

Exploring the Role and Application of AWL (Academic Word List) in College English Teaching

Wang Wei

School of Foreign Language, Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine, Xianyang 712046, China

wwshr8@163.com

Keywords: AWL; EAP teaching; discipline –specific studies

Abstract: Right now there are over 20 million students studying towards an academic degree in Mainland Chinese universities, according to the latest data from National Bureau of Statistics of China. A large fraction of these students will come into touch with foreign professionals or even decide to advance their qualifications abroad. As a result, many of these students follow an English for Academic Purpose (EAP) or English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course, that will enable them to deepen or share their discipline specific knowledge also internationally. This paper is going to review the role and applications of Academic Word List (AWL) and present the research investigating the AWL knowledge and perceptions of students from different disciplines in one mainland Chinese university.

1. Introduction

When it comes to learning a second language, acquiring a foreign lexicon can be a challenging and daunting task, particularly if the learners wish to attain a higher level of literacy [1]. As a result, for the learners of EAP, reading and writing pose an additional challenge- they not only have to understand the knowledge related to academic community but also learn to comprehend the language used for academic purposes [2]. This paper is going to review the role and applications of AWL and present the research investigating the AWL knowledge and perceptions of students from different disciplines in one Mainland Chinese University.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Role of Academic Word List

One of the significance of AWL, according to the Coxhead [3], is the relatively high coverage of the academic texts. She uses a corpus of 3.5 million running words and the software called Range to calculate the frequency (how often a word occurred) and range (how many different texts in the corpus it occurred) of the words.

In her Academic Corpus, words were classified into four major areas: Arts, Law, Commerce and Science irrespective of subject areas and disciplines. On the basis of frequency of occurrence of the words in her Academic Corpus, Coxhead [3] further divided into 10 subsets with 1 of the highest frequently and 10 the lowest. These words consisted of headwords plus their inflection and derivation and 3100 word forms in total were included.

Coxhead [3] suggested that the roles of AWL are to facilitate language courses as setting vocabulary goals like EAP and to help learners for self-study and as a reference for material and course designers when choosing texts and planning learning activities. Therefore, her contribution when compared to previous lists lies in making the AWL suitable for teaching and learning purposes.

2.2 Applications of Academic Word List

The development of AWL has had significant impact on EAP teaching largely because it fulfilled the particular demands on language learners by providing targeted lexical items for

academic purposes[4]. Furthermore, AWL real world applications have served as a source for numerous studies in various aspects of academic vocabulary such as the distributions, features and functions of a certain group of words [1] [5][6]. On the other hand, Hyland & Tse [7] admit that AWL guide teaching purposes but argue that contextual features are crucial to language selection as we always communicate as certain group members. Thus they believe vocabulary has discipline specific features and the best way for prepare students for their studies is to help them understand the features of discourses they will encounter rather than study universally applicable items.

3. Research Design

The following research questions guided my study

- 1) Are there differences in coverage and knowledge of AWL across different disciplines?
- 2) Do the actual learning methods vary among different disciplines?
- 3) Are there differences in learning preferences about specific AWL among the subgroups of students?

And the research hypotheses were the following

- 1) There are no differences in AWL coverage and universal academic vocabulary knowledge across different disciplines.
- 2) The actual learning methods don't vary among the subgroups of students.
- 3) There are no differences in learning method preferences among the subgroups of students.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Thirty students from *Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine* studying three different majors took part in this study. Ten of them study applied psychology; ten of them study marketing and management and the rest (N=10) study clinical medicine. They are all third-year students chosen by their English teachers as upper level students who have passed the College English Test Six (CET 6). They are studying English for Specific Purposes course this semester.

4.2 Methods

Data were collected from an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed with three questions. The 50 academic words were randomly chosen from the AWL. This is to examine the Coxhead's claim [3]that AWL covers a wide range of disciplines and its real application to different disciplines.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Findings

The table 1 shows the results of the average number of words selected by students from three disciplines from the 50 randomly chosen words in the AWL. The degree of vocabulary recognized varied considerably ranging from only 21 words known to one student to 48 words known to another. The mean among all participants in the study was 39.9 and the standard deviation 6.8. The group means fell in the range between 36.5 among Medicine students to 42.4 for Psychology students. We compared the group means among the three disciplines with a two-sample t test (alpha-level 0.05) and found no significant differences between the means, which is illustrated by the wide and overlapping 95% confidence intervals within the samples.

The following Table 2 shows the answer distribution of the second question about how the subjects had acquired the academic vocabulary. The percentage in the table shows that the majority of students have acquired the knowledge through option A – reading and listening materials by checking dictionaries.

Table 1: Question 1 mean results per group

Discipline	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	95% confidence interval	
Medicine	10	36.5	6.54	32.4	40.6
Marketing	10	40.7	4.85	37.7	43.7
Psychology	10	42.4	7.95	37.5	47.3
Total	30	39.9	6.80	35.7	44.1

Table 2: Answer distribution to question 2.

Discipline	N	A - dictionary	B - writing	C - word list	D- textbook
Medicine	10	60%	40%	20%	50%
Marketing	10	50%	0%	10%	50%
Psychology	10	80%	20%	10%	50%
Total	30	63.3%	20%	13.3%	50%

With regard to the third question about their preference to learning specific AWL, most students in each subgroup prefer to self-study (50-80%) while only a single student out of thirty shown a preference for memorizing word lists alphabetically.

Table 3: Answer distribution to question 3

Discipline	N	A-Teachers	B - Self-study	C - exercises	D- memorizing
Medicine	10	30%	60%	40%	10%
Marketing	10	10%	50%	40%	0%
Psychology	10	20%	80%	30%	0%
Total	30	20%	63.3%	36.6%	3.3%

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 Research Hypothesis 1: There are no differences in coverage of AWL and universal academic vocabulary knowledge across different disciplines.

According to the outcomes outlined in previous section we can conclude that the hypothesis cannot be rejected and the students from various disciplines were equally exposed to the 50 words from AWL. This largely conforms to Coxhead's claims[5] that AWL covers a wide range of subject areas and may also indicate the universal applicability of AWL across disciplines. Because the effectiveness appears to be largely similar across disciplines, we may say that students from different disciplines acquire academic lexicon at similar effectiveness.

5.2.2 Research Hypothesis 2: The actual learning methods don't vary among the subgroups of students.

While certain patterns can be inferred from the data, the current results are insufficient to draw a strong conclusion whether there are differences among the preferences among different disciplines. Instead, as can be seen in Table 2, it appears that the majority of students in each discipline share the most used methods and the least. Most of them appear to have learnt the academic words through reading and listening materials complemented by checking the meaning in dictionary.

The second most popular option – learning from the textbook was an option indicated by half of the participants in each of the subgroups. This may prove to some extent that these academic words may be arranged in the textbook as teaching materials, which is one of the most valuable applications suggested by Coxhead[3].

5.2.3 Research Hypothesis 3: There are no differences in learning method preferences to specific AWL among the subgroups of students.

The outcomes for this hypothesis are also inconclusive because the differences among subgroups are there but are not particularly obvious. It is surprising to find that most students in each

discipline would like to learn the specific AWL by themselves, which contrasts the traditional belief for the preference of teacher-dependent education among Chinese students.

The direct teaching of specific AWL is also valued to some extent by students through choosing teachers' explanations and vocabulary exercise. It can be found from the table that students hardly enjoy memorizing the word list despite personal anecdotal evidence that this may be one of the popular methods in mainland China.

It may also be worth noticing that more medicine students seem to prefer to follow teachers' explanations, which could be explained by the need for discipline specific vocabulary in the medical field. Words like lesion and vein, are included in the Medical AWL [8] because of its high frequency and general use in medical research articles. However, learning a large volume of such words may be very challenging without the assistance of an experienced instructor. We therefore suggest that medicine students may need more particular attention to specific AWL studies.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This small scale study of 30 university students contains data from three disciplines in one university of mainland China. The sample size and the design of study are rather limited, which may render the general applicability of results weak. A wider scale of study with more participants with different disciplines and interviews as well as classroom observations should be conducted for further study.

7. Conclusion

With the growing number of mainland students attempting to study abroad and the internationalization of education in China the level of English among students will determine the quality of education the students will be capable of receiving. As a result, the quality of EAP courses are going to play a crucial role in the future of Chinese education.

Our study is only a first step towards understanding the discipline specific needs of Mainland Chinese students, and the current results would benefit from continued work in the area. We suggest that future studies expand on the limitations of our study and address the issues of the limited sample size and disciplines.

References

- [1] Chen, Q., & Ge, G. (2007). A corpus-based lexical study on frequency and distribution of Coxhead's AWL word families in medical research articles (RAs). *English For Specific Purposes*, 26(4), 502-514.
- [2] Wang, J., Liang, S., & Ge, G. (2008). Establishment of a Medical Academic Word List. *English For Specific Purposes*, 27(4), 442-458.
- [3] Coxhead, A. (2000). A New Academic Word List. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 213.
- [4] Simpson-Vlach, R., & Ellis, N. (2010). An Academic Formulas List: New Methods in Phraseology Research. *Applied Linguistics*, 31(4),
- [5] Coxhead, A., & Byrd, P. (2007). Preparing writing teachers to teach the vocabulary and grammar of academic prose. *Journal Of Second Language Writing*, 16(3),
- [6] Ward, J. (2009). A basic engineering English word list for less proficient foundation engineering undergraduates. *English For Specific Purposes*, 28(3), 170-182.
- [7] Hyland, K. and Tse, P. (2007) Is there an "Academic Vocabulary"? *TESOL Quarterly*, 41: 235–53.
- [8] Wang, J., Liang, S., & Ge, G. (2008). Establishment of a Medical Academic Word List. *English For Specific Purposes*, 27(4), 442-458.