

# Selection and Implementation of Vocabulary Program for University Students Preparing to Study Abroad

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**ABSTRACT** : The article is a response to the recognition that students preparing to study abroad in English medium universities are ill-equipped with necessary language skills, and ventures to design and implement a vocabulary program suitable for their level and needs. I used direct teaching strategies to introduce Academic Word List (AWL); and after processing the vocabulary, made assessment of their receptive and productive knowledge in the newly acquired vocabulary.

**Key words** : Academic Word List (AWL), study abroad, vocabulary acquirement, direct instruction

## 1. Background

Saville-Troke (1974) states: "In teaching English to foreign students at the university level, we have been recognizing that our instruction falls short of their need. We have been leaving them inadequately equipped with the skills they need for coping with university-level instruction in English."

As a teacher of English, for students preparing to study abroad in English medium universities, I too have recognized that my instruction in language skills is inadequate for students in coping with university-level instruction in English. To remedy the shortcoming, I decided to implement a vocabulary program suitable for their success abroad.

Research indicates that with regular vocabulary instructions, learners acquire significantly higher comprehension ability, as presented in *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement* (Marzano, 2004). To be specific, learners need to have a command of a minimum of 3,000 words in order to comprehend authentic texts (Laufer, 1992), and students studying in English at the university level may need up to 10,000 words (Hazenberg and Hulstijn, 1996).

In order to encourage previously mentioned students attain vocabulary level of this range, I need to provide direct instruction on the more frequent words, as well as help students to develop learning strategies that will enable them to acquire less frequent vocabulary. Given the fact that vocabulary is essential for comprehension and communication, one of the most crucial benefits that I provide is systematic instruction in important academic words.

## 2. The Purpose and Approach

The students in my English for Study Abroad class are typically conscious of the extent to which limitations in their vocabulary knowledge mar their ability to comprehend and express their ideas effectively in English. Therefore, the purpose of this vocabulary program is to introduce academic words in a systematic method, first by building knowledge of partially acquired academic words and then acquiring new/unknown academic words,

so that students are able to develop fluency in listening and reading comprehension and using the target words.

In their prescribed textbook (unrelated to the vocabulary program), students acquire word knowledge incidentally through reading and listening exercises. This method (Incidental Learning), if used for the sole purpose of vocabulary learning, is indirect, time consuming, and may cause students to experience information overload due to the amount of time and reading necessary to comprehend content and acquire vocabulary. On the other hand, Intentional Learning is a traditional technique of presenting new vocabulary items through direct activities that is primarily intended to enhance vocabulary knowledge.

Hulstijn (2001) point out that between incidental and intentional vocabulary learning, there is no difference in how the approaches influence the learners to retain the vocabulary items in their long-term memory.

He further adds, it “is the quality and frequency of the information processing activities (i.e., elaboration on aspects of a word’s form and meaning, plus rehearsal) that determine retention of new information” (Hulstijn, 2001). He asserts that, in the classroom context, incidental and intentional learning should be seen as complementary activities.

Taking the above factors into consideration, I decided to follow the Intentional Learning approach for introducing academic vocabulary words (from a word-list, instead of text) to my English for Study Abroad students.

### **3. Selection of Word List**

Nation and his associates suggest that EAP students should first learn the 2000 most general words of English, followed by a set of academic words common to all academic disciplines (Nation & Waring, 1997).

This is taken to mean the 2000-word family General Service List or GSL (West, 1953) and the 570-word family Academic Word List or AWL (Coxhead, 2000), which would cover 75–80% and about 10% words in a text, respectively. A GSL-AWL 90% coverage is sufficient for EAP students, in terms of word knowledge, necessary for second language comprehension (Laufer, 1992).

Since English for Study Abroad only meets for two semesters, with many students enrolling for just one semester, it is not feasible to cover both GSL and AWL in class. Therefore, on the first day of the semester, I administered a diagnostic vocabulary test of the first two-thousand words by Schmitt (Schmitt, 2001) to find out how many words the students already know (receptive knowledge, not productive) and at what level.

Judging from the students’ performance in the diagnostic vocabulary test and taking into consideration the purpose of learning new vocabulary words, I intuitively decided to introduce only AWL (570 words), to adequately equip students with the vocabulary skills they need for coping with university-level instruction in English.

#### **4. Implementation (teaching and testing) of AWL**

Implementation of AWL in my class involved the following five steps:

- 1) Introducing the target word list
- 2) Identifying known and unknown words in the list
- 3) Understanding the form and meaning of the target word
- 4) Information processing activities
- 5) Assessment and feedback

##### **1) Introducing the target word list**

Vocabulary learners need to be actively involved in the process of learning new words. To be actively involved, they must know how and why they are learning these words. For this purpose, a short orientation presentation on AWL is made to the students. The gist of the presentation is provided below:

##### **What is the Academic Word List (AWL)**

The AWL is a list of words which appear with high frequency in English-language academic texts. The list was compiled by Averil Coxhead at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

The list contains 570 word families and is divided into 10 sublists. Sublist 1 consists of the 60 most common words in the AWL. Sublist 2 contains the next most frequently used words, and the rest in the same manner. Each sublist contains 60 word families, except for sublist 10, which contains 30.

To create this word list, an analysis was done of academic journals, textbooks, course workbooks, lab manuals, and course notes. The list was compiled following an analysis of over 3,500,000 words of text (corpus).

The words selected for the AWL are words which occur frequently in a range of academic subjects. This means that the AWL is useful to all second-language learners who wish to study in an English-speaking institution regardless of their field of study. The AWL does not, however, include technical words which are specific to a given field. Nor does it contain words which are of general use and very high frequency (e.g. 2000-word GSL).

##### **Purpose and Motivation**

The list is for students who are about to begin university study in an English-speaking country with the primary purpose of reading academic texts. The list could be used by teachers as part of a program preparing learners for university level study or used by students working alone to learn the words most needed to study at English medium universities.

As a student in the English for Study Abroad class, the word list is a natural companion to all other skills necessary to be successful in an English medium university. In fact, because these words are so common, they are even useful to those who do not intend to go on to regular university-level study in English. These words frequently occur in newspapers, magazines, and novels, and one can hear them on television, movies or in conversation.

## 2) Identifying known and unknown words in the list

Students are expected to master one sublist within a three-week period, thereby covering all ten sublists over two semesters. I introduce each sublist or the target vocabulary words using the following traditional model:

On the left-hand corner of the blackboard I draw a personal adaptation of the *Know* → *Want to know* → *Learned* (*K-W-L*) table, which I re-named *WIN*. “W” stands for target academic words to be learned from a particular sublists; “I”, words most students can already *identify* (partially acquired); and “N”, *new words* majority of the students need to acquire. Additionally, the word *WIN* is used as a mantra or catchphrase to motivate and challenge students for the vocabulary tasks.

The *WIN* checklist is an appropriate tool to identify already known (or, partially acquired) words so that time and effort can be directed towards learning the unknown words. This concludes the first part of the three-week unit (one unit = one sublist).

After having identified the already known words from an individual sublist, I immediately prepare an assessment test with the known words to examine whether or not students can actually comprehend the words in various contexts. The test result aids in deciding the amount of review exercises (recycling) required for the partially acquired words, if any.

Preparing an assessment test for each sublist (or if the class is mixed-level, multiple assessment tests for each sublist for the levels represented by the students) can be an extremely time-consuming process for the teacher. Therefore, I use a commercial software by the name of *Gerry's Vocabulary Teacher* ([http://www.cpr4esl.com/gerrys\\_vocab\\_teacher/index.html](http://www.cpr4esl.com/gerrys_vocab_teacher/index.html)) to prepare the assessment tests for the known words in an efficient and effective manner. On an average, it takes approximately fifteen minutes to prepare and deliver the tests to the students.

*Gerry's Vocabulary Teacher* is intended to provide teachers of English and their students (or, students studying independently) with a tool to create vocabulary review exercises through exposure to vocabulary in context. The software includes the AWL and a list of sentences (more than 50,000), each linked to the academic words of the AWL. These sentences show how the words are used (in the forms of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs etc.). A list of keywords and related sentences can be chosen and built into a hard-copy for classroom use, matching or cloze activity for the Web, intranet or CD applications. The test is prepared and delivered to the students via CNS (University of Yamanashi, campus networking service) typically on the same day the known words were established.

Students then have six days (or, until the next class) to complete the assessment tests. Based on the assessment results, conclusions are made whether or not to review the already known vocabulary words in the class and to what extent they should be recycled in future exercises.

### **3) Understanding the form and meaning of the target word**

The reason behind selecting the direct learning approach is that students can spend their allotted time specifically on learning the academic words. They are provided with information and tools; and are encouraged to study the personalized words lists (of the unknown academic words) independently or in pairs.

Students use a AWL wordlist published online by Wikipedia ([https://simple.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Academic\\_word\\_list](https://simple.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Academic_word_list)) for reference. It includes all dictionary features such as pronunciation (audio and IPA transcription), word stress, parts of speech, meaning in English, different forms of the word, a sentence to show the word in context, word family members, antonyms, synonyms, and related words.

At the end of the form and meaning learning exercise, I review some of the more difficult words with more explanations and examples. This concludes the second part of the three-week unit.

### **4) Information processing activities**

Once the students have acquired basic knowledge of the academic words in step 3 (understanding the form and meaning of the target word), they are provided with the task of processing and practicing the words using three different recycling and revising strategies: (1) multiple-choice fill-in-the-blanks exercises, (2) recording the word list on audio devices, and (3) setting up Goggle Alerts.

For multiple-choice fill-in-the-blanks exercises, students complete practice-exercises for the appropriate sublist from a free online site (<http://www.englishvocabularyexercises.com/AWL/id17.htm>). This task is done outside class time and the amount of practice is at the discretion of each student.

Another strategy used for processing and practicing the target words is to record the entire sublist along with an example sentence for each word on an audio recording device (example: Voice Memos on iPhone); and then listening to the recordings as often as possible, either actively or passively. A similar strategy is suggested by the British Council's Voices Magazine (Kandybovich, 2017). In addition to improving pronunciation and listening comprehension, this exercise, I believe, may assist students' communication systems (specifically the ears) to get accustomed to the speakers' own 'English voice.'

The final strategy used for processing and practicing the target words is to set up Goggle Alerts (<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/4815696?hl=en>) for academic words deemed most important on students' computers or smartphones.

Google alerts are email updates of the latest relevant Google results based on the user's choice of topic or word. To use this service, students should follow the process described below:

- Go to Google Alerts at [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)
- Register their email address (free of charge)
- Set alert for the most important unknown words

- Choose a frequency of update—one a day; as it happens; or once a week

It is an effective way for students to improve their vocabulary by allowing them to see new vocabulary words repeatedly, and in a variety of contexts. In this exercise, students read numerous articles or news on one specific topic/word. By continually reading on the same topic/word, students constantly see the same vocabulary being used again and again. Over time, they learn this new vocabulary through this repetition in context.

## **5) Assessment and Feedback**

Assessments and feedbacks are allocated at the end of each three-week unit. The purposes of the vocabulary tests during the course are the following:

- Finding out how the students have learned the target academic words
- The tests (out of three tests, two are graded) provide the students an incentive to study diligently
- The tests provide an opportunity for developmental feedback for the students

There are three techniques I use to assess recognition, recall, and production of academic Vocabulary during the course: (1) multiple-choice fill-in-the-blank type written tests are used to assess receptive knowledge; (2) speaking/discussion tasks, and (3) summary writing assignments are used to evaluate productive knowledge.

For the first assessment task on the final day of the three-week unit, students are expected to do the speaking/discussion task. This task doesn't contribute to their grades, but is an important activity for students getting direct feedback on vocabulary used in speaking/discussion. This is a complex task, especially when learners are expected to use academic vocabulary accurately and fluently.

For this activity, students plan and rehearse outside class time an informal presentation based on one of the many news stories they have read through Google Alerts in step 4. They present the story in class, in pairs or groups, creatively and factually using the related academic words in its right context. Then they answer any impromptu question their partners or group members may pose at them, using as many academic words as possible.

As the speaking task progresses, I take note of any significant errors students make in word family form or usage. At the end of the activity, I make error correction as a class and finally provide feedback directly to individual students.

After the speaking activity, students then do a short five-item written-test. It is a graded test to assess the recognition and recall of academic vocabulary through accuracy of word used in multiple-choice fill-in-the-blank items. It is a multiple-choice item because students need to supply sentences with the target word from a list of three choices. Additionally, it is a fill-in-the-blank item because they need to decide the correct word family form of the word they chose from the list of choices and write the accurate word family form on the blank. An example (fig. 1) is provided below:

**Fig. 1**

**Choose a word from the bracket and use the correct word family form of the chosen word to fill in the blank in each sentence.**

1. Computer fraud has become a \_\_\_\_\_ problem for Internet commerce. (majority/ theory/ data)
  2. The brain can be compared to an immense computer that processes information and then arrives at an appropriate \_\_\_\_\_. (context/ formula/ respond)
  3. Most networks link computers within a limited \_\_\_\_\_, such as within a department, office or building. (estimates/ areas/ factors)
  4. At *Computaschools*, we offer \_\_\_\_\_ learning programs that fit your needs, and let you progress at your own rate. (financial/ individual/ legal)
  5. The building suffered significant \_\_\_\_\_ damage during the earthquake. (structure/ theory/ income)
- (Answers: 1. major; 2. response; 3. area; 4. individualized; 5. structural)

The tests are administered through Google Forms (<https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/>) and are instantaneously marked and graded. Test results can be easily analyzed on Google Forms and feedbacks are provided for most common errors.

The final assessment task is a writing task to assess the productive knowledge of academic vocabulary. However, this task is independent of the vocabulary program being discussed in this article. This task is conducted at the end of each unit of the prescribed class textbook, where students write a fifteen-line (approximate) summary using at least five academic words. To a certain extent, it is a bridge between the vocabulary program and the prescribed class textbook. Feedbacks are provided to individual students after marking and grading.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has looked at how best to select a word list for a particular need-based class and then designing a program to integrate the word list in the student's leaning experience. It was motivated by a demand in teaching appropriate skills (especially language skills) to students planning and preparing to study abroad. I believe the vocabulary program can leave a powerful and lasting imprint on students and their leaning. Unfortunately, the program is in progress at the moment of writing this article and I have had limited or partial feedback from students on the success and merit of this vocabulary program. I wish to write a follow-up article with concrete data and evidence on the merit of this program in the near future.

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