

Learning Academic Vocabulary: Assessing the Theoretical Impact on the Learners of English in the KRG's Middle Schools

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Abstract— Learning Academic vocabulary is necessary to be taught at the early stages in the middle schools. The importance of academic vocabulary only started to be discussed in 1970s (Schmitt, 2005; Hirsh, 2010; Paquate, 2010). Coxhead (2000) has collected 570 word families from different academic texts. These words cover roughly 11% of running words based on an analysis of academic texts. The knowledge of academic vocabulary is essential and needed for students of secondary or high school level. Thus, there has been concern about learners at middle schools who basically cannot understand academic textbooks or write academic texts. The aim of this paper is to review the different critical theories of the importance of the most frequent academic word list for learners in secondary schools.

Keywords—Academic vocabulary, Teaching, Learning English, Middle schools.

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic vocabulary is a strong tool for academic students studying at different levels in various academic institutions. The importance of academic vocabulary only started to be discussed in 1970s (Schmitt, 2005; Hirsh, 2010; Paquate, 2010). Coxhead (2000) has collected 570 word families from different academic texts. These words cover roughly 11% of running words based on an analysis of academic texts. The knowledge of academic vocabulary is essential and needed for students of secondary or high school level. Thus, there has been concern about learners at middle schools who basically cannot understand academic textbooks or write academic texts (Armbuster, 1992).

The aim of this paper is to review the different critical theories of the importance of the most frequent academic word list for learners in secondary schools. The role and significance of academic vocabulary has long been ignored in Kurdistan intermediate school contexts, due to the lack of this knowledge. Studying academic vocabulary earlier could pave the way for intermediate learners in Kurdistan schools to understand authentic materials. It will help students to familiarise themselves with academic writing and also it will aid them in comprehending academic texts. I would argue that academic

vocabulary is of critical importance as a building block for writing academic assignments and understanding a variety of texts. High frequency words from an academic word list could be taught in intermediate schools and it is a fundamental factor in students' comprehension of academic texts.

This paper is divided into four main sections with the exception of the introduction: first and foremost, is an overview of literature about the academic vocabulary which includes five sub-headings. The second one concerns the most effective strategies for both teaching and learning academic vocabulary. The next one covers the results and discussions. The last one is the conclusion which summarizes the main ideas throughout the paper.

II. 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A. 2.1 Academic vocabulary in learning a second language

In recent years, the issue of when and how to teach academic vocabulary has been identified as an important topic in the field of applied linguistics. Magalia has defined academic vocabulary as “sets of lexical items that are not core words but which are relatively frequent in academic texts” (Magalia, 2010, p: 9). Academic vocabulary has been neglected for numerous years. Until recent years, research had not been conducted to distinguish the academic word list from the 2000 running words. Academic knowledge was derived from the General Service List which is a list of the 2000 most frequent words and this was compiled from five million corpora by West.

In the 1980s research into academic vocabulary done by Coxhead (2000) in the field of applied linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. He compiled academic vocabulary from a corpus of 3.5 million running words. This list encompasses 570 word families and each family has many members. For example, the word *coincide* can have family members like the word *coincidence* as a noun coincident as an adjective. Coxhead also established that words from the AWL are the most common in a wide range of disciplines such as humanities, science, commerce, law and arts (Coxhead, 2000, 2006; Nation, 2011). These words make up approximately 11% of running words in academic texts. Academic knowledge may increase students' knowledge of

their different stages of studies and also play a significant role in using micro skills. This means it helps learners to understand and convey their messages clearly throughout of different levels of subject areas (Schmitt, 2010; Nation & Webb, 2011; Milton, 2009; Coxhead, 2000).

There is evidence to show that academic vocabulary has been widely used for various purposes such as English for academic purpose (EAP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) as well as in social media, advertising magazines (Nation, 2011; Li, and Zhang, 2011; Coxhead, (2000). It could also be seen in various subjects such as law, science and arts which cover around 4.8% of general high frequency words and these words are often called sub technical words. Technical words, on the other hand, cover almost four per cent of total core words (Maranzo, 2004; Hyland & Tes, 2007; Hirsh, 2010; Coxhead, 2000, 2006). The vocabularies of the English language have been divided by a number of researchers (e.g. West, 1952; Coxhead, 2010; Nation, 2011) for five different categories namely, General Service List which is a high frequency list, university word list (UWL), academic word list AWL, technical or specialised word list and low frequency list. This paper will focus on high frequency items in the academic Word List because it is prevalent in authentic texts in different academic institutions.

1) 2.1.1. Which type of academic vocabulary to use?

The academic word list has been categorised according to the specialised words and these words tend to be difficult to understand without having sufficient knowledge of vocabulary. Coxhead (2000) has developed an academic word list based on the three main principles:

1-*Specialised occurrence*: The word families included had to be outside the first 2,000 most frequently occurring words of English as represented by West's (1953) GSL.

2-*Range*: A member of a word family had to occur at least 10 times in each of the four main sections of the corpus and in 15 or more of the 28 subject areas.

3-*Frequency*: Members of a word family had to occur at least 100 times in the academic Corpus.

The list of academic vocabulary was further divided into ten subgroups with highest frequency words in group one and lowest frequency words in group ten. This means that not all academic vocabularies are equally significant for students of English as a second language. Some vocabularies are critically important to comprehending the meaning of academic texts. Nation (2011) advocates that academic word list is desirable for educators and learners. The first reason he mentioned is that the list which is available for every student and teacher to access through online sources. The second reason was the list is valuable for teachers to teach English for either specific purposes or academic purposes to non-native learners. Despite the importance of AWL, research indicates that AWL has not been well distributed in some disciplines.

The academic word list has been criticised as it has weaknesses in the divisions of the academic words. A research study conducted by Tes & Hyland (2007) includes the 570 of word families which collected in academic corpus that all account for nearly 10.9 or 11. per cent in the corpus of two thousand running words. For instance, *resident*, *schedule* and *pursue*. They found that "This coverage is not evenly distributed" (Hyland & Tes, 2007, P: 240) They also argue that learners in scientific departments are better assisted. It seems that technical

words are used in specific subject areas and these words tend to be problematic for learners of other disciplines (Hyland & Tes, 2007; Nation, 2011; Magalie, 2010). However, the rate of 570 academic word list is used for variety of scientific disciplines such as medicine, biology and, computer science rather than humanities. These vocabularies could be useful for students who are studying in different departments. For example, students who are doing biology subjects may understand the content of the subject. In other words, academic vocabulary not only helps students to master some words but also it helps them to understand the knowledge of the content. It is evident that high frequent academic vocabulary can be seen in many different disciplines. Therefore, it is necessary for students to develop the idea of the using of academic word list in order to control subject areas.

2.1.1.1 The purpose and importance of the academic word list

The academic word list is central for comprehending knowledge. Second language learners should have exposure to learning academic vocabulary in order to know how to use words in appropriate situations. For example, Armbruster states that "success in school is dependent on academic achievement for students in middle and high schools" (Armbruster, 1992, P:xix). It is apparent that studying high frequent academic vocabularies makes it easier for students to develop their knowledge throughout their studies. That is to say, the knowledge of high frequent academic words is like a vehicle for learners to reach a high level of study in their future goals. Without this knowledge, it would be impossible to achieve their academic goals in their academic life.

Researchers (Schmitt and Schmitt, 2005; MaCathy, 2008; Evans and John, 1988) have indicated the role and the importance of the academic word list at different levels of academia. For example, when learners are introduced daily to high frequency academic vocabulary at secondary, they may learn two per cent of academic vocabulary during one month. During one year of academic study, they will have learned 12% of the total Academic Word List, not including the 2000 running words. Hence, when students go to higher level studies they may have fewer problems with word knowledge. Researchers, such as Schmitt, acknowledge that AWL is vital for teaching students as well as advanced learners. It might be interesting to start teaching from the most frequent academic vocabulary at the early stages for students of different subject areas because if academic vocabulary receives attention in secondary schools, students in advanced level will be less busy studying academic words and have more time to focus on the actual content of their subject areas.

Based on ample research, it has been found that students who are in intermediate schools should be taught some basic academic vocabulary in order to increase their capacity to understand authentic contexts. Of course, the AWL paves the way for secondary school students to be able to write academic essays easily when they are studying at advanced level.

Coxhead (2006) indicates that for students who prepare themselves to reach at tertiary level of study, academic vocabulary is necessary for them for writing assignments no matter what the discipline. Furthermore, Coxhead asserts that

“Academic Vocabulary should play a crucial role in setting vocabulary goals for a language course, guiding learners in their independent study... the bigger your vocabulary the more you will be able to cope with the high reading and writing demands of your study” (Coxhead, 2000, P: 214). It is clear that the building up of knowledge of academic vocabulary at the early stages (e.g secondary schools) would help second language learners overcome some challenges in their future of higher education undergraduate or post graduate levels. Having studied the academic word list, it makes it easier for learners to speak fluently and write accurately in an academic proficiency. Thus mastering the Academic Vocabulary List throughout the grades of schools will help learners to develop an understanding of realistic texts and help them to write assignments accurately because assignments tend to be quite formal in academic contexts (ibid). Biemiller (2000) has significantly researched academic words. He states that having sufficient knowledge of Academic vocabulary is not a guarantee of achieving success but the absence of academic vocabulary for learners may make sure of their failure. Therefore, studying academic vocabulary at the stages of intermediate levels is sequentially important and it helps learners to grasp a number of academic words before starting university studies.

2) 2.2. Learning academic vocabulary at early stages

As has been mentioned above, academic vocabulary helps learners to grasp information from the realistic texts in a wide range of academic fields. There has been debate between researchers and educators as to whether it is possible to teach academic vocabulary for middle stages in the schools of foreign countries. Several researchers such as (Nation, 2011; Schmitt 2010, Biemiller, 2000, Dudley-Evans & John, 1998) argue that academic vocabulary has to be taught for advanced second language learners because these words are rarely used in daily life conversions. Some of them would prefer to teach academic vocabulary at university level. This seems that academic word list is only important at high level of study. Students in secondary school might not need to know the academic word list because for them it is more important to learn the most frequent of 2000 words from the General Service List. On the other hand, many researchers for instance, Marzano (2004) & Biemiller (2000) suggest that academic vocabulary should be taught at early stages such as secondary schools in order to aid learners to grow AWL before reaching university level and this will help them to understand the content of subject areas. For example, words like *link*, *comment*, and *process* from early stages can assist foreign language learners to develop their understanding throughout the stages because they might be heard from every day discussions such as in schools (Coxhead, 2000; Lie & Zhang, 2009).

Having learned these words, students should be ready for being student university courses without having significant problems when writing assignments and comprehending their academic texts. Learning any word from any stage of academic study is a powerful tool for increasing academic knowledge (Biemiller, 2000, Marzano, 2004). Instead of memorizing academic vocabulary at university level; students might spend their time seeking the knowledge relates to their disciplines. Simply, studying high frequency of academic vocabulary in secondary schools could lead to learners to more easily comprehend different information about different subject areas directly.

As noted earlier, along with AWL, technical vocabulary covers a small proportion of the percentage of total high frequency words. These words are considered to be specialised words for specific subject areas. Research has found that it is widely agreed that there is a strong relationship between AWL and technical vocabulary. For example, the words like money and stock market which belong to the word economy (Nation, 2001, 2006; Schmitt 2010, 2009). Technical vocabulary is also helpful for second language learners because learners who intend to continue their academic study for the specific subject area will be a great help for them. This is because specialized vocabulary becomes higher frequency in that field of the study. However, in some areas of technical vocabulary it becomes a heavy burden for learning. Nation (2006) has divided technical vocabulary into two different kinds: one is the most specialised form for the specific texts such as technology information, and others are considered to be non-specialized words. From this perspective, it is clear that some words would be considered as low frequency for other subject areas (Nation, 2001, Lessard-Clouston, 2010; Magalie, 2010). Research studies have shown that technical vocabulary and AWL are indispensable for studying English for academic purposes and English for specific purposes (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998). However, studying technical vocabulary might make it difficult for teachers who are not specialist in some areas. Teachers who are teaching students in computer science may not have sufficient knowledge of the hardware or software such as *databases* and *ram* (Nation, 2006, 2001; Magalia, 2010). In fact, academic world list and technical words are equally required for learning in various subject areas. For example, in Kurdish schools the mathematics is mandated to be taught using the English language, so when students try to solve some problems they can utilise some basic technical words for solving exercises such as fraction, or times. These specialised or AWL words often occur in many authentic texts. However, they are not reasonably frequent in fiction and novel texts (Coxhead, 2000; Schmitt, 2010).

III. 3. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

1) 3.1. The approaches for teaching academic vocabulary

In fact, teachers in the classroom can play significant roles in teaching the most applicable academic vocabulary. Utilising the best strategies for developing students' academic knowledge could be good for the process of schooling. Research study by Ur (1991) has shown that teachers should present the meaning of the vocabulary to learners. This might be important to focus on message rather than forms. However, the form-focused teaching of vocabulary explicitly is crucial. For example, family members of a word should not be ignored because it helps learners' memory to remember words easily.

Linguists such as (Snow, 1988; Coxhead, 2000; Schmitt, 2010, 2005; Nation, 2001, 2011; Carter and McCarthy, 1988; Li, 2009) have reached the conclusion of teaching and learning vocabulary by providing the following techniques: first and foremost, using word cards and using sentences to show how words work in appropriate contexts for deliberating. Next,

dictionaries can help learners to find out the definition of the word. However, students should be learned how to use dictionary. Bilingual dictionaries can sometimes help learners to grasp the meaning by using L1. Teachers should teach students by using chunks and collocation, words that usually go together. For, instance, *fossil fuel*, *heavy rain*. The last one they suggest is for students to take note and keep in a notebook in order to revisit them once a week.

These recommendations mentioned above, are essential for teachers and students to use in school classroom. Hence, words should be taught according to learners' needs and context (Hyland and Tese, 2007; Webb, 2009). Learners should feel that they comprehend how to use words in an appropriate manner because the vast majority of items have more than one meaning. Of course, teachers need to distinguish technical vocabulary from low and high frequency vocabulary. Educators can control the situation of words of teaching academic vocabulary by having a successful plan for teaching words in school classroom.

2) 3.1.1. Reading textbooks intensively

Various strategies for teaching and learning academic vocabulary have been described by researchers and practitioners in order to find an appropriate strategy for controlling vocabulary throughout the grades of schools.

Research by Nation and Webb (2011) shows that the most effective way for learning academic vocabulary is through reading texts thoroughly. Nation has mentioned that the "grader reader" which indicates a wide range of academic text books which might help advanced learners to develop their understanding of general knowledge. However, the idea of "grader reader" has been criticized because it excluded students of schools and has not presented the authentic texts for learning the academic word list (Marzano, 2004; Coxhead, 2006; Schmitt, 2010).

Takase (2007 cited in Nation, 2011, p: 532) suggests that teachers might be able to deliver a certain amount of academic knowledge during the school time and then students should be given homework to intensively read texts. Learning high frequency academic vocabulary through focusing on the authentic texts can naturally improve learner's ability to understand academic social contexts (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010; McCarthy and O'Dell, 2008). Research has found that low frequency vocabulary is neglected. However, low frequency is perhaps useful for specialized subject areas.

Evans and John (1998) have divided academic vocabulary into "comprehension and production" approaches for learning. Comprehension refers to the meaning which is to be emphasized throughout the content, while the latter implies "retrieval and storage" which is considered to be more effective. They also suggest that the strategy for learning academic vocabulary by utilizing mnemonic devices including visual images and flash cards is the best alternative for learners in recalling vocabulary. It is clear that this technique is useful for beginner learners in intermediate schools for recognizing words easily (Nation, 2011; Schmitt, 2010).

There are various techniques which are vital for second language learners to learn academic words such as guessing vocabulary from academic contexts. A large amount of research (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010) shows that second language learners can develop their vocabulary knowledge by guessing

the meanings throughout contexts. Indeed, some vocabulary has different meanings from different texts. For example, the word *table*, can be used for a column in academic texts and also a dining room in a house. This situation could be problematic if learners are not made aware of these multiple meanings. Therefore, it is a crucial way to teach academic words through using flash cards and writing textbooks in order students to be able to retrieve the word and use it appropriate way in secondary schools.

Researchers such as (Marzano, 2004; Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2001, 2005) state that learning vocabulary, both incidentally and deliberately, is also a factor in improving student's knowledge of words. Learning incidentally could be more worthwhile for native speakers rather than foreign language learners Schmitt (2010). Furthermore, learning vocabulary by using cards "deliberate decontextualized rote learning vocabulary" may be highly respected by students of other languages (ibid). Thus, this strategy has been recognized as the traditional way of memorizing vocabulary. Teachers are possibly unsatisfied with this technique for teaching academic vocabulary because it does not help communication directly (Snow, 1998; Nation, 2001; Evans and Johns, 1998).

a) 3.1.1.1. Listening to academic subjects

Evidence has found that learners improve their knowledge by listening to academic discussions. Listening to academic purposes, increases learners' knowledge of academic vocabulary. The most significant research has been conducted in Spain University by Viddal (2003, cited from Lessard-Cloustan, 2010). The study included 122 students who were learning a language. The study revealed that learning academic vocabulary through listening to the academic subjects such as 'science and tourism' can tremendously affect students' acquisition. It is evident, that listing "through aural academic input" helps learners to understand technical and low frequency words better (Lessard-Cloustan, 2010).

4. Methods:

This study is a critical theoretical review of literature; therefore, the qualitative method is adopted since it deals with the literature. The data has been gathered from the intensive books and research papers. The aim of this paper is to find out how academic vocabulary could be taught and learning in the early stages. The gap has been found that in the Kurdistan governmental middle schools, students hardly comprehend academic texts, therefore students should be taught the most frequent academic vocabulary.

IV. 5- RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings from the literature review revealed that the most frequent academic vocabulary is an essential tool for non-native speakers of English to understand academic texts. It is evident that one of the major issues of academic institutions in Kurdistan is a lack of study of academic words for writing and comprehending academic texts in depth.

This situation of Kurdistan Region is similar to the Chinese context. Li & Zhang (2009) mentioned that Chinese learners study grammar systematically. However, the role of vocabulary

has been ignored in secondary schools. This system may have negatively affected their students' lexical development.

It is obvious that, from the ample evidence presented above from the review of the literature of academic lexis is a need, therefore, it would be crucial for Kurdish learners of learning English in Kurdistan secondary schools to take academic lexis into account. As Nation, (2006, 2001) and Magalia, (2010) mentioned that the high frequency of academic word list and technical words should be programmed for intermediate schools. Additionally, the administrators should allocate extra time for teaching the most frequent academic words and these words can be taught via the provision of authentic texts. For example, when teaching the word *network*, the content should be about the Internet. In this case, students learn both, the academic word and the Internet information. Educators can teach the first list of high frequency and match it with the realist subjects such as mathematics. This is for the first list word. For the next semester teachers can teach second sub list as well as some technical vocabulary for example *download* and *upload*. These kinds of words can be taught for next semester for teaching students at secondary schools. Students would become familiarise with the academic vocabulary before they reached university study.

The General Service List 2,000 (West,1953) is the basic core vocabulary for learning English from the secondary to high level. However, low frequency words may not assist learners at the early stages since the low frequency is rarely used in stories. This is as Schmitt (2010) argued that technical words to be only taught in the authentic subjects. Instead of this, technical and specialized vocabularies can be taught for those learners who are studying in particular subject areas. For instance, students who are doing computer courses should know some technical vocabulary in order to comprehend materials. Government can play a significant role in helping teachers to familiarize themselves with new techniques and methods of teaching vocabularies (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010; Coxhead, 2000, 2005).

Based on the rationales mentioned above, these types of vocabulary lists should provide the fundamental words to be taught in early stages of education such as secondary schools in Kurdish contexts. This will help second language learners to build up morphological knowledge and feel confident when they pursue further study.

6. Conclusions

Academic vocabulary is the basis for understanding in academic contexts. It is vital for learners of second language to master the academic word list from an early stage. The academic word list covers around 570 specialized word families and it appears 11% of token words. This type of vocabulary is mostly seen in law, science and commerce, which includes different subject areas.

Based on the evidence mentioned earlier, academic vocabulary can be taught in secondary schools. This helps students to prepare themselves for advanced levels and it assists them to grasp academic debates in different contexts.

The knowledge of teaching and learning vocabulary is highly important for both teachers and learners. Teachers need to be aware in order to have sufficient knowledge of different strategies for teaching academic vocabulary. Using flashcards

and guessing the meanings of the word through academic texts is highly effective. Teachers should teach academic vocabulary according to the needs of students. The result found that the most frequent vocabulary is essential instrument to teach through academic texts.

The learning of AWL through intensive reading will greatly help second language learners to build up their knowledge of vocabulary and understand academic texts clearly. The findings in this assignment suggest that the high frequency word in the Academic Word List should be taught from the secondary to the highest levels of university study. The findings of this essay may help both teachers and students in Kurdish secondary school. It will help them to familiarise themselves with the new developments of techniques of teaching and learning the Academic Word List. The current investigation was limited by the number of words of this assignment. Further research needs to be done into the role of academic vocabulary in intermediate schools in the Kurdistan context in order to improve students' ability to understand academic texts better in different levels of studies. This paper recommends administrators and educators in the Kurdistan context to start thinking of incorporating the teaching of high frequency of academic vocabulary in secondary schools.

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