

Analysis of Vocabulary Levels in Toyo University's Writing Centre Student Essays

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Writing in the second language is a very important skill to develop (Harklau, 2002 ; Silva, 1993). Most importantly should second language students choose to study abroad, writing at the university level, particularly in report or essay form, are the main forms of evaluation, as indicated by numerous websites of foreign universities that post guidelines about how to write essays. If students cannot formulate and present their arguments or positions on a subject in a way that conforms to the expected academic style(s), the student may be unable to pass a course. Therefore, it is essential that students be taught how to write successfully in academic genres (Hyland, 2004, p. 2-5).

Of the ways to teach writing to second language learners, one-to-one instruction, or Conference Writing, is often effective (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990 ; Hussein & Al Ashri, 2013). This involves a regular meeting between a learner and teacher with the ultimate goal of making the learner more familiar with appropriate academic genres and developing a degree of autonomy so the learner can apply such knowledge in educational situations that require different academic genres. The focus in Conference Writing is on process writing (Elbow, 1981 ; Harris, 1986 ; Susser, 1994), so continual drafts and rethinking of ideas are often required of participating students.

Conference Writing has both benefits and drawbacks. The benefits are that this one-to-one instruction allows for the teacher to address the individual needs of each student, and, in turn, the student can ask questions that they might not do in a larger class. This is particularly important in Japan where the behaviours of speaking up and asking questions in class are less culturally-sanctioned (Wadden, 1993). Further, the one-to-one meetings are conducted in the second, or perhaps third, language, and the learner also has the opportunity to develop their spoken fluency while they negotiate the contents of their academic work with the teacher. However, on the downside, students need sufficient communicative skills in order to talk about their thoughts clearly, so some students may not benefit from Conference Writing.

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Conference Writing has been a key feature of writing centres that provide help for both writers in the L1 (Gillespie, Gillam, Brown & Stay, 2002) and the L2 (Williams, 2004). Many universities in Tokyo, including Tokyo University and Sophia University, have started to create writing centres. Seeing the potential of this form of instruction, Toyo University has set up its own writing centre called the Language Centre (from here to be referred to as the Centre). Its aims are to have students ready for study abroad and eventually to write undergraduate theses in English. To reach a level of writing proficiency enabling a student to successfully employ academic writing takes a long time and requires a large amount of contact with the language (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Expressed in terms of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), this level would be starting from B2. At this level students can : “write an essay or report that develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting details (p, 6).¹” In general, students that study at Toyo University are some way from this standard, with many appearing in the A1 or A2 categories for which no CEFR descriptors are available for essay writing.

Through its curriculum the Centre offers one-to-one instruction in the form of six modules that correspond to different and ever-more increasingly difficult forms of rhetorical modes in academic writing. The program starts by leading learners through basic descriptive paragraphs / essays and then onto compare and contrast modes, up to more complex and cognitively-challenging forms of academic modes like argumentation, and problem and solution essays. The ultimate stage is being able to write a full research paper in English, the contents of which could go some way towards students’ undergraduate theses.

As students move through the various rhetorical modes, they are assessed along the way. A student could possibly be promoted to the next module or have to repeat the same module again. The assessment criteria to make these decisions is based on different criteria, but does include evaluation of the final essay in that rhetorical mode. Currently the program includes six assessment criteria based on five levels of proficiency from “weak” to “academic” (indicating proficiency in that criterion). These include : language use (complexity of sentence construction), mechanics (use of writing conventions of spelling and punctuation), cohesion, coherence, the content, genre-compliance and vocabulary. The last of these criterion, vocabulary, is the focus of this short paper.

Vocabulary in Language Study

Command of vocabulary is an important criterion for success in writing in any language. It has also become widespread as a criterion for measuring linguistic skills, even intelligence. For example, Glicksberg (1943-44) found that the higher someone scored on tests of intelligence, the more likely they were to have a wider vocabulary. In the face of criticism, however, in more recent decades the general consensus has been towards holistic

¹ <http://www.polzleitner.com/epet/Assessment/NewAssessmentScales/all-three-files.pdf>

measures of intelligence.

Second language researchers such as Morris & Cobb (2004) have underscored the importance of writing well. Writing has also become widespread as a measurement criteria for L2 proficiency. This may be because, unlike grammar where there is a certain amount of subjectivity in correct usage, discrete vocabulary items can be measured objectively (Nation, 2001, p.344). In other words, in productive English the absence or presence of words can be counted. This makes vocabulary a powerful tool for gauging second language proficiency.

However, with so many words in the English language, the question remains which words to focus on for assessment. Scholars have proposed that learners should start learning a second language through the most commonly used words in that language (Nation, 2001; West, 1957). Thanks to advances in computer technology, corpus linguists has been able to generate lists of the most frequently occurring words in many foreign languages.

Word corpora such as that composed by West (1957) became useful as a study and research tool, but dealt only with words used in newspapers and book print for that time. An updated version of the corpora covering general reading texts was created by Nation (2001) in groups of 1000 most common words. The higher the grouping of 1000, the more infrequent the words.

For students going to study abroad in an academic context general word lists were less practical. What was needed was a core list of words that was used in academic contexts in universities in English-speaking countries. The Academic Word List, or AWL, (Coxhead, 2000) was developed with 570 word families. These cover the most frequently used word families across all academic fields. A word family is based on the root word such as *count*, but from there would encompass grammatically related words *counting*, *uncountable*, etc.

It stands to reason that any program wishing to send students to universities overseas should deal in some way with words from the AWL. The learning of the combination of the first 2000 words and the AWL covers around 87% of words used in academic texts (Nation, 2001). The author chose the AWL because of ease of using available software that could analyse it. However, it is worth noting that a number of corpora exist in Japan offering a range of specialist text-generated vocabulary lists (See Browne, 2014 for an example).

Pursuant with the above aims of the Centre, which imply considerable control over words in the Academic Word List, there is value in measuring the current vocabulary profile of Toyo students who are taking various levels of writing courses at the Centre to gauge their level of word usage. Not only would such a profile give a general idea of the vocabulary use of different levels of writing proficiency, but it may be used as a general yardstick to gauge the success of the Centre.

Procedure

Data was taken from 28 students who took the writing program in the fall semester of 2015. The data was used to measure student vocabulary use, including the Academic Word List, in student essays at different writing proficiency levels. Students met with writing teachers for six individual sessions over one semester. As part

of the writing program, students submitted a first draft and a final draft and these were used as data sources to show the level of progress made from the first basic idea to the final version of the essay, which tended to take 40-50 days. Students produced somewhere between three and five drafts of the text before submission of the final draft and would have met a teacher for a maximum of three hours (in six thirty-minute sessions).

Table 1 shows the breakdown of these students and their proficiency levels. Module one and two, the easiest modules cover narration, description and explaining processes ; modules three or four students work on compare, contrast or cause and effect writing, and students in the highest modules five and six were composing either argumentation essays or larger individual research projects. The TOEIC score increases as modules increase, but there are students from all different faculties of the university, and in some cases TOEIC scores are not compulsory depending on the policy of the individual faculty.

Table 1. *Breakdown of Study participants (n=28) in January 2015*

	<i>n</i>	TOEIC scores	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Modules one and two	12(9)	550	34
Modules three and four	11	570	41
Modules five and six	5	640	57

Note. TOEIC scores of three students in the first two modules could not be ascertained because their faculty does not require compulsory TOEIC scores

The data was analysed with PASW, Ver. 18.0 (SPSS Inc., 2009) and Vocabulary Profile, Ver. 4 software (Cobb, 2002). First PASW was used for comparing means. It was further employed to run a regression analysis on the vocabulary score (one to five) assigned by one teacher for each student's final draft to see which groups of vocabulary accounted for the most variance in this score. The scoring used at the Centre is as follows :

One point (weak) - low level translation with poor knowledge of words/forms

Two points (fair) - limited use and frequent errors so ineffective

Three points (developing) - developing occasional errors in word choice and idiomatic expressions

Four points (strong) - capable range of words/idiomatic expressions with occasional errors

Five points (academic) - highly sophisticated use/effective use of idiomatic expressions and register

As well as PASW, Vocabulary Profile was used to indicate the percentage of each level of vocabulary contained in the first and last essay drafts. The author used Vocabulary Profile as recommended by Laufer and Nation (1995) to objectively measure L2 learners' vocabulary use in writing by showing the percentage of words a learner uses at different vocabulary frequency levels in their writings (p.311). In the present study, the four lev-

els are the first 1000 words, the second 1000 word level, the Academic Word List and finally the Off Word List (lower frequency words and proper nouns).

Before the analysis was run, a number of checks were carried out. First, a spelling check was made of all drafts and spelling was manually altered from US to UK versions so that the words would be recognised and counted by the Word Profile software. Secondly, no instances of Japanese words were found in the essays. Third the proper nouns like names of people and places were removed from the analysis. Lastly, although the data set was small, there were no serious violations of kurtosis or skewness.

Results

All the first and final drafts of 28 students were analysed by PASW, and the mean scores can be seen in Table 2. It shows that after comparing the means of all the word levels, significant changes were seen in the amount of words at each level. Further analysis for each of the types of group revealed a similar situation : significant increases in the amount of words were seen in all levels of word and essay type writing (module). Although this may seem obvious, considering that students would naturally write more as their writing progresses, they are consistent in the fact that all word levels are increasing in number.

Table 2. *Mean Differences in Total Word Length Between First and Final drafts of Student Compositions (n=28)*

	1 st Draft				Final Draft				<i>t</i>
	<i>MIN</i>	<i>MAX</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>MIN</i>	<i>MAX</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
1000 WL	51	993	294.3	196.34	111	1204	537	291.15	4.88*
2000 WL	0	53	18.04	14.77	0	87	33.6	19.01	5.76*
AWL WL	0	43	12.43	11.01	3	71	22.1	17.21	4.75*
Off WL	4	75	25.25	15.69	9	106	48.1	27.13	5.33*

Note. WL = Word Level. Off = Off List. *t* = mean difference between first and last draft. ($p < 0.05$)

The next analysis involved the Vocabulary Profile. Table 3 shows the percentages of each of the word levels for each of the essay levels. There are a few comments that can be made about this table. First, generally, the percentage of academic words increases as the modules increase in difficulty. This result might also be due to the nature of the writing in module 1 and 2, which tends to be about personal narrative and so the opportunity

Table 3. *Average Vocabulary Profile of Each Module Level*

Word Level	Modules 1 and 2		Modules 3 and 4		Modules 5 and 6	
	1 st draft	last draft	1 st draft	last draft	1 st draft	last draft
% of 1000	83.11%	82.44%	86.24%	85.47%	79.42%	80.03%
% of 2000	5.31%	6.13%	3.96%	*4.44%	6.88%	6.34%
% of AWL	1.59%	1.99%	3.96%	3.74%	6.00%	5.24%
% of Off List	9.97%	9.42%	5.82%	6.34%	7.68%	8.39%

for academic words may be less. However, these percentages are low compared to overall rates for academic texts (Nation, 2001). Second, it is clear that very little changes in the percentage of each word level for all modules, except one case in the 2000 word level for modules 3 and 4. Although the number of words is going up, the percentages of the academic word levels are not.

The final analysis is based on the vocabulary scores assigned to the final essay drafts. A multiple regression was undertaken to confirm which of the four levels of words would predict the final vocabulary scores. With vocabulary score as the dependent variable, the word levels for all modules were added into the model using a forward selection regression. This method adds each variable only if it improves the best regression model. The Off List level was the only predictor of the vocabulary score ($F(1, 27) = 16.88, p < .001$) with an R^2 of 40.12%. The same regression analysis was carried out for each module, but the only significant result was for Modules 1 and 2, with, again the Off List level recorded as the only significant predictor of the vocabulary score ($F(1, 10) = 23.96, p < .001$) with the R^2 at 67.61%.

Conclusion

This study suffers from small n -sizes. There is also the issue of only one Centre teacher acting as the scorer (rater) for vocabulary. Two raters for one student would have possibly added more reliability to the results of this study. The results overall show that although students at the Centre write more words between first and final drafts, the actual percentage of academic words has not increased.

Academic words are very important to learn for students who may study in western academic settings, the main study abroad destination for Japanese university students. It should, therefore, be a future goal of the Centre to encourage students to use academic vocabulary in essays to a higher degree. Although some academic disciplines may require a higher degree of academic words than others, a tentative estimate by Nation (2001, p.17) based on his corpus analysis of academic disciplines suggests the breakdown of word levels in academic texts as : 1 st 1000 (73.51%), 2 nd 1000 (8.52%), AWL (8.51%) and Off List (13.36%). The results in the current study fall short of this benchmark.

Looking at the results from this small sample, it can be seen that a higher percentage of AWL words is required in the final student drafts. Some rhetorical modes and topics may encourage greater use of vocabulary from the Academic Word List. Currently, however, there exists no research that addresses the relationship between rhetorical modes, topics and the use of vocabulary from the Academic World List. Future research should explore this relationship to gain more understanding of vocabulary use in second language writing.

In addition, no clear results came from the regression except that the number of overall Off List words may contribute to the way that the final essays are evaluated. This result was supported by Laufer and Nation (1995) who state that that use of low frequency words indicates richness in a learner's vocabulary. They further state that low frequency words should be addressed autonomously and indirectly.

Possible additional future research should address how students can increase their level of vocabulary sophistication. One possible suggestion could be to make students aware of their current level of vocabulary use. The software used to analyse the vocabulary used in this paper is free and very easy to use, so students could analyse their own papers with a view to improving their vocabularies. Moreover, students could be encouraged to use other online resources such as thesauruses. There may even be a case for direct teaching of the AWL words. Many apps are now available that provide a fun and regular platform for vocabulary learning through games and other activities (See Memrize application, version 2.2.1).

For teachers in the Centre, it is necessary to provide training about the vocabulary levels discussed in this paper. It would also be useful to adapt the rubric used at the Center for assessing vocabulary use coinciding more with notions expressed in this paper. Teachers could base more of their evaluation decisions on academic words in the text. These are concrete and easy to identify. A degree of direct teaching of suitable vocabulary items, particularly from the AWL, could be a possible start. Future research could, thus, focus on how teachers can motivate students to use more academic words and deal with optimal ways for the teachers to cover direct teaching within the Conference Writing time itself. By paying attention to the changes outlined in this paper, it may help the Center's learners to function better as second language writers.

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【Abstract】

語彙レベルの分析 —東洋大学ランゲージセンターのエッセイに関して—

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2013年度に東洋大学では、海外留学のような学生の目標を達成するために必要なアカデミックライティング能力を促進するために語学センターと呼ばれるライティングセンターを設立した。ここでは、 Semesterで6回、各30分、教員と受講生の1対1の対面方式による（コンファレンス）ライティング指導を提供している。大学などアカデミックな環境でのライティングの成否は学生の効果的な語彙の使用、またその語彙の適切性にある。そして、それはこのプログラムを評価する重要な手段となる。コンファレンスライティングを受講しているグループの学生（ $n=28$ ）を対象に受講前後にソフトウェア（Vocabulary Profile, Ver. 4 ; Cobb, 2002）を使用して、学生の使用した語彙数と異語数を調査した。コースの最初と最後におけるエッセイのライティングで、ライティング能力が異なるが、すべての学生が Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) の低いランクにある語彙しか使用していなかった。筆者は、語彙に焦点を合わせた、より直接的なライティング指導をすることを提案する。さらに、この研究で使用されたソフトウェアを使用して、学生は現在自分が使用している語彙（語彙能力）に気づくべきである。

キーワード：第二言語ライティング、カンファレンスライティング、アカデミック語彙、日本の大学、エッセイ

In 2013 Toyo University created a writing centre called the Language Centre to help students improve their academic writing in English and to assist them to reach goals such as functioning better in the academic study abroad setting. Instruction is offered by way of individual Conference Writing between one teacher and one student taking place for thirty minutes six times in English over one semester. Vital to writing success in academic settings is effective vocabulary use, so measurement of student vocabulary use is one important way to gauge the success of the writing centre. A small cohort of students ($n = 28$) taking the Conference Writing courses were measured in a pre/post study design using software (Vocabulary Profile, Ver. 4 ; Cobb, 2002), which analysed the amount of vocabulary used at different word levels. All students at different stages of writing proficiency used a low percentage of academic words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) in both their first and final essay drafts. The author proposes that more direct pedagogical intervention focusing on vocabulary be implemented. Further, it is necessary to raise students' awareness of their current use of academic vocabulary in essays through the software used in this study.

Key words : second language writing, conference writing, academic vocabulary, Japanese university, essays

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