EXPLORING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY USE IN THE STUDENTS' L2 WRITING

Abstract

Second language (L2) writing is considered one of the most challenging skills to be developed in tertiary studies. The present study aims at exploring the relationship between academic vocabulary knowledge and the overall performance in L2 writing. The productive knowledge of academic vocabulary (AV) of the first-year students in an English-medium university (n=82) in Uzbekistan was investigated. The analysis of AV knowledge and overall scores for written papers revealed that EFL students employed a good use of productive academic words in their L2 writing. The article increases awareness about the EFL students' need for productive vocabulary use in academic writing and provides possible implications for academic English lecturers.

Аннотация

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЙ ЛЕКСИКИ L2 В ПИСЬМЕННОЙ РЕЧИ СТУДЕНТОВ

Письмо на иностранном языке считается одним из самых сложных умений, которые необходимо развивать в процессе обучения в высших учебных заведениях. Целью настоящего исследования является изучение взаимосвязи между знанием академической лексики и общей успеваемостью в письменной речи на иностранном языке. Продуктивное владение академической лексикой студентами первого курса англоязычного университета (n=82) было исследовано в Узбекистане. Анализ знания академической лексики и общих баллов за письменные работы показал, что студенты активно используют продуктивные академические слова в письменных работах. Данная статья повышает осведомленность студентов о необходимости использования продуктивной лексики в академическом письме и предлагает возможные выводы для преподавателей академического английского языка.

Keywords

academic words, second language writing, EFL undergraduate students, academic English, productive vocabulary

Ключевые слова

академический словарный запас, письмо на иностранном языке, студенты бакалавриата, академический английский, продуктивная лексика

1. BACKGROUND

Writing is an essential component in English language teaching; it is the most significant and challenging skill developed by university students. Ramsay et al. (2010, p. 355) emphasised that 'being able to write is much more than writing the way you speak and much more than just knowing the grammar of a language.'Writing becomes an even more demanding skill to enhance for English learners as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL). Jung (2020) clarified that L2 writers might face difficulties in selecting and organizing ideas when producing writing if support in terms of content and structure is not provided.

the quality of written production in a foreign language might depend on different aspects, including students' cultural and educational background, university entry requirements, disciplines taught at the higher education (HE) institutions and the language of instruction where these practices take place.

Apart from these, the language, specifically the choice of academic vocabulary (AV), students use in their second language (L2) writing, might have a considerable impact on their writing quality at university. Coxhead (2012, p. 137) explained that 'vocabulary is an important part of university life for students and their lecturers, particularly in high stakes writing and assessment.' Academic words 'are used across content areas, have abstract definitions, and are a challenge to master' (Townsend, 2009 as cited in Baumann & Graves, 2010, p. 6). Coxhead (2000) clarified that AV does not comprise the largest part of the texts and is not critical to these texts' topics, but these words are supportive and vital for the text quality. Coxhead also (1998, p. 2) highlighted that AV knowledge is essential for 'students [who are] studying at an English-speaking university, particularly for reading and writing.' Based on their investigation, Arnó-Macià and Aguilar (2018) found that in comparison to other language courses English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses might tend to better development of students' discipline-specific language skills. Nation (2001, p. 18) also noted that academic words 'allow writers to refer to others' work and to work with data academically.' Therefore, it is essential for tertiary level learners to recognise and understand AV in reading and listening and use it in their oral and written production.

1.1. Assessing academic vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is considered a significant constituent of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes in HE institutions. a growing body of research discusses productive knowledge of students' academic vocabulary. According to Schmitt (2014, p. 920), 'productive mastery is more difficult or advanced than receptive mastery because more word knowledge components are required, and many of these components are contextual in nature … and take a long time to develop.' Productive vocabulary (PV) was investigated through different types of written assignments, i.e., filling-in the gap sentences (El-Dakhs, 2015; Karakoc & Köse, 2017), paragraphs (El-Dakhs, 2015), summary (Ashrafzadeh & Nimehchisalem, 2015), different types of essays (Köse & Yuksel, 2013; Brun-Mercer & Zimmerman, 2015; Ishikawa, 2015; Karakoc & Köse, 2017; Csomay & Prades, 2018), or integrated tasks (Coxhead, 2012). Some studies revealed that in comparison to receptive vocabulary (RV), students' PV knowledge level is lower (e.g. El-Dakhs, 2015; Karakoc & Köse, 2017). Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) explained that EFL learners might face difficulties in the appropriate and effective use of AV in their writing.

Another way of analysis was conducted through the students' writing represented by the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, a collection of British universities' written assignments between 2004 and 2007 (Durrant, 2014; Durrant, 2016; Malmström et al., 2018). Durrant (2016) identified AV coverage differences in various disciplines and text types and found increased AV use across the university year levels. Malmström et al. (2018) identified that students' PV in the BAWE texts is not as diverse as published writers. Researchers also used written samples from several widely recognised international tests (e.g. TOEFL, EPT) for text analysis (e.g. Johnson et al., 2016).

1.2. Vocabulary knowledge and L2 writing

To analyse the quality of written texts lexical items are widely used (Crossley, 2020). the relationship between EFL students' productive vocabulary and their

writing performance was investigated in different learning contexts. Numerous studies identified students' beliefs about AV importance for L2 writing quality (e.g., Coxhead, 2012; Brun-Mercer & Zimmerman, 2015; Choo et al., 2017). Coxhead (2012) concluded that ESL learners need more academic and technical words to express their ideas better in writing. Choo et al. (2017) found that Malaysian university students perceive AV knowledge as vital to produce better L2 writing.

However, a positive perception of the value of words does not always guarantee the use of relevant vocabulary in writing. Chi (2010) revealed that first-year students in Hong Kong failed to employ appropriate words to replace their academic writing's problematic words/phrases. Ashrafzadeh and Nimehchisalem (2015) found that most Malaysian tertiary students did not achieve good vocabulary scores in their summary writing task. Also, El-Dakhs (2015) identified that the Arab undergraduate students' knowledge of vocabulary did not meet all English requirements as a medium of instruction at the given university.

In contrast, numerous studies revealed a relatively good productive mastery of AV in L2 writing (Köse & Yuksel, 2013; Dodigovic et al., 2014; Durrant, 2016; Malmström et al., 2016). Köse and Yuksel (2013) concluded that Turkish ELT-major learners increased AV use in their written production through their study years. Dodigovic et al. (2014) also found that Chinese students used a substantial amount of AV (over 97 per cent of listed academic words) in their final year projects. These students made a limited number of errors, which was explained by the EFL learners' studying at EMI university and English exposure in all subjects taught.

A growing body of research showed that AV fair use was not always identified as an indicator of good performance in L2 writing. Lemmouh (2010) explained that lexical richness does not seem to be the most critical criterion in assessing EFL students' essays. Kim and Ryoo (2014, p. 103) clarified that 'vocabulary is just one of many skills involved in the writing processes.' However, several studies indicated that RV and PV knowledge might become a predictor of quality writing (Ponnudurai & De Rycker, 2012; Roche & Harington, 2013; Karakoc & Köse, 2017). Yang et al. (2019, p.854) explained that "learners need to develop an adequate amount of receptive vocabulary to produce more accurate and complex L2 writing pieces." Karakoc and Köse (2017) also suggested that an increased PV might lead to higher performance in the EFL students' writing.

The literature review identified the significance of AV use in student writing but produced quite contradictory results on AV contribution to L2 writing quality. Therefore, the present study's goal is to contribute to the line of research that investigates productive vocabulary among EFL learners. the study explores the relationship between first-year students' knowledge of AV and their writing performance, which is operationalised as the students' overall holistic essay score given by two raters before conducting the current study.

The main research question that guided the investigation was as follows: What is the relationship between the use of academic vocabulary and the EFL undergraduate students' writing?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants of the study. Eighty-two participants under investigation were the first-year EFL students in an EMI university in Uzbekistan, among who fifty-one were males and thirty-one were

females. Participants' age ranged between 17 and 20 years old, with the majority being 18. the students are bilingual and trilingual, speaking mainly Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Kazakh, and/or Karakalpak. For all the participants, English is a foreign language that they studied for several years at the secondary education institution. They were not exposed to AV explicit teaching as they were mostly prepared to take the IELTS exam before entering the HE institution.

2.2. Settings and assignment

The study was conducted in one of the English-medium universities in Uzbekistan. As required by the HE institution, the students had at least 6.0 IELTS overall scores with no less than 5.0 in the writing section. All the students take Academic English (AE) as the core module of their first-year studies, which is focused on teaching language and transferable skills. the assessment tasks are individual in the autumn semester (a summary-response essay, an academic blog, and reflection) and group work (a small-scale research paper and oral presentation) in the spring semester.

For the current study, a summary-response essay was chosen for the analysis. To perform the task, the students went through several stages. They listened to and watched short academic lectures and read short articles on a similar topic; discussed and summarised the ideas given in the materials. the students were required to provide their opinions on the lecture and article issues and incorporate direct quotes or paraphrases from at least one reliable source. the students were introduced to a summary-response paper sample (650-700 words) to give them an idea about the structure. They were expected to follow the essay structure but not restricted to using their structure unless they provided the needed information about the summarised sources, referenced them appropriately and expressed their points of view in the written piece.

2.3. Tools and procedure

The key research tool was document analysis, i.e., the students' written papers submitted online through Turnitin (an electronic platform checking for plagiarism). First, the percentage of AV in the students' essays was found through the online Vocabulary Profile Classic software available from the Compleat Lexical Tutor. the VocabProfile has some practical and pedagogical use (Cobb, 2010), so numerous researchers measured the number of GSL and AWL words using the programme (e.g. Ponnudurai & De Rycker, 2012; Dodigovic et al., 2014; Kim & Ryoo, 2014; Cheng & Matthews, 2018). Nagy and Townsend (2012, p. 104) highlighted that the VocabProfiler is an "example of an efficient research tool for evaluating student writing, as it analyses the occurrence and frequency of general academic words." Therefore, this software was found to be suitable for the purposes of the current study.

Secondly, the overall score of the students' papers achieved for the written task were collected and analysed to determine the relationship between the percentage of AV used in their essays and overall score. the papers were graded by the academic staff who developed the rubric (the structure, content, language (grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics), style, referencing the sources and expressing the ideas). As the study was conducted after the academic year was over, no influence was made on the assessment process.

JASP, as freely available software, was used to generate descriptive (to identify the productive vocabulary percentage and overall score) and inferential statistics. the Spearman correlation test was applied to explore the relationship

between AV knowledge (i.e. AV percent in students' papers) and students' L2 writing performance (i.e. overall holistic score).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study examined the productive knowledge of the first year EFL students' AV and explored the relationship between the knowledge of academic words and students' performance in L2 writing.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for productive academic vocabulary

3.1. Productive academic vocabulary

The research aimed at exploring the use of academic vocabulary in the students' written papers and its relationship to the overall score (see Table 1).

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Min	Max
AV percent	82	9.41	2.26	0.25	5.26	15.31
Paper score	82	54.64	13.52	1.49	25.00	81.25

The findings revealed that the percentage of AV in students' papers (M=9.41) is slightly below the average of 10 % coverage in the academic texts, as noted by Coxhead (2000). the results also showed that the papers' mean score was 54.64, which is higher than the pass mark of 40 (according to the EMI university regulations). Interestingly, only one student obtained the highest score of 81.25, and the lowest of 25.0 was given to two participants.

Further analysis of students' written assignment showed that the study participants applied the academic words from different sub-lists in their L2 writing. Extract 1 demonstrates the use of AV from the first to fifth sub-list (given in italics) and sixth to tenth sub-list (shown in bold).

Extract 1

Plagiarism in the fashion industry does not need legislative changes, while the entertainment industry needs current copyright laws and the **motivation** to create **innovative** works. **Nevertheless**, the judiciary should be transparent in evaluating plagiarism to prevent **discrimination** against artists.

A plausible reason for effective use of productive AV could be that EFL students read and listen to academic materials in their studies and practice some writing activities, leading to efficient use of AV in their L2 writing. the analysis of the students' papers also revealed that the learners did not only employ the derivatives of the same word (e.g., *find – found, research – researchers, evaluate – evaluating, create – creating - creative*), but also provided a variety of AV (e.g., *investigation, despite, sustainable, definitely, emphasise*). This variety might be explained by the fact that the students are required to write in a relevant style, use GSL and AWL words, and avoid using colloquial expressions in their writing. Thus, the participants appear to be highly aware of AV importance. Coxhead (2012) researched English-as-additional language students in New Zealand and found that students realise the lexical choices' significance. the author believes that it is crucial for university lecturers to discuss the appropriate use of AV and register with EFL learners to 'support their decision making' (Coxhead, 2012, p. 143). Additionally, the use of appropriate vocabulary is a criterion applied in assessing the EFL students' paper at the EMI University, which is explained at different points of the semester. the study's findings differ from Chi (2010) and El-Dakhs (2015), who did not find efficient use of appropriate vocabulary in academic writing. However, the results are compatible with Dodigovic et al. (2014), who identified relatively good productive mastery of AWL among Chinese students.

3.2. Vocabulary knowledge and writing performance

The research also investigated the statistical significance of the relationship between AV knowledge and students' writing performance. Table 2 shows the results of the Spearman correlation test.

Table 2

Relationship between the use of academic words and paper score

	Spearman's rho	p*
AV percentage - Paper overall score	0,255*	0,021
significant at * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001		

Findings revealed that there is a positive, statistically significant relationship between the knowledge of AV and students' overall performance in L2 writing (p<.05). Further analysis of students' papers showed that the study participants who applied academic words effectively got higher overall scores for the written assignment. For example, Extract 2 illustrates that efficient use of academic words (given in italics) positively impacted the overall score (75 %). It should also be noted that other language aspects (e.g., grammar, spelling, punctuation and register) were also addressed adequately in the papers of similar writing quality.

Extract 2

The rapid assimilation of different ***cultures*** chosen as the ***method*** of desirable cross-national society's ***achievement violates*** the ***migrants***' right to preserve their own heritage, spiritual assets and receive an opportunity to ***contribute*** to social and political ***aspects*** of life.

The examination of other students' assignments, which demonstrated excellent AV use, revealed that grammatical mistakes and some vague ideas might have led to a lower overall score. Extract 3, with an overall score of 56 %, was marked high for the variety and use of academic words (given in italics) but lower for the grammatical inaccuracies and logical flow of ideas in the written assignment:

Extract 3

Both ***authors demonstrate*** a close relationship between space expeditions and historical discoveries which made by latest technologies. Discoveries in Egypt and future ***targeted*** explorations through planets can be ***evidential*** cases to determine ***technological*** upgrades over its drawbacks. Balanced ***investment*** can be feasible solution for improving the ***scope*** of exploring planets, finding archeological discoveries and making ***sustainable*** improvements in humans' social life.

Those students' papers that demonstrated an ineffective use of AV and did not show a logical flow of ideas were scored lower. For instance, in Extract 4, the learner used several academic words (e.g. gender) and ideas repeatedly (given in italics), which influenced the overall score for the written assignment negatively:

Extract 4

Governments should be fair towards women ***despite*** all ***gender*** stereotypes and teachers also should ***evaluate*** students equally. ***Despite*** all male and females' stereotypes, everyone ought to be treated desirably equally in every ***sphere. Furthermore, gender*** stereotypes could be totally ***eliminated*** from society in order to provide a better future for the young ***generation***.

Overall, the participants' written papers identified a significantly positive relationship between the knowledge of AV and students' performance in L2 writing. These results are different from that of Lemmouh (2010), whose study did not show

a strong relationship between lexical richness and student essay grades. Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) explained that although the students recognise AV importance, they might use the words they employed in their previous written tasks. the current study generally supports Csomay and Prades (2018), who found an increasing use and healthy relationship between AV and higher essay scores in such text-types as response papers, comparative analysis, and argumentative synthesis papers. the results are also consistent with Karakoc and Köse (2017), who revealed a significant contribution of vocabulary knowledge to foreign language performance in reading and writing. However, Kim and Ryoo (2014) claimed that vocabulary should not be considered "an absolute indicator" of the students' writing performance. Therefore, Nagy and Townsend (2012, p. 104) explained that measuring productive vocabulary requires a complex process 'to evaluate students' gains in the academic language beyond word meanings.' a possible reason is that the assessment of L2 writing might not only depend on the effective use of AV but also other academic language aspects.

In sum, the analysis of the university students' L2 writing indicated a positive relationship between their AV knowledge and writing performance.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study identified several important findings that have triggered a number of implications for academic English teaching. As a fair use of productive vocabulary was identified, one possible implication is to include various academic written activities and tasks that will enable learners to practise writing individually and in pairs or small groups. Such an L2 writing practice might encourage students to employ more productive academic words in written assignments and improve their L2 writing skills. Coxhead (2012) suggested that EFL students should practise quoting and paraphrasing, which might help improve the quality of academic writing.

The study also revealed that some participants of the current study did not use a variety of academic words in their L2 writing. As the students did not have any explicit teaching of AV, it might be advised to raise EFL students' awareness of AV importance and provide some direct instruction that might help develop students' vocabulary and further improve their writing. Csomay and Prades (2018) recommended that teachers use vocabulary profilers that might be added to the L2 written tasks assessment criteria. Johnson et al. (2016) also clarified that to activate productive knowledge of academic vocabulary, L2 writing teachers might pair up students to play a vocabulary guessing game, encourage peer correction, and use lexical frequency profiles.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study has several limitations to be considered. First, the data were collected from the limited sample size, 82 first-year EFL students, which might not represent the population. Thus, one good suggestion for further investigation is to have a larger scale study at the similar university and where it is possible to cover other universities in the countries where English is taught as a second/foreign language. Another possible limitation is the type of written assignment analysed in the study. the task was initially based on summarising and responding to reading and listening material, which might have limited students in the AV choice. Future research might be focused on investigating the AV use in different types of L2 written assignments produced by EFL students in HE institutions. Finally, the study is limited to qualifying "good writing" by considering AV use in the paper and the overall score of a written

piece. Two raters assessed the EFL students' papers, and inter-rater reliability of marking was guaranteed, but the evaluation process was not investigated in deep. Further research might focus on examining other aspects of academic language in writing. the English language lecturers might be interviewed to explore their approach when assessing L2 writing.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the productive academic vocabulary among the first-year EFL students and identified the relationship between AV and students' writing scores. the Vocabulary Profiler software findings identified that the participants had good use of productive vocabulary in L2 writing. the analysis showed a positive correlation between AV knowledge and overall score in the EFL students' written paper. the present study contributed to the growing body of research on the productive use of AV and its positive influence on the EFL students' L2 writing quality. the findings supported some of the investigations on considering AV to be one of the possible indicators in assessing EFL undergraduate students' written assignments. the study results might not be conclusive, and future research is recommended to investigate the influence of other academic language aspects on L2 writing performance in different EFL learning contexts.

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