

The Significance of the Academic Word List among ESL Tertiary Students in a Malaysian Public University

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ABSTRACT

The Academic Word List (AWL) was compiled by Coxhead (2000) and consists of 570 word families. Along with 2,000 of the most common English words, knowledge of the words represented in this list is vital for the overall academic performance of students. It is widely acknowledged that the most acute linguistic need for students is vocabulary, followed by knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of syntactic structures. The current study adopted the survey approach and utilised an online questionnaire, which comprised of closed and open-ended items, specifically designed by the researchers. This paper examines the attitudes of Malaysian tertiary students towards the AWL for reading, writing, speaking and listening. The study involved the participation of 195 undergraduates comprising of Malays, Chinese and Indians who are enrolled in a Malaysian public university. Data was collected using a questionnaire designed by the researchers. The instrument was tested for reliability, with returned values indicating high reliability. It is found that the participants regard the knowledge of the words represented in the AWL as essential for academic reading and comprehension, writing, presentations, and understanding. Although generally assumed to be of significance to students, the effective implementation of a programme that accords specific attention to the AWL is still strongly reliant on the discernments of those who stand to benefit the most from it. The findings of this study are of significance to researchers, ESL/EFL teachers and learners, and course designers when developing AWL.

Keywords: Academic Word List; AWL; ESL/EFL; higher education; Malaysian undergraduates; students' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

“Without grammar little can be conveyed;
without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”
(David Wilkins 1972, p. 11)

This article presents the results of a research conducted through an online survey, aimed at exploring university students' perceptions of the importance of Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) in their academic performance. In the English as second language and English as foreign language learning context, knowledge of vocabulary is crucial to ensure

successful English language learning. It is important for students to have sufficient vocabulary in order to understand the utterances of another or to express their ideas either in oral or written form.

As indicated by Folse (2011, p. 366), “vocabulary is the most crucial component in learning a foreign language.” The importance of vocabulary is further stressed by Martinez (2014), as he claims that knowledge of vocabulary in a target language accommodates reading, writing, speaking and listening, via reading vocabulary, writing vocabulary, speaking vocabulary and listening vocabulary (Cummins 1999, as cited in Herrel 2004). Therefore, this suggests that vocabulary is central to communication. This directly indicates that insufficient academic vocabulary is a key challenge for students (Evans & Morrison 2011) as they are not sufficiently familiar with academic lexical terms.

There is an array of advantages when using the Academic Word List by Coxhead (2000) for improving tertiary students’ vocabulary size and eventually their academic performance, which involves using the English language for academic reading, writing, speaking and listening. Academic vocabulary is critical for the comprehension (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986, cited in Zwiers 2008) of discipline-specific content taught at the tertiary level as it assists in analysing, predicting, explaining and justifying issues in academic contexts using a higher level of English. According to Mukoroli (2011), learners with higher academic vocabulary development are better at tolerating a small proportion of unknown words in a text without disruption of comprehension and can even infer the meaning of those words from rich contexts.

However, in the Malaysian higher education context, undergraduates who have to learn English as a foreign language are exposed to challenges in mastering English language vocabulary. These students are learning and using English, which is a foreign language to them, and they are also expected to learn new academic concepts that require sophisticated vocabulary knowledge and understanding. It is also undeniable that due to the demand of technicality and frequency of usage, academic vocabulary is less used compared to conversational lexis in our English language classrooms. Furthermore, as argued by Cummins (2002, cited in Zwiers 2008), academic vocabulary is more technical in nature and thus, academic texts and lectures are often made up of much more complex words and phrases. Therefore, a learner’s effective comprehension of texts and lectures is likely to be impaired if he or she suffers from low academic vocabulary knowledge.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focuses on how a group of undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia perceives the knowledge of the AWL for their academic purposes. The current study is guided by the following research questions:

To what extent do Malaysian undergraduate students consider the knowledge of the AWL to be helpful for:

- a) academic reading and comprehension?
- b) academic writing?
- c) academic presentations (speaking)?
- d) academic understanding (via listening)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

LEARNING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

In the context of learning at the tertiary level, university students in tertiary classrooms are often daunted with many academic tasks to be completed within a certain period. Therefore, university students, especially at the undergraduate level, are required to possess a high level of thinking and mastery of the four language skills as they are crucial for excellent academic performance. These students are exposed to a variety of academic materials and they need to be able to effectively communicate with these materials via reading and listening to produce written and spoken output. Therefore, to a certain extent, reading, listening, writing and speaking are pertinent skills that influence how they perform academically. As highlighted by Howarth (1998), to be able to learn a set of academic words and to be able to use these words appropriately is challenging. Moreover, for second language learners of English (L2), the task is twice as difficult as they are exposed to a lot of lexical items that they may not have encountered before. Therefore, this study aims to identify the perceptions of university students in regards to the importance of academic vocabulary for their academic performance.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A vocabulary is the body of words used in a particular language. These words convey specific meaning(s) and can be in the form of single items and phrases or chunks of a group of words. Accordingly, Lewis (1993) asserted that lexis or the vocabulary is the core or heart of a language.

Academic vocabulary represents the words contained in academic texts. Cortes (2004) emphasised that the use of academic words with precision is vital for a text to be classified as a good academic text. Academic vocabulary is used to teach content across all academic disciplines. According to Marzano (2004), academic vocabulary and academic terms allow learners to analyse, infer, and provide conclusions in discipline-based reading, writing, speaking and listening. Learners need to be able to understand the content vocabulary in order to understand the academic concepts that they are learning. In the academic context, Schmitt (2008) reported that many students at the academic level are unable to master the AWL vocabulary. Although EFL learners are able to identify about 3,000 words, they may not be able to produce these words accurately in their writing.

ACADEMIC WORD LIST (AWL)

An academic word list plays a very important role in creating vocabulary goals for language acquisition. A word list also provides assistance to language learners as well as course and material designers. Language learners are able to use it as a point of reference in their independent study and as for course and material designers, a word list assists in the selection of texts and in designing suitable learning activities. When learning EFL, word lists also have a vital role in reference to using lexis from a group of words in language learning. For teachers, word list's function is to assist in identifying which words are useful for learners in their language learning process.

The Academic Word List (AWL), which is an extension of the General Service List (GSL) (West 1953), was compiled by Coxhead (2000) and consists of 570 word families. The importance of this list is that it draws upon general academic words that are not specifically connected to any single discipline but are very important for university students to master.

Durrant (2016) stressed that Coxhead's influential AWL is based on a larger, more representative corpus. The AWL is also tailored towards particular disciplines (Durrant 2014,

Hyland & Tse 2007), so this represents an interesting advancement in the technical aspect of word usage. As a word list is premised on a list of word families, Nation (2001) indicates that knowledge of headwords assists in the understanding of derivationally-related forms and provides a higher level of coverage of words. The AWL has been cited as “the main representative list of academic vocabulary” and one “which has revolutionised English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learning” (Yang 2014, p. 29).

Based on a review conducted by Nation and Waring (1997) on a range of studies, the primary focus of learners of general English is that they should know about 3,000 high frequency words, followed by focusing on strategies to deal with unknown words and to learn new items when encountered. They also proposed that learners of EAP should learn the most frequent 2,000 words of general English and then focus on specialised word lists. Banister (2016) also suggested that the AWL is an effective tool in helping learners focus on words that are worth learning in discipline-specific texts and furthermore, the AWL-related websites allow interaction with these items on a deeper level. The AWL has also been identified as being able to boost the lexical resources of learners with its clear and achievable goals.

THE AWL AND RECEPTIVE SKILLS (READING AND LISTENING)

Studies by AlSaif (2011) and Alfridan (2010) found that EFL learners majoring in English, have a surprisingly lower level of academic vocabulary knowledge. Both researchers concluded that this weakness is likely to cause the learners to struggle with their learning of the English language, productively and receptively. Researchers also argue that vocabulary size correlates positively with the competence of learners in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

In the context of reading, Pretorius (2000) and Llach and Gallego (2009) noted that vocabulary has a strong influence on reading comprehension. To further support Pretorius’s (2000) claim, Qian’s (2002) research indicated that one’s depth of vocabulary knowledge contributes strongly to the level of performance in reading comprehension. Stæhr (2008) asserted that the link between speaking, listening, and academic vocabulary has been given less attention, based on existing literature (Borer 2007, Hincks 2003).

On the whole, the discussion of the literature above shows that the knowledge and effective use of academic vocabulary is important for the overall academic performance of tertiary learners.

THE AWL AND PRODUCTIVE SKILLS (WRITING AND SPEAKING)

Words listed in the AWL are words that are essential for successful academic writing. These words are essential components that ensure academic performance in tertiary classrooms. In such contexts, effective writing is crucial and it entails knowing words in relation to its form, meaning (concepts, referents and associations) and being able to use (grammatical functions, collocations, registers, frequencies) them well (Nation 2013). Meara (1996) argues that a lack of vocabulary impacts not only the written tasks of learners but also their spoken communication. Meara has concluded that about 3,000 to 5,000 word families should be known to learners for them to be able to read effectively and participate in meaningful spoken communication at an advanced level. However, Nation (2006) disputed the claims and stressed that a higher number of 8,000 words is needed to conduct such activities successfully.

In a study focusing on intensive English programme students, Brun-Mercer and Boyd Zimmerman (2016) found that those who lacked the knowledge of the register of a word would face difficulties using academic vocabulary effectively and appropriately. In such situations, they recommended the explicit teaching of the register of new terms. A study on

academic essay writing among ESL learners from the perspective of lecturers indicated that the use of appropriate vocabulary is prioritised by the lecturers in their evaluations (Santos 1998). In terms of categorising language errors, lecturers judged vocabulary errors more seriously in comparison to other language errors. Lexical errors are often dealt with seriously as the wrong use of vocabulary impinges directly on content and obscures intended meaning (Santos 1998).

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING

This study employed purposive sampling. The respondents are from the Arts and the Sciences majors, from a Malaysian public university. A total of 195 Malaysian undergraduate students, ranging from first year to final year students, participated in the study. They are Malays, Chinese and Indians who come from urban, sub-urban and rural areas in Malaysia.

Of the 195 respondents, 39% indicated that they have come across the AWL before, while the remaining 61% have no knowledge of the AWL. For the purpose of this study, these respondents were directed to access the online AWL prior to completing the questionnaire.

MEASURES

The current study adopted the survey approach and utilised an online questionnaire comprising of closed and open-ended items, specifically designed by the researchers to assess the following four constructs in the study: knowledge of the AWL for academic reading and comprehension, knowledge of the AWL for academic writing, knowledge of the AWL for academic presentations (speaking) and knowledge of the AWL for academic understanding (via listening).

The closed-ended items in the questionnaire were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Multiple reliability analyses were conducted on the questionnaire to minimize limitations imposed by issues pertaining to reliability. Reliability analyses, using the SAS 9.4 software platform, were applied to measure the internal consistency of each construct as well as the internal consistency of the instrument as a whole. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, with 17 items measuring four constructs as reflected in the four research questions mentioned earlier and 3 demographic items.

RESULTS

RELIABILITY

This section reports the reliability of the questionnaire's four constructs as well as the reliability of the questionnaire as a whole.

TABLE 1. Results of Reliability Analyses

Construct	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Level of internal consistency (Reliability)
1: Academic reading and comprehension	.92	Excellent
2: Academic writing	.92	Excellent
3: Academic presentations (speaking)	.87	Good
4: Academic understanding (via listening)	.90	Excellent
Overall	.97	Excellent

Based on the figures in Table 1, the reliability of the questionnaire as a whole is excellent, with $\alpha = .97$. As shown in the table, constructs 1, 2 and 4 obtained $\alpha = .92$, $\alpha = .92$ and $\alpha = .90$ respectively, denoting excellent reliability, while construct 3 obtained $\alpha = .87$, denoting good reliability. Interpretation of the obtained values is based on the interpretation of Cronbach's alpha (α) readings (George & Mallery 2003), commonly accepted in research findings.

DEMOGRAPHICS

This section provides background information of the respondents in terms of demographic data; specifically their year of study, race, and hometown.

TABLE 2. Respondents' Year of Study, Race, and Hometown

Category	Group	Number of respondents (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Year of Study	First Year	98	50.4
	Second Year	58	29.7
	Third Year	27	13.8
	Final Year	12	6.1
		195	100
Race	Malay	122	62.8
	Chinese	39	20
	Indian	24	12.3
	East Malaysian ethnicity	10	4.9
		195	100
Hometown	Urban	67	34.4
	Sub-urban	71	36.4
	Rural	57	29.2
		195	100

As illustrated in Table 2, the respondents consisted of first, second, third and final year undergraduates. Half of the respondents were made up of first year undergraduates, at approximately 50.4% ($n = 98$), while the remaining 49.6% ($n = 97$) comprised of those in their second, third and final year of studies.

Table 2 also shows classifications according to race. The majority of the respondents were Malays, constituting 62.8% ($n = 122$) of the sample population. The Chinese respondents formed the second largest group at 20% ($n = 39$), followed by Indian respondents at 12.3% ($n = 24$). The smallest group of respondents were of East Malaysian ethnicity at only 4.9% ($n = 10$).

The last section of Table 2 indicates that a majority of the respondents were either from urban or sub-urban areas in Malaysia, totalling to 70.8% ($n = 138$) with the remaining 29.2% ($n = 57$) from the rural areas.

The following sections detail the core findings of this study, presented in accordance with the research questions.

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

TABLE 3. Responses to Construct 1: Knowledge of the AWL for Academic Reading and Comprehension

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1. Knowledge of the AWL will help me understand better when I read academic materials (textbooks, journal articles and academic publications).	0.5	1	27.7	47.2	23.6
2. Knowledge of the AWL will help me be more confident in my ability to read academic materials.	0.5	1	26.2	52.3	20

3. Knowledge of the AWL will help me identify the important points in academic materials better.	0.5	0	25.1	51.8	22.6
4. Knowledge of the AWL will help me read more effectively.	1	1	19	52.3	26.7
5. Knowledge of the AWL will help me review lecture notes more effectively.	0.5	1	24.6	53.3	20.5
6. Knowledge of the AWL will help me do skimming and scanning more effectively	0.5	0	31.8	46.7	21

1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Slightly Agree; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree

Table 3 shows the respondents' perceptions towards the knowledge of the AWL for academic reading and comprehension. 70.8% affirmed ('Agree' and 'Strongly Agree') that knowledge of the AWL will help in terms of reading academic materials such as textbooks, journal articles and academic publications. The majority (72%) of the students affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help build confidence in reading academic materials. On the same positive note, 72.3% affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help them identify important points in academic materials better. As for items 4 and 5, more than 70% of the respondents affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help in the effective reading and reviewing of lecture notes, with approximately 1% indicating otherwise ('Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree') for each item. Almost 70% agreed and strongly agreed that knowledge of AWL will help them to skim and scan more effectively. Approximately 30% chose to slightly agree with the statement, while only 0.5% did not agree.

TABLE 4. Responses to Construct 2: Knowledge of the AWL for Academic Writing

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1. Knowledge of the AWL will help me use more appropriate academic words in academic writing	0.5	1	17.9	52.8	27.2
2. Knowledge of the AWL will help me be more confident in my ability to write academically.	0.5	1	23.6	50.3	24.6
3. Knowledge of the AWL will help me write more effective sentences in terms of academic writing	0.5	0.5	25.1	48.7	25.1
4. Knowledge of the AWL will help me produce better written academic assignments.	0.5	1	27.7	44.6	26.2

1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Slightly Agree; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree

Table 4 shows the respondents' perceptions towards the knowledge of the AWL for academic writing. 80% affirmed ('Agree' and 'Strongly Agree') that knowledge of the AWL will positively impact their choice of academic words in academic writing. 1% disagreed and only 0.5% strongly disagreed with the statement. The rest opted to slightly agree with the statement. 74% affirmed that they would be more confident in their academic writing ability with knowledge of the AWL, while 1% disagreed and 0.5% strongly disagreed. As for items 3 and 4, more than 70% of the respondents affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help them write and produce written academic assignments more effectively. Approximately 1% indicated otherwise ('Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree'). About a quarter of the respondents chose 'Slightly Agree'.

TABLE 5. Responses to Construct 3: Knowledge of the AWL for Academic Presentations (Speaking)

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1. Knowledge of the AWL will help me use more appropriate words in academic presentations	0.5	1	23.6	47.7	27.2
2. Knowledge of the AWL will help me be more confident in my academic presentations.	1	0.5	29.7	48.7	20
3. Knowledge of the AWL will help me communicate my intended message more effectively.	0.5	2.1	28.2	48.7	20.5
4. Knowledge of the AWL will help me better understand the difference in terms of delivering messages of fact, inference, opinion and judgement.	0.5	1	30.8	46.7	21

1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Slightly Agree; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree

The majority of the students (74%) affirmed (‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’) that knowledge of the AWL will be useful in terms of helping them employ more appropriate words in academic presentations. 74% of the respondents also affirmed that knowledge of the AWL would potentially boost their confidence in academic presentations. Most students (70%) affirmed that knowledge of the AWL would help them in effective communication while less than 3% indicated otherwise (‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Disagree’). 67.7% of the respondents affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help in terms of understanding the differences in various forms of content delivery.

TABLE 6. Responses to Construct 4: Knowledge of the AWL for Academic Understanding (via Listening)

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1. Knowledge of the AWL will help me better understand lectures.	0.5	1	23.6	52.3	22.6
2. Knowledge of the AWL will help me be more engaged during lectures.	1	1	29.7	50.8	17.4
3. Knowledge of the AWL will help me better differentiate verbal messages of fact, inference, opinion and judgement.	0.5	0.5	29.2	49.7	20

1: *Strongly Disagree*; 2: *Disagree*; 3: *Slightly Agree*; 4: *Agree*; 5: *Strongly Agree*

75% of students affirmed (‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’) that knowledge of the AWL will assist in their understanding of lectures. The majority of the respondents (68%) affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help them to be more engaged during lectures. A majority of (70%) the respondents affirmed that knowledge of the AWL will help them differentiate various types of verbal messages. Only 1% indicated otherwise (‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Disagree’), and slightly less than a third of the respondents indicated that they slightly agreed with the statement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that knowledge of the AWL has the potential to build the confidence of readers and enables better understanding of various materials like textbooks, journal articles and academic publications. This aspect is in tandem with several researchers’ (Goswami 2001, Alsaif 2010 & Alfridan 2010) claim, that students will possess a greater ability to comprehend the materials they read when they use their relevant AWL to understand and derive meanings. The participants in this study pointed out that the AWL assists them in determining the relevant points in various academic materials that they read and simultaneously enables effective reading or reviewing of lecture notes, which corroborates Martinez’s (2014) argument that vocabulary is central in facilitating students’ understanding of academic reading.

This study proves that 80% of the students admit that their knowledge of the AWL has a positive impact on their writing skills, especially when selecting the appropriate words to express their ideas. This is in line with a study carried out by Brun-Mercer and Boyd Zimmerman’s (2016) which highlighted the importance of the AWL in academic writing. In this vein, students perceived their knowledge of the AWL as having the capacity to build their confidence in relation to academic writing as most students often experience ‘writing phobia’ (Phillips 1986) when it comes to operationalising their ideas. Hence, it is evident that the AWL has the potential to improve the writing skills of students and shed their fear of producing academic writing. This is further reiterated when students affirmed that their knowledge of the AWL enables them to skilfully write their assignments.

The responses to construct 3 illustrated students' perceptions of the AWL knowledge for academic presentations (speaking). Students communicated the benefits of the AWL in relation to using suitable words to reflect their ideas, building confidence and presenting intended messages more effectively. According to Meara (1996), the AWL is significant in affecting students' ability to differentiate the various types of speeches and genres. In this perspective, students believed that their knowledge of the AWL makes a difference to them as it enables them to prepare and deliver information more effectively, especially in their speeches pertaining to facts, inference, opinion and judgement. Thus, the AWL hones the communication skills of students and Parvis (2001) asserts that public speaking is a vital skill for the future endeavours of students.

The results also showed the importance of the AWL knowledge for academic understanding based on listening. Hogan et al. (2014) are of the notion that the AWL is a "strong predictor" of listening comprehension and this concurs with the finding that during the listening process, the AWL knowledge facilitates the understanding of lectures, engaging with lectures and differentiating various types of verbal messages.

It can be concluded from the results of this study that with research advocating the learning of the AWL words and tertiary students themselves acknowledging that the AWL is beneficial for academic reading, writing, listening and speaking, the direction of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia should be encouraged to focus on the mastery of the AWL. Therefore, teachers and curriculum developers should consider teaching vocabulary explicitly or extrinsically to improve the vocabulary knowledge of students. The questionnaire created by the researchers achieved high internal consistency after multiple analyses, making it a reliable option to be used in future studies. Further research should consider using a different sample from other public or private universities to investigate tertiary students' attitudes towards the AWL for reading, writing, speaking and listening. This sample can be selected from other public or private universities around Malaysia so that a more comprehensive result can be obtained.

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