

APPROACHES TO TEACHING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

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Abstract: *academic vocabulary plays a crucial role in both teaching and learning English. Words used in academic contexts are typically not found in everyday conversation but are essential for understanding lectures, writing essays, completing assessments, and conducting research. This study reviews several strategies for teaching academic vocabulary, including corpus-based word lists, mobile-assisted language learning, and the use of vocabulary notebooks. It also examines challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs), native speakers, and students with learning disabilities. The review concludes with practical recommendations for educators to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and improve their overall academic language proficiency.*

Keywords: *academic vocabulary, vocabulary acquisition, teaching strategies, English language learners, vocabulary notebooks, mobile-assisted learning*

Introduction

Academic vocabulary represents a fundamental component of academic success, particularly for learners of English as a second language (ESL). These words frequently appear in lectures, academic readings, and scholarly writing but are seldom used in daily conversation. Developing mastery of academic vocabulary requires effective teaching methods, reliable resources, and consistent practice. This review aims to analyze the significance of academic vocabulary, explore pedagogical approaches for instruction, and discuss challenges faced by learners in various educational contexts.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored effective methods for teaching and learning academic vocabulary in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Early research emphasized the need for structured word lists to guide learners toward high-frequency academic terms. Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) remains one of the most influential tools, offering 570 word families frequently encountered in academic texts. This list has informed much of the research on academic vocabulary and continues to guide curriculum design. Subsequent studies (e.g., Gardner & Davies, 2014) expanded its scope to include disciplinary variations across different academic fields. Research has also highlighted the role of technology in supporting vocabulary learning. Alemi, Reza, and Lari (2012) demonstrated that mobile-assisted learning (MALL) through SMS-based activities can significantly enhance vocabulary retention and learner motivation. Similarly, Chen and Chung (2008) found that mobile applications increase flexibility and frequency of exposure, both critical for long-term vocabulary acquisition.

Traditional techniques such as vocabulary notebooks have also shown strong pedagogical value. Schmitt (1995, as cited in Komur & Ozdemir, 2015) argued that writing, revising, and personalizing word entries enhances productive use of vocabulary. More recent research supports combining traditional note-taking with digital platforms to improve learner autonomy and engagement (Wei, 2021).

Overall, previous studies agree that academic vocabulary learning is most effective when learners engage in active, contextualized practice supported by technology and explicit instruction. However, relatively few studies address how

these strategies can be tailored for students with learning disabilities or low-proficiency ELLs, suggesting a need for further research in inclusive academic vocabulary instruction.

Importance of Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is vital for students across educational levels—from school learners to university researchers. According to Buckingham (2008, as cited in Ma, 2015), ESL students increasingly need to produce written work comparable to that of native speakers, making academic vocabulary indispensable. Wei (2021) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge underpins both comprehension and classroom communication. Similarly, Alemi et al. (2013) argue that the acquisition of new vocabulary is integral to language learning and overall academic achievement. Academic vocabulary enables students to understand complex texts, engage in critical thinking, and express ideas with precision. Without sufficient lexical knowledge, learners may struggle to comprehend academic materials or demonstrate their knowledge effectively in assessments.

Pedagogical Strategies

Corpus-Based Word Lists

Corpus-based word lists provide an evidence-driven foundation for teaching academic vocabulary. The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) helps learners focus on the most relevant and recurring academic terms (Ma, 2015). Teachers can incorporate AWL-based tasks into reading and writing activities, allowing students to understand and use new words in authentic academic contexts. By systematically embedding corpus-based vocabulary into the curriculum,

educators can help students develop a more precise and discipline-appropriate academic lexicon.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile technology offers flexible opportunities for vocabulary practice. Alemi, Reza, and Lari (2012) found that SMS-based vocabulary exercises significantly improve memorization and daily engagement. Through mobile applications, students can review words on the go, set reminders, and engage in gamified learning, making MALL a convenient and motivating approach to vocabulary acquisition.

Vocabulary Notebooks

Maintaining a vocabulary notebook encourages active learning and word consciousness. Schmitt (1995, as cited in Komur & Ozdemir, 2015) suggests that writing and reviewing words supports long-term retention. Vocabulary notebooks also promote learner autonomy, allowing students to record definitions, examples, collocations, and personal reflections. This strategy transforms vocabulary learning from passive memorization into active construction.

Active vs. Passive Academic Vocabulary

In vocabulary research, scholars commonly distinguish between active (productive) and passive (receptive) vocabulary knowledge. Passive vocabulary refers to the words that learners can recognize and comprehend when reading or listening, while active vocabulary includes words that learners can accurately and appropriately use in speaking and writing (Celik, 2007; Schmitt, 2000). In academic contexts, this distinction is particularly important because students often

understand many specialized terms when reading scholarly texts but struggle to use them in academic writing or presentations.

Research suggests that passive vocabulary typically develops earlier and is larger in size, as comprehension requires only recognition of meaning. In contrast, active vocabulary demands deeper lexical knowledge such as understanding collocations, grammatical behavior, and context-appropriate usage (Nation, 2001; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). For instance, a learner may understand the term “methodology” when reading but may not confidently produce it in writing without practice.

Developing active academic vocabulary requires intentional and repeated use of new words in meaningful contexts. Classroom activities such as sentence creation, short essay writing, peer discussions, and presentations help students transition words from passive recognition to active production. Teachers can further support this process through explicit instruction on word formation, affixes, and collocations. By moving vocabulary from receptive to productive use, learners achieve greater fluency, precision, and academic competence.

Challenges for Learners

Acquiring academic vocabulary can be particularly challenging for ESL learners due to limited exposure to formal registers and advanced grammar. Hinkel (2001, as cited in Ma, 2015) notes that writing formally in English demands mastery of sophisticated vocabulary and syntactic structures, which many non-native speakers lack. Moreover, research by O'Connor et al. (2019) indicates that learners with disabilities both native and non-native display similar patterns of difficulty in vocabulary learning. This finding suggests that teachers need to adapt

instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs, such as using multisensory techniques or differentiated instruction.

Recommendations for Teachers

- To enhance academic vocabulary acquisition, educators should:
- Encourage students to apply new words through sentence creation, short texts, and role-play activities (Ma, 2015).
- Integrate mobile-assisted learning tools and vocabulary notebooks to reinforce engagement and review (Alemi et al., 2012; Komur & Ozdemir, 2015).
- Teach word roots, prefixes, and suffixes to help students deduce meanings and expand lexical knowledge systematically (Wei, 2021).
- Combine inductive and deductive teaching methods to make lessons both interactive and structured.
- Assess vocabulary growth through formative techniques such as quizzes, reflections, and peer feedback.

Conclusion

Academic vocabulary forms the foundation of successful academic communication and overall language proficiency. As this review demonstrates, explicit instruction in academic vocabulary enables learners to comprehend complex texts, express abstract ideas, and participate confidently in scholarly discourse. Effective pedagogical approaches including corpus-based word lists, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), and the use of vocabulary notebooks offer practical and evidence-based pathways for vocabulary development. These

strategies not only enhance students' retention of new words but also promote autonomy, motivation, and long-term language growth.

Teachers play a pivotal role in transforming passive word knowledge into active, productive use through meaningful classroom interaction and contextualized practice. Integrating academic vocabulary into authentic reading and writing tasks, coupled with opportunities for peer collaboration, helps students internalize and apply new language effectively. Furthermore, by incorporating digital tools, educators can provide flexible, engaging, and personalized learning experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom settings.

However, it is equally important to acknowledge the challenges faced by diverse learners, including English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with learning disabilities. Differentiated instruction, multisensory activities, and scaffolded feedback can ensure equitable access to academic vocabulary learning for all students.

Future research should further explore how technology-enhanced and inclusive pedagogies can be combined to address individual learner differences and disciplinary needs. By adopting a comprehensive and student-centered approach, educators can empower learners to build robust academic vocabularies, thereby improving not only their linguistic competence but also their academic confidence and success across subjects.

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