Using the Academic Word List to Promote Academic Writing

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Teachers today face the complex task of teaching content-based lessons that also support and develop language for English learners in classrooms. The integration of content and language relies on a student’s ability to navigate academic language. Research suggests a strong correlation between vocabulary use and academic writing competence utilizing academic language effectively (Douglas, 2013; Kinsella, 2012; Roessingh, 2006). Using the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), this paper outlines current research on effective strategies for practical teaching of academic vocabulary in classroom settings. This paper then offers a step-by-step approach to enhance students’ acquisition of academic vocabulary within the writing process.

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The English Learner Context

Teachers today face the complex task of teaching content-based lessons that also support and develop language for English learners in classrooms. US and state standards and assessments require understanding the role that language plays with discipline-specific vocabulary, academic engagement in written and oral assignments, and the ability to present arguments based on documented evidence (Fu, 2009). The English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21), a consortium of educational authorities in ten American states, describes the movement to deepen connections between language and content. Washington State and Oregon State are members of this consortium and are expected to comply (ELPA21, n.d.). The integration of content and language relies on a student’s ability to navigate academic language. This navigation often goes beyond learning the content to include learning how to discuss and write effectively about that content. Clarifying the role that language plays in content teaching, van Lier and Walqui (2012) suggest, “it is clear that language permeates all the standards, in many ways, even in those cases where the word ‘language’ is not explicitly mentioned” (p.1).

The challenge is daunting and requires the collaboration of classroom teaching strategies with English language pedagogy. Cummins (2009) describes the traditional approach of classroom teachers as waiting until the students learned English before writing or discussing the content. Cummins calls the impact of this approach on writing “the poverty of the writing experience” (p. ix). Hill and Miller (2013) assert that “language has always been the medium of instruction,” so a better understanding of the role that academic language plays in the classroom is necessary (p. xi).

Academic Language

Academic language is the high-utility language of school that is used to discuss and write about content (Kinsella, 2012). Academic language allows a student to show his or her understanding of content. It includes discourse and grammatical rules for effective classroom participation in written and oral discussions. It represents a language-across-the-curriculum approach (van Lier & Walqui, 2012) and includes the vocabulary to discuss and write about functions such as comparing/contrasting, synthesizing, and persuading. These authors further describe academic language as “the development of language through perception, interaction, planning, research, discussion, and co-construction of academic products” (p. 4).

Kinsella (2012) describes academic language as words that deserve intense and robust instruction. Kinsella purports use of the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) as a viable source for vocabulary worthy of vigorous instruction. Coxhead (2014) describes vocabulary as the “central building block for all learners” (p. x). She cites this list as a means of learning and teaching the most frequently used words and phrases to navigate content. These include high-utility academic words and high-utility discipline words within a content area. This approach is supported by Douglas’ (2013) study with novice writers. Douglas reports that 2,000 high frequency word families covered almost 88% of the running words in papers assessed as being satisfactory or higher in a first year university setting and that the AWL contributed another 7%. He asserts that utility with these words would be beneficial to English language learners by providing almost 94% of the vocabulary to achieve academic success in writing as they begin to engage in post-secondary studies.
The Academic Word List

The Academic Word List (AWL) was developed by Coxhead (2000) from a corpus of 3.5 million running words of written academic texts. From this corpus, the 2000 most frequently occurring words were eliminated. From the remaining words, 570 word families were created, which make up approximately 10% of academic texts outside of content vocabulary within disciplines. This list is arranged in the order of frequency and divided into sublists. Although no context is given because they represent words that occur across academic disciplines, the AWL represents the language used to discuss those disciplines. Examples from Sublist One include: analyze, approach, area, assess, assume, authority, available, benefit, concept, consist, constitute, context, contract, create, data, define, derive, distribute, economy, environment.

Words from the AWL allow students to discuss content in effective and precise ways (Kinsella, 2012). The words are, as Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Asselin (2003) assert, the way in which students can “gain access to power” in classrooms (p. 269). Coxhead (2014) reiterates the need for instruction to include raising awareness of words and intentionally making connections between words. This is supported in research done by Graves and Watts-Taffe (2002) who argue against trying to teach words one-by-one. They advocate going beyond the explicit teaching of individual words to include word learning strategies and fostering word connections and consciousness. Providing and creating context for vocabulary is essential.

Kinsella (2012) describes the AWL as a tool because comprehension questions from reading texts often embed content vocabulary and academic language. She describes those questions as asking students to discuss a topic with language relevant to themes or concepts not directly used in the text. Examples of comprehension questions from an intermediate level English proficiency reading text with AWL words bolded include: “Identify and understand the elements of fiction: characters, setting, plot, themes; Scan a text for ‘compare and contrast’ words” (Miller & Cohen, 2014, p. 114).

The AWL provides language to participate in class discussions and writing. Comprehension questions also provide multiple encounters in various contexts and encourage students to think deeply about the words (McKeon & Beck, 2004). The irony of teaching vocabulary in traditional ways is that students learn the content vocabulary, but are not taught the language with which to discuss or write about that vocabulary (Kinsella, 2012). The AWL, according to Kinsella, provides instruction in both.

Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary

“For years, second language learners have complained about their lack of vocabulary in their new language” (Folse, 2004, p. v). Scott, Jamieson-Noel and Asselin (2003) examine how vocabulary is taught in twenty-three upper elementary classrooms and find that it primarily consists of mentioning vocabulary and assigning tasks around those words. The researchers assert that this does not meet the standards of teaching vocabulary. Defining mastery is central to the discussion. When is a word or phrase learned? Twaddell (1973) describes the blurry process of learning vocabulary as, “the twilight zone between the darkness of the entire unfamiliarity and the brightness of complete familiarity” (p. 73).

Rod Ellis (1999) highlights the role that interaction plays in the process of learning vocabulary. He expands the concept of interaction to include face-to-face as well as intrapersonal interactions. When meaning is constructed internally in response to socially
constructed events, language and vocabulary develop within a multi-layered learning lens of experience. There has to be both instruction from the teacher and practice by the student. In this way, Ellis disagrees with the concepts of modified input. He labels that approach as a deficit lens on the language learner. By bringing language learning into a social and interactive experience, the process highlights the learner’s ability to mediate meaning by increasing self-awareness of the process. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2002) support the notion of an interpersonal approach emphasizing the power of discussion. Within this discussion, students meet the language within the discipline-specific context. Lewis (1960) writes, “One understands a word much better if one has met it alive, in its native habitat” (p. 2).

Kinsella (2012) reiterates the use of partnering during discussions to deepen the use of vocabulary. She says that by bringing physical movement into the instruction during the partnering experience, meaning is enhanced through association and conversation. Kinsella reports that vocabulary is best learned through examples rather than exclusively with definitions. Learning happens as students experience vocabulary multiple times and within varied contexts. Salmon (2014) suggests anchor charts to describe word banks be left on walls to recycle instructional objectives, language concepts, and key terminology. Marzano and Pickering (2005) advocate an imagery-based technique combined with meaningful encounters of words, rather than a connection to a limited knowledge of one definition. Kinsella (2012) adds that students must be held accountable to the instruction in explicit ways by requiring practice using vocabulary that has been taught in direct ways. She advocates teacher-mediated instruction that outlined expectations in writing and thinking.

Teacher-mediated instruction includes providing examples of academic language and precision in expressing critical thinking (Kinsella, 2012). McKeon and Beck (2004) advocate direct instruction to deepen and broaden the breadth of information about words and engage in an active process by getting students to “think about the word” (p. 13). These authors describe a successful process of teaching vocabulary including multiple exposures to the contexts in which words are found, a breadth of information about the words, and deep processing by students about those words. The goal of this approach aims at establishing networks of connections through multiple experiences and contexts. These concepts are similar to notions expressed by other researchers (Coxhead, 2014; Ellis, 1999; Fu, 2009; Folse, 2004; Kinsella, 2012).

Teaching vocabulary explicitly while deepening the academic context are concepts central to the approach described below. Providing multiple opportunities to apply vocabulary in a variety of contexts is also important. Relying on the effectiveness of interaction both interpersonally and intra-personally, learning is supported and deepened, particularly when augmenting vocabulary instruction through the use of the AWL.

Workshop: Using the Academic Word List to Promote Academic Writing

The goal of the following activity is to establish networks of connections through written and oral interaction through multiple exposures to contexts. In addition, instruction aims at deep exposure to the breadth of information about words as an ongoing process by students.

The following activity is suggested for all proficiency levels. The content can be adjusted to meet grade-level expectations.
Step One: Explicit Teaching

- Every week, each student is assigned one word from Sublist One of the AWL (explicit teaching)
  - Assignment for students
    - Make a mind map and include the following information:
      - A definition (in your own words)
      - A definition given to you by a native speaker (interaction)
      - Word family members (expanding the context)
      - An illustration of the word (imagery)
      - Use the word in a sentence (applying context)
        - Each week, the topic of the sentence is assigned
        - The topic is taken from current reading assignments
  - Interaction
    - Students bring their mind maps to class
    - Students share their mind maps with peers in an active around-the-room conversation (interaction)
    - Mind maps are scanned and put online for everyone to access
    - Words are written on an anchor chart (word bank) and hung in the room (as a recycling; resource)
  - Assessment
    - Weekly quiz
      - Students use five of the words from the current week and write an in-class paragraph (to ensure explicit accountability)
        - The topic is the same as on the mind map
        - Students can prepare outside the class
        - Spelling and grammar are assessed
    - After repeating this process for a few weeks, quizzes can be broadened in scope to recycle more of the AWL vocabulary to which students have been exposed

Rationale: The explicit focus on AWL allows students a scaffolded approach to increasing academic language (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Kinsella, 2012). The interactive component promotes deep learning by bringing peers into the conversation (Ellis, 1999). Assigning the mind map promotes the experience of seeing the vocabulary in a variety of ways which utilize learning styles (Marzano and Pickering, 2004). By limiting the number of vocabulary words, students are given opportunities to apply the words into multiple contexts (McKeon and Beck, 2004).

Step Two: Intentional Contextualization

- Each week, content is presented (in the form of readings or lectures)
  - Students are read a text or listen to a lecture
  - Students answer comprehension questions
    - Students analyze questions in groups and do the following in a scaffolded manner, thinking about words
• Identify content vocabulary used in the questions
• Identify academic language used in the questions
• Identify questions that require simple facts from the text
• Identify questions that require deeper thinking and analysis
• Identify ways of answering the text:
  o using AWL
  o incorporating content vocabulary
• Students write their answers

  o Grading
    ▪ Content (accuracy)
    ▪ Use of content vocabulary
    ▪ Use of academic language
    ▪ Acceptable grammar
  o Students highlight all content/academic language they use before turning in their papers

  Rationale: Based on research by Salmon (2005), students are provided with explicit practice in identifying content vocabulary and the academic language to navigate that vocabulary. This approach confronts the challenge for English learners to deconstruct comprehension questions (Kinsella, 2012). By making this intentional, the lesson promotes students’ awareness of the reciprocal process of reading and writing by identifying “good vocabulary and the option of borrowing key vocabulary” (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002, p. 150). By raising students’ awareness of the language they need, word consciousness is promoted (McKeon and Beck, 2004). Having students actively think about the words they are using promotes active acquisition of language while also helping them to learn content. Analyzing comprehension questions, while promoting critical thinking, also promotes the students’ awareness of what is being asked and what the best approaches would be in answering. These are taught explicitly, as Kinsella (2012) suggests.

Step Three: Word Consciousness
• Anchor charts are displayed as ongoing resources in the classroom. In addition, all anchor charts are scanned and placed online for subsequent use by students.

  Note: In some teaching settings, posters are not permitted on walls between classes. In these situations, teacher removes and reposts for each class session.
  o During discussions, when explicit use of AWL words surface, attention is drawn to them (raising word consciousness)
  o Additional words are added when they surface during discussion (natural context)
  o Before quizzes, students are asked explicitly which words they might want to use
    ▪ This encourages students to look beyond contextual use and discover how words change with contexts (thinking about words)
  o All writing is graded on AWL use
Reflection: Anchor charts present accessible word banks of academic language to help students recycle vocabulary. Highlighting vocabulary in pre-writing discussions and encouraging recycling of vocabulary provides multiple exposures and uses of academic language, which facilitates word consciousness (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Kinsella, 2012). By fostering word consciousness in explicit ways, students encounter and use vocabulary in a variety of contexts, thus deepening their understanding of how words are used (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). Furthermore, this provides students multiple sources of words and increases their ability to adjust their use of academic language. In addition, by scaffolding the task of thinking which words to use before writing, students’ metacognition and motivation for effective academic writing is fostered (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002).

Extensions of the Lesson

1. This activity can be done with lectures as well. Have students take notes on content. Form discussion groups. Follow the same procedures.

2. When a guest speaker comes to class, students identify academic language the speaker uses. Other students identify content vocabulary used by the speaker. Discussion follows the lecture.

3. Peer evaluation. Students conduct peer feedback sessions where they read a classmate’s paper to identify academic language and give suggestions where more could be incorporated.

4. Use proverbs and quotations to generate critical thinking questions. Students explain a proverb’s literal and figurative meanings. Having students identify the language they want to incorporate fosters word consciousness as well as intentional application.

Conclusion

By explicitly focusing on the language that promotes academic language proficiency, teachers can foster an awareness within students of the language necessary to join academic conversations and build their academic capital. Having repeated exposures and interactive practice with alternate contexts for language, students’ skill of using language effectively deepens. Creating multiple experiences fosters the ability to see alternative contexts in which to apply the language. Moving away from traditional methods of vocabulary selection and instruction, teachers can apply what Lewis (1960) describes as finding the vocabulary alive and in its “natural habitat” (p. 1). It is the hope of this writer that the above process moves teaching closer to these outcomes.
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References


