

ESL Postgraduates' Perceptions towards Academic Writing Using Academic Word List

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Abstract: Academic Word List (AWL) as compiled by Coxhead [3,4] was an extension of the General Service List (GSL) by West [17]. This academic word list consists of 570-word families that draws upon general academic words which is not connected to a single discipline, but for higher education students. The present study aimed to identify the ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL) in terms of (i) knowledge of AWL for content, (ii) knowledge of AWL for mechanics, (iii) knowledge of AWL for organization, and (iv) knowledge of AWL for vocabulary. Through both criterion and convenience sampling, 186 ESL postgraduates from five faculties in a university were chosen for this research. Survey questionnaire designed by the researcher was used as the data collection instrument. Expert check was to ensure clarity of the sentences and to ensure the language used was appropriate and suited the postgraduates. Moreover, the instrument was tested for reliability and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient value .85 (>.65) shows that it is a reliable instrument. The findings of this study revealed that ESL postgraduates regard knowledge of AWL as essential for academic writing in terms of content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary. Furthermore, the findings also indicated that with proper exposure and intervention, knowledge of AWL will help ESL postgraduates from different discipline to be more confident and able to communicate their intended message more effectively in their academic writing by closely following the Academic Word List (AWL) recommended in this study.

Keywords: Academic Word List (AWL), ESL postgraduates, perceptions, academic writing

Introduction

The impression is often expressed that the standards of academic writing is declining in higher education and many academic staff and students claim that they are facing various challenges such as lack of a mastery in academic writing conventions, inadequate vocabulary size, and poor sentence skills to produce clear academic writing across the curriculum [11, 15, 16]. Responding to the strong emphasis on academic writing in higher education [6] and the significance of challenges faced by students in higher education in the results of past studies [3,4,8,12], this study seeks to explore ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing using the Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL). Folse [9]note that "vocabulary" is the most crucial component in learning a foreign language. Hence, it is pivotal for individuals in ESL academic writing context and discipline to have sufficient knowledge of vocabulary to ensure successful English language learning [7]. The more vocabulary postgraduates have learned, the better they understand how to use it in their academic writing [1].

According to Coxhead [4], there is an array of benefits when using Academic Word List (AWL) for improving higher education students' vocabulary size and academic performance, which involves using the English language for academic writing. Reflecting this prominence of vocabulary in academic writing, several researchers have proposed vocabulary as one of the key factors that contribute to clear academic writing across discipline-specific content taught at higher education [8,14,18,19]. Though it is important for ESL postgraduates to enhance their vocabulary size to do well in academic writing, it is also equally important for ESL postgraduates to meet the elements which contribute to clear academic writing. In this study, the elements which contribute to clear academic writing in English are categorized into four constructs namely content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary.

By shedding light on the ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL) in the Malaysian higher education context, it is hoped that students in higher education could improve their academic writing as it is crucial for excellent academic performance. These higher education students are exposed to various academic materials and to a certain extent, choice of words, development of paragraphs, clarity, coherence, and vocabulary are pertinent elements that influence how they produce a clear academic writing. As highlighted by Howarth [10] and other researchers (Hyland & Tse) [11], to be able to learn a set of academic words and to use these words appropriately in academic writing is challenging. Moreover, for ESL learners, the task is twice as challenging as they are exposed to a lot of lexical items that they may have not learned before. Thus, this study aims to identify the perceptions of ESL postgraduates from five different faculties in regard to the importance of academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL).

Aims and research questions of the study

This study aims to explore ESL postgraduates’ perceptions on academic writing using Coxhead’s Academic Word List (AWL) [4]. The following research questions guide the current study:

What is the Malaysian ESL postgraduates’ perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL) in terms of:

- (a) knowledge of AWL for content
- (b) knowledge of AWL for mechanics
- (c) knowledge of Awl for organization
- (d) knowledge of AWL for vocabulary

Methodology

Research design. Purposive sampling was employed in this study using a closed-ended quantitative survey designed by the researcher. The questionnaire consists of two parts – Part A with 2 demographic items and Part B with 16 items on a five-point Likert Scale measuring four constructs of clear academic writing namely content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary.

Participant. The participant in this study were 186 ESL postgraduates from five faculties; (i) Faculty of Economics & Administration, (ii) Faculty of Logistics Management, (iii) Faculty of Business Administration, and (iv) Faculty of Food Science with Business Management, and (v) Biotechnology with Business Management. The participants were chosen based on two characteristics – geographical proximity (Selangor) and education qualification (postgraduates in their first or second year). In selecting the ESL postgraduates, the researcher paid attention to represent the various field of postgraduates’ study one can pursue in Malaysia (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Distribution of postgraduates according to faculty

<i>Faculty</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Economics and Administration	43	23.1
Logistics Management	21	11.3
Business Administration	86	46.2
Food Science with Business Management	20	10.8
Biotechnology with Business Management	16	8.6

Research procedure. The researcher seek permission from relevant gatekeepers and the closed-ended questionnaire was personally delivered and distributed to the ESL postgraduates in the five different faculties in the university located in Selangor, Malaysia. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, but only 186 (93%) questionnaires were collected over a period of one month.

Research instrument. The instrument used in this study was the perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL) among ESL postgraduates’ questionnaire. Based on the reliability analysis, the questionnaire resulted with a Cronbach’s alpha = .85 (>.65) and this shows that it is a highly reliable instrument. The two parts of the questionnaire – Part A (independent variables) and Part B (dependent variables) were shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Variables on the perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL) among ESL postgraduates’ questionnaire

<i>Part</i>	<i>Variables</i>
A	Independent Variables
	Gender
	Faculty
B	Dependent Variables
	Content

	Mechanics
	Organization
	Vocabulary

In this study, four constructs of clear academic writing – content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary with a total of 16 items (see Table 3) were used to measure ESL postgraduates’ perceptions regarding academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 3: Constructs and Items

Constructs	Questionnaire Item No.
Content	4, 5, 12, 16
Mechanics	3,6,11
Organization	2,7,10,13,15
Vocabulary	1,8,9,14

Instruments’ reliability. Cronbach’s alpha was used to check the reliability of each construct. This section report on the reliability of each construct as well as the overall (see Table 4).

Table 4: Reliability analysis for overall and each construct

No.	Construct	Cronbach’s alpha
1.	Content	.85
2.	Mechanics	.80
3.	Organization	.84
4.	Vocabulary	.92
	Overall	.85

Findings

This section will present the findings of the ESL postgraduates’ perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL).

Overall findings of four constructs of perceptions. Table 5 below presents the overall findings for the four constructs of ESL postgraduates’ perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 5: ESL Postgraduates’ perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL)

Sub-constructs of perceptions	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Knowledge of AWL for content	186	4.39	.35
Knowledge of AWL for mechanics	186	3.24	.39
Knowledge of AWL for organization	186	3.22	.42
Knowledge of AWL for vocabulary	186	4.46	.37

As shown in Table 5, a total of 186 ESL postgraduates participated in this study and there were four sub-constructs of perception namely (i) knowledge of AWL for content, (ii) knowledge of AWL for mechanics, (iii) knowledge of AWL for organization, and (iv) knowledge of AWL for vocabulary. The findings showed that two key sub-constructs of perception towards academic writing using AWL emerge as important. It can be seen in Table 5 that knowledge of AWL for vocabulary (M = 4.46, SD = .37) has the highest mean followed by knowledge of AWL for content (M = 4.39, SD = .35) and only one sub-constructs of perception; knowledge of AWL for organization is evaluated positively by a minority of ESL postgraduates (M = 3.22, SD = .42).

Sub-construct 1 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for content. Table 6 below shows the ESL postgraduates’ perceptions towards academic writing for content using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 6: Sub-construct 1 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for content
 SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree

Item No.	Knowledge of AWL for content	SA	A	N	D	SD
4.	Knowledge of AWL will contribute to clarity in academic writing.	141 75.8%	45 24.2%	0 -	0 -	0 -
5.	Knowledge of AWL will contribute to exemplification in academic writing.	131 70.4%	55 29.6%	0 -	0 -	0 -
12.	Knowledge of AWL will contribute to completeness in academic writing.	148 79.6%	38 20.4%	0 -	0 -	0 -
16.	Knowledge of AWL will contribute to reasonable length in academic writing.	135 72.6%	51 27.4%	0 -	0 -	0 -

As shown in Table 6, the majority (79.6%, N = 148) of the ESL postgraduates strongly affirmed that knowledge of AWL will contribute to completeness in academic writing. Also, 75.8% (N = 141) strongly agreed that knowledge of AWL will contribute to clarity in academic writing. On the same positive note, none of the ESL postgraduates responded disagree or strongly disagree on the knowledge of AWL for content. As for items 5 and 18, more than 70% of the ESL postgraduates strongly agreed that knowledge of AWL will contribute to reasonable length in academic writing (72.6%, N = 135) and 70.4% (N = 131) strongly agreed that knowledge of AWL will contribute to exemplification in academic writing.

Sub-construct 2 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for mechanics. Table 7 below shows the ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing for mechanics using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 7: Sub-construct 1 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for mechanics
 SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree

Item No.	Knowledge of AWL for mechanics	SA	A	N	D	SD
3.	Knowledge of AWL will help me use correct spelling in academic writing.	180 96.8%	6 3.2%	0 -	0 -	0 -
6.	Knowledge of AWL will help me use correct punctuation in academic writing.	110 59.1%	76 40.9%	0 -	0 -	0 -
11.	Knowledge of AWL will help me use correct grammar in academic writing.	75 44.6%	93 55.4%	0 -	0 -	0 -

As shown in Table 7, the majority (96.8%, N = 180) of the ESL postgraduates strongly affirmed that knowledge of AWL will help them use the correct spelling in academic writing. Also, 59.1% (N = 110) strongly agreed that knowledge of AWL will help them use the correct punctuation in academic writing. As for item 11, more than half (55.4%, N = 93) of the ESL postgraduates agreed that knowledge of AWL will help them use the correct grammar in academic writing.

Sub-construct 3 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for organization. Table 8 below shows the ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing for organization using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 8: Sub-construct 1 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for organization
 SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree

Item No.	Knowledge of AWL for organization	SA	A	N	D	SD
2.	Knowledge of AWL will help me identify the central idea an academic writing.	137 81.5%	31 18.5%	0 -	0 -	0 -
7.	Knowledge of AWL will help in the development of paragraphs in academic writing.	48 28.6%	59 35.1%	61 36.3%	0 -	0 -
10.	Knowledge of AWL will help me to use appropriate discourse markers.	56 33.3%	47 28.0%	65 38.7%	0 -	0 -
13.	Knowledge of AWL will help me with cohesion in academic writing.	147 87.5%	21 12.5%	0 -	0 -	0 -
15.	Knowledge of AWL will help me with coherence in academic writing.	151 89.9%	17 10.1%	0 -	0 -	0 -

As shown in Table 8, the majority (89.9%, N = 151) of the ESL postgraduates strongly affirmed that knowledge of AWL will help them with coherence in academic writing. Also, 87.5% (N = 147) strongly agreed that AWL will help them with cohesion in academic writing. On the same positive note, none of the ESL postgraduates responded disagree or strongly disagree on the knowledge of AWL for organization. As for items 7 and 10, more than 35% of the ESL postgraduates responded neutral that knowledge of AWL will help them to use appropriate discourse markers (38.7%, N = 65) and development of paragraphs in academic writing (36.3%, N = 61).

Sub-construct 4 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for vocabulary. Table 9 below shows the ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing for vocabulary using Academic Word List (AWL).

Table 9: Sub-construct 1 of perceptions: Knowledge of AWL for vocabulary
 SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree

Item No.	Knowledge of AWL for vocabulary	SA	A	N	D	SD
1.	Knowledge of AWL will help me with relevant choice of words in academic writing.	158 94.0%	10 6.0%	0 -	0 -	0 -
8.	Knowledge of AWL will help me better understand the key terms in academic writing.	147 87.5%	21 12.5%	0 -	0 -	0 -
9.	Knowledge of AWL will help me better understand the concepts in academic writing.	149 88.7%	19 11.3%	0 -	0 -	0 -
14.	Knowledge of AWL will help me communicate my intended message more effectively.	160 95.2%	8 4.8%	0 -	0 -	0 -

As shown in Table 9, the majority (95.2%, N = 160) of the ESL postgraduates strongly affirmed that knowledge of AWL will help them to communicate the intended message more effectively in academic writing. Also, 94.0% (N = 158) strongly agreed that AWL will help them with relevant choice of words in academic writing. On the same positive note, none of the ESL postgraduates responded disagree or strongly disagree on the knowledge of AWL for vocabulary. As for items 8 and 9, more than half of the ESL postgraduates responded strongly agree that knowledge of AWL will help them to understand the key terms in academic writing (87.5%, N = 147) and 88.7% (N = 149) of the ESL postgraduates affirmed that knowledge of AWL will help them understand better the concepts in academic writing.

Discussion

The findings of the present study support the results gained by similar studies in the field [1,6,8]. The present study shows that while vocabulary size affected the ESL postgraduates' academic writing perceptions, it did not seem to influence the ESL postgraduates' knowledge of AWL for content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary in academic writing.

The ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing in terms of content has also drawn a realization upon us that a clear academic writing include the elements of clarity, exemplification, completeness, and reasonable length. In addition, the findings affirm that all ESL postgraduates perceived AWL as essential for clear academic writing. This may indicate that AWL has the potential to promote academic writing throughout the curriculum in the five different faculties.

The responses to construct 2: knowledge of AWL for content illustrated ESL postgraduates' perceptions towards academic writing for content. The findings show that 96.8% of the ESL postgraduates strongly agree that AWL knowledge will help them to use the correct spelling in their academic writing. Ultimately, this finding may convey that AWL is effective and suitable resources to promote awareness and engagement in learning new words that may be used in their academic writing.

The findings also showed the importance of the AWL knowledge for academic writing in terms of organization. All the ESL postgraduates in this study agree that AWL knowledge will help them with coherence, cohesion, and identifying the central idea in academic writing. This finding may suggest that all ESL postgraduates agree that AWL knowledge makes a difference as it cultivate and prepare them to deliver the intended message effectively, especially in their academic writing organization pertaining to facts, deduction, assumption, and writer's voice. Hence, AWL knowledge for logical organization hones the coherence aspect of their academic writing that enhance the continuity of ideas and exemplification in each paragraph.

This study proves that 95.2% of the ESL postgraduates admit that their knowledge of AWL for vocabulary has a positive impact on their academic writing, especially when choosing the appropriate words to communicate their intended message effectively. This is in line with a study carried out by Brun-Mercer and Boyd Zimmerman's [1]. This finding may suggest that for effective and clear academic writing to be instilled, effective vocabulary learning must be directed to suitable resources. This is further reiterated when all ESL postgraduates agree that their knowledge of AWL enables them to understand the key terms and concept which eventually allows them to skillfully write their academic writing.

Conclusion

This study explored the ESL postgraduates' perception towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL). In doing so, four constructs of academic writing were introduced in this study namely (i) knowledge of AWL for content, (ii) knowledge of AWL for mechanics, (iii) knowledge of AWL for organization, and (iv) knowledge of AWL for vocabulary. The findings reveal that knowledge of AWL has positive impact on their academic writing whereby most ESL postgraduates admit that knowledge of AWL contribute to the completeness of an academic writing (79.6%, N = 148) and coherence (89.9%, N = 151), enable them to use the correct spelling (96.8%, N = 180), and build the skills to communicate intended message more effectively in academic writing (95.2%, N = 160). These findings support previous studies done by Brun-Mercer and Boyd Zimmerman [1] which highlighted the importance of AWL in academic writing.

In light of future research, a study adopting the methods of this present study can be carried out using a different sample and in bigger scale by involving more ESL postgraduates in Malaysia or other countries to ascertain the perceptions towards academic writing using Academic Word List (AWL). A thorough review of past studies revealed that most of the relevant past studies focused on the perspectives of 14 university level students' vocabulary (integrated reading) and writing task [6], conceptualization, vocabulary teaching and perceived problematic implementation [12], and use of academic vocabulary to assess reading and analytical writing ability [2]. Hence, there is a paucity of research that addresses the perceptions towards academic writing using Academic WordList (AWL) specifically in the ESL postgraduates' multidisciplinary context. Finally, it can be concluded that clear academic writing does not happen in isolation and from the findings of this study, knowledge of AWL is

significant for ESL postgraduates' academic writing in terms of content, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary.

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