

**THE USE OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY AND WORDS COLLOCATION
IN UNDERGRADUATES' WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS**

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Statement of Originality

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled
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is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except
where due reference is made.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AW	Academic Word
GSL	General Service List
AWL	Academic Word List
L2	Second Language
K1	First 1000 words
K2	First 2000 words
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
EPP	English for Professional Purposes

ABSTRACT

THE USE OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY AND WORDS COLLOCATION IN UNDERGRADUATES' WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Siti Salwani Saad

This study aims to determine the use of academic words and their collocation in UNIMAS undergraduates' academic written texts. Coxhead's (1998) AWL was used in identifying the academic words. There are three objectives of this study which are 1) determine the percentage of AW used in the undergraduates' academic writing, 2) identify the words that collocate with the AW identified in the undergraduates' academic writing 3) analyze the type of words (content words or functional) used by science background undergraduate as collocation of the AW identified in the undergraduates' academic writing. The corpus comprised of academic texts written by EPP students which are reports based on their own mini research. The texts were retrieved from the repository and analyzed using a web-based analysis tool 'VocabProfile' and concordance software, TextSTAT. The results showed that the use of academic words among the undergraduates still needs to be improved in order for them to produce a better academic text. However, as L2 learners, their repertoires of word collocation are a bit restricted and they tend use the same pattern over and over again to avoid errors. The percentage of functional words used is relatively high compared to content words. It affects the quality of the academic texts by making the text sound less formal. Nevertheless, the undergraduates are aware of some of the stylistic of academic text such as the use of more passive voice compared to active voice.

ABSTRAK

PENGUNAAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA AKADEMIK DAN KOLOKASI DI KALANGAN PRASISWAZAH DALAM PENULISAN AKADEMIK

Siti Salwani Saad

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penggunaan perbendaharaan kata akademik dan kolokasi dalam penulisan akademik pelajar prasiswazah di UNIMAS. Kajian ini menggunakan AWL Coxhead (1998) sebagai panduan untuk mengenal pasti perbendaharaan kata akademik. Kajian ini mempunyai tiga objektif iaitu 1) menentukan peratusan perbendaharaan kata akademik yang digunakan dalam penulisan akademik pelajar, 2) mengenal pasti perkataan yang digunakan sebagai kolokasi pada perbendaharaan kata akademik yang digunakan di dalam teks, 3) menganalisis jenis perkataan yang digunakan oleh pelajar jurusan sains sebagai kolokasi kepada perbendaharaan kata yang digunakan di dalam teks (Functional words and Content words). Korpus yang digunakan di dalam kajian terdiri daripada akademik teks yang ditulis oleh pelajar EPP. Akademik teks tersebut merupakan laporan yang ditulis oleh pelajar berdasarkan kajian mini yang mereka jalankan. Teks dikumpul dan dianalisis menggunakan alat analisis berdasarkan laman web iaitu 'VocabProfile' dan perisian konkordans iaitu 'TextSTAT'. Hasil kajian menunjukkan penggunaan perbendaharaan kata akademik di kalangan pelajar harus ditingkatkan untuk membantu mereka menghasilkan teks akademik yang lebih berkualiti. Namun begitu, sebagai pelajar bahasa kedua (L2), pengetahuan mereka dalam menggunakan kolokasi yang sesuai agak terbatas dan mereka cenderung untuk menggunakan kolokasi yang sama dengan berulang kali untuk mengelak daripada melakukan kesilapan dalam penulisan. Peratusan 'Functional Words' jauh lebih tinggi berbanding 'Content Words'. Ini memberi kesan kepada kualiti teks akademik mereka kerana 'Functional Words' tersebut akan membuatkan bahasa teks itu kurang formal. Namun begitu, pelajar-pelajar ini mengetahui bahawa salah satu ciri-ciri penulisan akademik lebih menekankan penggunaan ayat pasif berbanding ayat aktif.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will include the introduction, background, statement of problem, aim, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, operational definition of terms and scope of study.

1.1 Introduction

According to Murray & Moore (2006), becoming an academic writer itself is a journey on its own. It is not a skill that can be required overnight. The purpose of academic writing usually is to convey information or explaining abstract ideas (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002). Words found in academic writing can be categorized into four categories which are high

frequency words, academic words, technical words and low frequency words (Nation, 2001). High frequency words covers the basic words used in any text or in other words, vocabulary that commonly occur in all kind of texts. Some examples of the words are *an, as, be, by, etc.* Technical vocabulary is word that is directly related to a specific field, topic or discipline. For instances, words that are closely related to engineering field, *kinetic, inertia, circuit, etc.* Readers can easily associate the text to the engineering field. One of the elements in academic writing is the knowledge of vocabulary that is commonly used in cross discipline of academic writing which is called academic vocabulary. Academic vocabulary is word that is common in academic text but not common in non academic text. It can make a difference whether a particular text is considered as academic text or a non-academic text.

Coxhead (1998) had developed a list of academic words which is called Academic Word List (AWL). It consists of 570 word families which then are divided into 10 sublists according to their frequency of occurrences in cross discipline of academic texts. Each Sublist consists of 60 word families except Sublist 10 with only 30 word families. The words in the AWL are accounted as 10% from the total words in the whole corpus of academic texts studied by Coxhead. Meanwhile, it only covers 1.4% in the fiction texts. So, the words listed in AWL are words that are significantly important in academic writing, words that characterized a text as an academic text. AWL was developed by analyzing four disciplines of academic texts which are Art, Commerce, Law, and Science with approximately 3,500,000 running words (Coxhead, 1998).

Collocation and academic writing are two components that can be link together (Cortes, 2004). Good academic writers should be able to explain an

idea accurately without having to use longer sentences which create opportunities for more error. The use of collocation is considered a marker of proficient language use between writers including academic writing (Cortes, 2004).

Corpus based studies is rapidly developing in language related research nowadays. It contributes in studying the structure and use of a particular language. Before computerized corpus based research being developed, researchers used to manually identify the structure and use of language in authentic texts. This approach has its own limitation as the research will not be feasible if there are too many texts to be analyzed. According to Biber, Conrad & Reppen (1998), there are four characteristics of corpus based analysis which are:

1. It is empirical which analyze the actual patters of use in natural texts
2. It utilizes a large and principled collection of natural texts or corpus as the basis for analysis.
3. It makes extensive use of computer for analysis
4. It depends on both qualitative and quantitative analytical techniques.

1.2 Background of the study

Being a university student has always been a demanding job to be accomplished. Higher level of thinking and good mastery in the four language skills are only some of the requirement as a university student. The vast range of authentic academic material sometimes makes their life harder especially L2 learners who need to cope with not just the basic use of English Language but also the sophisticated academic texts in English. The ability to read academic texts in English is not enough for them; they should also be able to produce the academic texts in English. The challenge for the students is to

master the skill of speaking, listening, reading and writing academically in English. Thus, this make the teaching of academic words in university becomes a more crucial element that need to be focused on. In any university, the instructors will surely analyze what are the students' condition in academic reading and writing before going into developing courses to teach academic reading and writing. So, the real picture of how are the students coping in academic field and the students' level of knowledge in academic is crucial for the instructors.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Learning academic words has always been a serious difficulty to all university students. University setting requires the students to be able to listen, read, speak and write academically in English. Howarth (1998) also indicates that learning the set of academic words and being able to use them appropriately is a difficult task which means the skills cannot be acquired easily. Moreover, as L2 learners, the task becomes a lot more difficult as they have to work with a lot of vocabularies that they never or seldom encounter before. Since almost all of the course requirements are to produce written texts in English, the knowledge of academic vocabulary is crucial for them to be acquired. A research conducted by Santos (1988) on essays written by non-native English speakers students, indicates that the use of appropriate vocabulary is one of the listed lecturer's evaluations of L2 university writing. Of all language errors, vocabulary is the most seriously judged by the lecturers.

Collocation in academic writing is also an important aspect to look at. A study done by Cortes (2004) shows that students rarely use collocation or lexical bundle that usually used by professional academic writers. As cited in

Jordan (1997), a large-scale research had been conducted at Cambridge University in order to find out the difficulties that overseas students both undergraduates and postgraduates faced in the academic setting (Geoghagen, 1983). The results of the study indicates that written work is regarded as the second most difficult task in the university setting with 23% compare to the most difficult task which is participating in seminar with 28%.

Thus, academic vocabulary is very important for L2 learners in university setting. They need some guidance or overview of what kind of words should be used in completing their written assignments and how to use them in academic writing (Leki & Carson, 1994). The principle which supports this study is that instructors should teach materials which can help the students to improve their academic writing skills (Coxhead, 1998).

1.4 Aim and Objectives

1.4.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to determine the use of academic words in UNIMAS undergraduates' writing text. Besides, this study will also look at the collocation used with the academic words by the undergraduates.

1.4.2 Objectives

The objectives are to:

1. Determine the percentage of AW used in the undergraduates' academic writing.
2. Identify the words that collocate with the AW identified in the undergraduates' academic writing.

3. Analyze the type of words (content words or prepositions) used by science background undergraduate as collocation of the AW identified in the undergraduates' academic writing.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How many percentages of academic words used in the undergraduates' academic writing based on Coxhead's AWL?
2. What are the most frequent words preceding (collocate) the academic words identified in the undergraduates' academic text?
3. What are the most frequent words following (collocate) the academic words identified in the undergraduates' academic text?
4. What type (content words or prepositions) of words that science background undergraduates used as collocation to the academic word identified in their written text?

1.6 Significance of the study

This study aims to identify how far the students use the academic vocabulary as listed by Coxhead (1998). Since this study will identify the percentage of academic words used in the students writing, it should be able to reveal to what extent the students apply academic words in writing academic text.

This study will be using concordance to identify the academic word used by the students in their written text. By using the concordance, it might give the instructors or lecturers an insight of how the students used academic words in writing academic texts. It might also help the instructors to develop a lesson that address the use of academic words in academic writing for the students. Besides, the instructor can also look at room for improvement in academic writing of the students. According to Fox (1998), corpus data can be used in classroom teaching as it gives the students a context to learn a word or phrase instead of just knowing the meaning of it. A research conducted by Candlin & Thurstun (1998), provide a basic guidelines for teachers or instructors to use corpus analysis to teach the vocabulary of academic English. The research conclude that the teachers and students who involved in this research commented that this type of learning are “helpful, very different and innovative” (Candlin & Thurstun, 1998). Besides giving insights in teaching English for Academic Purposes, the results of this study might also provide direction for English for Special Purpose instructors in developing modules and materials in teaching.

1.7 Operational Definition of terms

1.7.1 Academic words

Academic words refer to words that commonly occur only in academic texts and not in other types of text such as fiction (Nation, 2001). Coxhead (1998) had conducted a study to develop a list of words that normally used in academic texts in cross disciplines. The list produces is called Academic Word List. The list consists of 570 word families divided into 10 Sublist with 60 words per Sublist except Sublist 10 with 30 word families. The list does not include words that are in the

most frequent 1000 and 2000 words of English. In this study, Coxhead's AWL will be used as the basis in identifying the academic words used in the undergraduates' written texts. However, only Sublist 1 out of the 10 sublists will be referred to.

1.7.2 Sublist 1

Coxhead's Sublist 1 consists of the most common words in the AWL. There are 60 word families in it. Each family consists of a headword and other words that come under the same family. Headword refers to the root word that constitutes the other words. For an instance, the headword is *approach* and the other words that come under it are *approachable*, *approached*, *approaches*, *approaching*, *unapproachable*. (Refer to Appendix A for full list of words in Sublist 1)

1.7.3 Word collocation

Firth (1951) defined collocation as '*the company that a word keeps*' (in Nation, 2001). Collocation refers to relationship between a word and other words that precede and follow it. According to Nation (2001), knowing a word is not just about knowing its meaning but also knowing the words that collocate with it. Collocation is one of the markers in differentiating proficient and less proficient writer including academic writing (Cortes, 2004). In this study, the word collocation being focused in is the academic words' collocation.

1.7.4 Corpus

A corpus is defined as “any body of text; a body of machine-readable text, a finite collection of machine readable text, sampled to be maximally representative of a language or variety” (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). In this study, the corpus consists of written assignments written by students who enroll in English for Professional Purposes course.

1.8 Scope of the study

The scope of this study is academic texts written by EPP students range from first year to second year students. In this study, the terms used for academic word list is AWL. According to Coxhead (1998), there are 10 Sublist that make up the AWL. However, in this study, the academic words focused are just the words listed in Sublist 1. Some examples of academic words listed in Sublist 1 are *analyse / analyze, approach, context, define, establish, factor, major, principle, etc.*

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will include the literature review such as academic words, importance of academic words, and word collocation in academic texts students' background influence the way of writing and concordance and vocabulary teaching.

2.1 Academic vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is defined as words that commonly occur only in academic texts and not in other type of texts. It has become a characteristic of academic text which means in order for a text to be considered a good academic text, academic words should be used with precision (Cortes, 2004).

Nation (1990) had developed a list of words that normally used by academician in writing academic texts. As cited in Jordan (1997), the list was called University Word List (UWL). UWL was developed based on four other studies which two of them (Campion & Elley 1971; Praninskas 1972) studied academic texts to look at words that are commonly occur in academic writing which are not in the General Service List (GSL), (West, 1953). The other two studies conducted by Lynn (1973) and Ghadessy (1979) looked at the translation of words that the students write above the academic words found in the text that they read. The results of the studies had overlapped in a way that there are some similar vocabulary emerged in all four studies which indicated that the words used are significantly important in academic texts (Nation, 2001). Then, Xue & Nation (1990) combined them into one list which called University Word List. The listed words are most common words used in academic texts but they are not in the list of the General Service List developed by West (1953). Some examples of the words listed are *analyze, approach, period, passive, etc.* The list consists of 808 word families divided into 11 levels. However, eventually, the UWL has been replaced by Coxhead's (1998) Academic Word List.

2.2 Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL)

Coxhead (1998) had conducted a study in order to develop a list of general academic vocabulary used cross discipline of academic writing. The paper adopted the principles of vocabulary learning and corpus linguistics which guided the development of the Academic Word List (AWL). The study was conducted based on a corpus of approximately 3,500,000 running words of written academic texts. The list was developed in response to the needs of learners preparing for academic study and their teachers for a well-principled, corpus-based study to determine which academic vocabulary items occur with

wide range and reasonable frequency in academic texts excluding the first 2,000 words of English (West, 1953).

There are three principles that outlined Coxhead's development of the AWL which are:

1. Teachers should teach materials which are relevant to the learners.
2. Teacher should teach the most useful vocabulary.
3. Teacher should teach the most frequent item first.

Coxhead (1998)

These principles are the fundamental guideline of Coxhead's research. The relevance of the vocabulary was seen as words that the students especially university or college students need in fulfilling the demand of academic world. They are required to listen, read, speak and write in academic English which is a very challenging task especially to second language learners. The AWL actually helps teachers and students to focus on a specific list of words that they will certainly encounter in reading and writing academic texts. Besides, the AWL is an example of the close relationship between corpus linguistics and language teaching. The empirical data obtained from the analysis of the academic corpus is used to give a direction to teachers in developing modules or materials especially in teaching academic vocabulary.

2.3 The importance of academic vocabulary

According to Nation (2001), there are four main reasons that make academic vocabulary important to academic writers such as university students. The first is academic words can be commonly identified in any discipline of academic writing. It means there is a significant importance of