

The Challenges of Getting L2 Learners to Use Academic Words in their Writings

Shanthi Nadarajan

(nshanthi@cls.unimas.my)

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

To understand how instruction influences L2 learners to attend to academic words during writing, it is useful to look at evaluation practices, instructional approach and learner ability over time. This paper explores the relationship between academic word use and holistic scores of L2 learners' essays, investigates L2 learners' ability to use vocabulary following instruction, and also compares lexical richness of L1 and L2 academic writings. The multilevel data collection techniques – teacher evaluation of L1 and L2 writings, classroom interactions, excerpts from actual L1 and L2 writings and teacher reflections – provide a holistic view of L2 learners' ability to learn words following instruction and use them like their L1 peers. Using a sample of 387 essays from 129 students, the analysis revealed that while there was no relationship between academic word use and holistic scores, not only teachers award higher grades to essays with a higher percentage of academic words, but L2 learners can also be taught to use academic vocabulary in their writings over time.

1 Introduction

Second Language (L2) learners in the beginning years have difficulties with their writings, despite being exposed to the same lesson, text and level of interaction due to insufficient vocabulary. A number of L2 studies (e.g. Leki & Carson, 1994; Raimes, 1985; Uzawa & Cummings, 1989) have indicated that lack of vocabulary is what makes writing in a foreign language difficult, and that vocabulary proficiency is probably the best indicator of overall text quality (e.g. Astika, 1993; Santos, 1988). Meanwhile, Duin and Graves's (1987) study revealed that explicit vocabulary instruction can result in greater use of contextually appropriate words during writing. On the other hand, language instructors have also tried to help learners expand their vocabulary knowledge quickly and effectively through various means such as books and software but as stated by Liu (2008), "there has been relatively few proposals on how best to systematically approach the teaching and learning of vocabulary for specific L2 learners" (p. 129). Incidentally, Laufer's (1994) and Nadarajan's (2009) studies that looked at vocabulary learning in the classroom context discovered that university students generally show progress in writing ability by increasing the amount of Raimes' academic vocabulary in their academic writings. In terms of analysis, Engber (1995) showed that counting the number of error-free content words in L2 writings often gave a strong correlation (.57) with teachers' ratings. Incidentally, Engber's (1995) study paved the way for subsequent vocabulary studies to employ objective measures to assess overall text quality. The current study will also employ objective measures to: a) determine the relationship between lexical