle when transitioning to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) [2].

The primary deficit observed in EFL academic compositions is not merely structural, but lexical: students often rely on informal colloquialisms, high-frequency spoken verbs (e.g., *get*, *make*, *look into*), and repetitive clause connectors [3]. Academic vocabulary functions as the cognitive scaffolding that enables writers to conceptualize ideas, establish formal relationships between propositions, and convey disciplinary stance [4]. Therefore, systematic acquisition and functional mastery of academic lexis remain paramount to improving writing proficiency.

Methodology

The study employed an experimental, quasi-longitudinal design over a 14-week academic semester involving 60 intermediate-to-advanced undergraduate EFL students majoring in Philology. Participants were divided equally into a control group ($n = 30$) and an experimental group ($n = 30$).

- **Instruments:** Both groups completed timed academic essay writing tasks (pre-test and post-test) addressing standardized argumentative prompts.

- **Pedagogical Intervention:** The experimental group received systematic, explicit instruction centered on the Academic Word List (AWL), focusing on morphological awareness (word families), collocations, semantic prosody, and context-dependent usage. The control group followed a conventional writing syllabus where vocabulary was treated incidentally through reading comprehension.

- **Evaluation Metrics:** Pre- and post-intervention essays were examined using computational text analysis tools (VocabProfile/Range) to calculate the percentage of AWL coverage, Type-Token Ratio (TTR) for lexical variation, and an analytic rubric assessing task achievement, coherence/cohesion, and lexical resource on a standardized scale.

Results

Quantitative assessment showed significant differences between the two groups following the intervention.

- **AWL Coverage:** In the pre-test, AWL coverage in written drafts averaged 4.2% for the control group and 4.1% for the experimental group. In the post-test, the control group's AWL coverage rose marginally to 5.1%, whereas the experimental group exhibited an increase to 9.8%, aligning closely with the standard lexical benchmark observed in published academic prose (typically 8.5%–11.0%) [1].

- **Lexical Sophistication and Repetition:** The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant decrease in high-frequency GSL words (from 83.2% down to 73.6%), replacing multi-word spoken constructions with precise academic verbs (e.g., *investigate*, *establish*, *indicate*, *substantiate*).

- **Overall Writing Scores:** Evaluated on a 100-point composite rubric, the experimental group achieved a mean post-test score gain of +14.2 points ($p < 0.01$), compared to a gain of +3.8 points in the control group.

Analysis and Discussion



The empirical results confirm Nation's lexical frequency framework, which posits that text comprehension and production rely heavily on mastering distinct lexical tiers [5]. General conversational vocabulary falls short of satisfying the epistemic demands of university-level EAP writing. When EFL learners lack productive command of the AWL, their writing exhibits semantic ambiguity, over-generalization, and syntactic sprawl [6].

The explicit instruction received by the experimental group bridged the gap between passive lexical recognition and active production. By acquiring word families and disciplinary collocations, learners showed greater precision in formulating thesis statements, structuring paragraph topic sentences, and qualifying claims through academic hedging (e.g., *suggests*, *demonstrates*, *indicates probability*) [7]. These findings indicate that incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading is insufficient for academic writing mastery; systematic lexical intervention is necessary to internalize formal written discourse structures.

Conclusion

Academic vocabulary serves as a fundamental pillar in developing EFL learners' academic writing competence. The empirical evidence demonstrates that intentional pedagogical integration of structured academic word lists significantly enhances students' lexical sophistication, stylistic formality, and overall rhetorical precision. EFL curricula and university EAP programs must transition from incidental vocabulary exposure to explicit, corpus-informed lexical training that emphasizes collocations, derivational morphology, and register awareness to build sustainable academic literacy.

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