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The acquisition and development of academic vocabulary: Learners' perspectives

Dana Therova

The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

Email: dana.therova@open.ac.uk

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Academic vocabulary is widely recognised as a key aspect of academic writing style and there is a well-established link between the knowledge of academic vocabulary and academic achievement. Considering the role that academic vocabulary plays in academic settings, the acquisition and usage of this type of vocabulary is crucial for university students. However, few studies have examined academic vocabulary from the perspective of novice student writers. Consequently, this study investigated academic vocabulary as perceived by multilingual foundation-level students at a UK university ($N = 17$). In particular, the sources of acquisition of academic words and the contributing factors impacting the development of productive academic vocabulary were explored through semi-structured interviews. The findings have potentially important pedagogical implications not only for foundation-level provisions but also wider English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts as they highlight the role of appropriate sources, instructed environment, peer support and the importance of opportunities for writing practice together with receiving feedback on written production.

Key Words: academic vocabulary, academic writing, second language writing, international foundation students, EAP.

1. Introduction

Due to the globalisation of education, there has been an increase in the number of non-UK students enrolling at UK universities. For example, in the academic year 2006-2007, there were 176,915 non-UK students enrolled in their first year of a degree course compared to 267,420 first year non-UK students in the academic year 2018-2019, out of the total of 485,645 non-UK students at all levels of study at UK higher education institutions, accounting for approximately 20% of the total student population (Higher Education Statistics Agency, n.d.). The current UK higher education climate is thus characterised by a diverse body of a student population constituting both 'home' (i.e. British) as well as 'overseas' (i.e. non-UK) students. This diversity in the social, ethnic and linguistic composition of student populations inevitably leads to different levels of preparedness for academic study, resulting in an urgent need to address the literacy demands placed on students (Tribble & Wingate, 2013).

In the context of UK universities, the specific literacy needs are catered for primarily by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision, including foundation courses targeted at both home students who do not meet the university entry requirements in terms of their formal qualifications, as well as overseas students who do not meet the entry criteria required by UK universities in terms of their level of English proficiency and/or formal qualifications. These foundation courses, which are typically 6–12 months long, aim to prepare students for undergraduate study by helping them develop the skills necessary for successful participation in academic settings.

The concept of 'academic literacy' is central in addressing students' needs, and refers to "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community". Such communicative competence includes such skills as reading, debating, presenting, evaluating information and creating knowledge through speaking and writing, which all need to be acquired by all students (home as well as overseas) new to an academic setting (Wingate, 2018, p. 350). This view of all students, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds, being novices to academic contexts is closely related to the Academic Literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998) characterised by its emphasis on literacy practices in specific disciplinary contexts constituting primarily reading and writing within disciplines, which represent the central processes of learning in higher education.

Out of all the academic literacy skills that university students need to develop, academic writing has received most attention as the difficulties students experience are often detected in their written production. This has led to an increasing awareness that students from all backgrounds enrolling at UK universities need support with academic writing (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Wingate, 2018; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). The main reason for this is the fact that writing is one of the principal ways of demonstrating knowledge and understanding in university contexts, whereby written assignments constitute the main mode of assessment (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Writing is hence regarded as a 'high stakes' activity in university settings as effective writing is associated with success while ineffective writing often leads to failure. Students thus need to demonstrate the required standard of academic writing if they are to succeed in their studies (Flowerdew, 2016; Lillis & Scott, 2007).

The importance of academic writing skills in turn highlights the role of academic vocabulary, which is regarded as a key element of academic writing (Hyland & Tse, 2007) because a good control of these vocabulary items is often linked to an academic achievement (Gardner & Davies, 2014). It is, therefore, crucial for university students to develop appropriate writing style incorporating some of the most common characteristics of academic writing, such as the deployment of vocabulary prevalent in academic texts. The acquisition and development of academic vocabulary is particularly important for students who are new to the academic culture as they have very little or no experience with this type of vocabulary.

In light of the above observations, this paper reports on the acquisition and development of academic vocabulary in novice students' academic writing. The next sections define academic vocabulary, then discusses the role that academic vocabulary plays in university contexts, followed by an overview of studies that have investigated academic vocabulary from the perspectives of learners. The following section describes this study including its context, aims, the data collection and analytical procedures. Next, the results are presented and discussed, highlighting some potentially important implications for pedagogical practice. This paper concludes with a summary of the present study, its main findings, implications for pedagogy and the limitations of the current study together with suggestions for further research.

2. Academic vocabulary

2.1. The definition of academic vocabulary

Nation (2001) distinguishes four kinds of vocabulary: *high-frequency* words common in various uses of the language and covering a large proportion of texts (e.g. function words and many content words); *technical words* closely related to a specific subject or topic area which differ from subject area to subject area (found in technical dictionaries, such as dictionaries of economics, electronics or geography); *low-frequency* words occurring very infrequently and covering only a small proportion of texts (e.g. proper nouns); and *academic words* common in various kinds of academic texts and less common in non-academic texts, which allow the text producers to talk about scientific activities (e.g. vocabulary describing research process or analysis).

The term *academic vocabulary* has been used to refer to vocabulary occurring with a greater frequency in academic genres than in other types of texts, commonly employed across various

academic disciplines illustrated by the following definitions of academic vocabulary: “context independent words which occur with high frequency across disciplines” (Cowan, 1974, p. 291); “[f]ormal, context-independent words with a high frequency and/or wide range of occurrence across scientific disciplines, not usually found in basic general English courses; words with high frequency across scientific disciplines” (Farrell, 1990, p. 11); “words that appear with much greater frequency in academic texts than in other types of texts, such as literary texts or popular media” (Townsend & Kiernan, 2015, p. 113); “lexical items [which] occur frequently and uniformly across a wide range of academic material” (Coxhead, 2000, p. 218); or “a set of options to refer to those activities that characterize academic work, organize scientific discourse and build the rhetoric of academic texts” (Paquot, 2010, p. 28). These definitions underline the key role of academic vocabulary in EAP contexts, where this type of vocabulary is an indispensable aspect of academic texts.

2.2. The role of academic vocabulary

In academic settings, academic vocabulary represents high-frequency words as it accounts for a considerable number of words in academic texts (Nation, 2001). Coxhead (2000) found that academic words account for approximately 10% of academic texts, while in Gardner and Davies's (2014) study, academic vocabulary covered nearly 14% of academic texts. Given the prevalence of these vocabulary items in academic texts, academic vocabulary can thus be considered important for both comprehension as well as production of academic texts (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007). In terms of comprehension, academic vocabulary is widely recognised as a vital component of academic reading abilities (Corson, 1997) as insufficient knowledge of this type of vocabulary potentially compromises learners' ability to comprehend academic discourse (Donley & Reppen, 2001). In terms of production of academic texts, academic vocabulary is regarded as a key element of academic writing style (Hyland & Tse, 2007). Thus, academic vocabulary items are such words which students across disciplines encounter in their reading and should also be able to deploy in their written production. This makes the learning of academic vocabulary a vital learning goal and a high priority for learners wishing to pursue academic study in English (Coxhead & Nation, 2001; Nation, 2001).

The importance of academic vocabulary in university settings is also widely recognised due to an established link between academic vocabulary knowledge and academic achievement (Nagy and Townsend, 2012). This is true for learners at all levels of study as “control of academic vocabulary, or the lack thereof, may be the single most important discriminator in the ‘gate-keeping’ tests of education” (Gardner & Davies, 2014, p. 305). This highlights the need for practitioners to facilitate learning conditions that would enable learners not only to acquire academic vocabulary, but that would also help them use these academic vocabulary items effectively in language production. This is particularly important in settings where the knowledge of academic vocabulary items may be directly linked to academic achievement.

Given the importance of the knowledge and usage of academic vocabulary in university settings, the next section focuses on academic vocabulary research set in the context of tertiary education. In particular, studies including the learners' perceptions in relation to their experiences with academic vocabulary are discussed.

2.3. Academic vocabulary research: learners' perspectives

Numerous researchers (e.g., Brun-Mercer & Zimmerman, 2015; Coxhead, 2012; Csomay & Prades, 2018; Durrant, 2017; Knoch et al., 2015, 2014; Masrai & Milton, 2017, 2018; Nadarajan, 2011; Storch, 2009; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Xudong et al., 2010) have investigated the usage of academic vocabulary items in university student writing, predominantly utilising academic word lists, such as the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) or the new Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner & Davies, 2014), containing the most frequently occurring vocabulary in academic settings. As well as focusing on the usage of academic vocabulary in writing, several of these studies

also include the learners' perspectives on the various aspects relating to academic vocabulary in their written production. These studies provide valuable insights into learners' experiences with academic vocabulary, which have important implications for pedagogy.

Coxhead's (2012) study, for instance, utilised an integrated reading and writing task followed by a semi-structured interview about the participants' language learning experiences, the integrated task, and their vocabulary use in writing with the aim of exploring the perspectives of 14 English as an additional language students at a New Zealand university with a particular focus on the ways in which the students incorporate vocabulary into their writing. Her study found the students' reliance on reading sources in the process of writing. Her findings thus call for academic support to provide advice on the readings and vocabulary that students ought to focus on. Coxhead (2012) also highlights the importance of practice and modelling that student writers should receive on academic writing conventions.

Similarly, Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) investigated decision-making processes of nine advanced L2 learners at an Intensive English Program in California in relation to the integration of academic vocabulary from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) in their writing and the techniques that helped the learners use these vocabulary items effectively. Drawing on the students' essay, a survey on vocabulary strategy use and interview data, they found that their participants had difficulties deploying these academic vocabulary items effectively and appropriately as they were not always aware of the register of a word. They also found that their participants felt more confident in using new vocabulary after multiple exposures to the vocabulary in various contexts. The opportunities to use the newly acquired academic vocabulary items productively, together with receiving feedback on the usage of academic vocabulary, were also among the factors perceived by their participants as beneficial. Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) thus call for explicit teaching of the register of newly met vocabulary, drawing students' attention to examples of academic vocabulary and its usage in appropriate texts and providing learners with ample opportunities to practise using the same vocabulary item in different contexts.

Students' perspectives on academic vocabulary were also incorporated in Knoch et al.'s (2014) study conducted at an Australian university investigating 101 non-English-speaking-background students' writing proficiency over one year. This study formed part of a larger study (Knoch et al., 2015) conducted with 31 students over the period of a three-year degree in the same university. Both studies employed a range of measures to assess the participants' writing as well as interview and survey data, and reported no significant changes in the usage of academic vocabulary contained in the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) over time. In both studies, the participants reported that they did not receive feedback on their written assignments, which may have contributed to the lack of improvement of their academic vocabulary as Knoch et al. (2014) emphasise that a lack of feedback may leave students unaware that their writing requires improvement. Knoch et al. (2015) also note that the participants in their study, who did not think their writing improved, attributed this primarily to insufficient writing practice.

Although some studies (e.g., Brun-Mercer & Zimmerman, 2015; Coxhead, 2012; Knoch et al., 2014, 2015) of academic vocabulary in university student writing incorporate the student writers' perceptions, little has been reported on the learners' perspectives relating to the acquisition and development of academic vocabulary. In addition, no research has been identified exploring the perspectives of international foundation students who are novices to an academic setting and who have had very little, if any, exposure to academic vocabulary. The current study addresses this important omission by exploring international foundation students' experiences with academic vocabulary with the aim of highlighting the pedagogical implications of this study in relation to international foundation provision and wider EAP contexts informed by the participating novice students' perspectives.

3. The present study

3.1. Context

This study is set in the context of an International Foundation Programme (IFP) at a British university based in the South-East of England and its two overseas campuses located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Mauritius. The IFP is targeted at international students who do not meet the English language and/or academic requirements for direct entry to the University's degree programmes. The required language level for the IFP is 5.5 overall in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test with a minimum of 5.0 in each of the test's four components (comprising reading, writing, speaking and listening), or equivalent.

The goal of the IFP is to help students improve their general level of English and support them in acquiring a wide range of transferable skills essential for study at a degree level, such as independent learning, effective communication skills, critical thinking or researching and presentation skills. These skills are developed over one academic year (equalling 24 teaching weeks over six months), during which the students are required to attend 16 hours of taught sessions per week in the form of lectures, seminars and laboratories. In addition, they are expected to spend approximately 24 hours per week on individual independent study. The students' progress is assessed by summative individual and group assessments, both oral and written. On successful completion of the IFP, students can progress to a degree programme of their choice within the University.

3.2. Aims

This study is part of a larger study examining the deployment and development of academic vocabulary in the academic writing of novice student writers and their perceptions of the primary factors contributing to the learning of these vocabulary items. It is noteworthy that in this study, academic vocabulary was understood by the participating students as formal expressions common in academic texts across various disciplines (broadly corresponding to the definitions of academic vocabulary outlined in Section 2.1). Given the crucial role that academic vocabulary plays in university settings and the importance of foundation-level courses in preparing novice students for academic study, the focus of this paper is on academic vocabulary from the perspective of students at a foundation-level of study. In particular, the sources of acquisition of academic vocabulary items and the development (i.e. improvement) of the acquired academic vocabulary items subsequently used in the student written production are investigated. In doing so, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the main contributing factors impacting the acquisition of academic vocabulary as perceived by international foundation-level students?
2. What are the main contributing factors impacting the development of productive academic vocabulary deployed in the students' writing as perceived by international foundation-level students?

3.3. Data collection

The approach to the investigation of the participating students' perspectives on the learning of academic vocabulary was informed by the Academic Literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998), which puts emphasis on exploring student writing beyond their texts, enabled by drawing on a wide array of ethnographically-oriented data, such as interviews. Thus, in the current study, interviews were utilised to gain insights into the students' experiences with academic vocabulary on the IFP. Specifically, a semi-structured format of interviews was selected as its loose set of guidelines ensures flexibility which enables extensive follow-up of the participants' responses (Hyland, 2016).

In total, 17 students (9 males and 8 females) aged 18–23 years ($M = 20$) across three campuses (including 7 from the UK, 5 from Mauritius, and 5 from the UAE) agreed to participate in an interview at the end of the academic years 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. These students came from

various linguistics, educational and cultural backgrounds, accounting for 13 nationalities (i.e., Bermudian, Egyptian, Indian, Iranian, Japanese, Malawian, Mauritian, Nigerian, Pakistani, Saudi Arabian, Turkmen, Turkish, Vietnamese), and 13 languages as their first language (L1) (i.e., Arabic, Chichewa, Creole, Eleme, English, Farsi, Hausa, Hindi, Japanese, Turkish, Turkmen, Urdu, Vietnamese). This variety in students' backgrounds represents the international scene characteristic of British higher education. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of the participants were not permanent residents in their place of study. These students typically arrived in order to attend the IFP during term-time and left after its completion.

One interview was conducted with each of the 17 participating students at the end of the academic year so as to enable the participants to reflect on their learning experience during the IFP. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (with the UK-based participants) and via Skype (with students based overseas) and lasted for 20 to 30 minutes on average. The interviews covered a range of topics relating to the students' academic experience as novices to the academic settings. However, due to the importance of academic vocabulary in university contexts, the focus of this paper is on the findings relating to the vocabulary aspect of the interviews, primarily the students' perceptions of the sources of newly acquired academic vocabulary and the main factors that impacted the development of academic vocabulary in their written production.

3.4. Data analysis

For the analysis of the interview data, thematic analysis was adopted as "it offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). In line with this approach, the interview data were examined following a deductive approach in order to identify various themes closely related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of analytical steps were then taken to interrogate the transcribed interview data, including the production of initial themes relating to the various aspects of the data that were of relevance to the phenomena under investigation. This was followed by several phases of further defining and refining of the themes resulting in themes relating to the acquisition and development of academic vocabulary.

During the data analysis, the issue of reactivity was also considered, referring to the effects of the researcher on the nature of the collected data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), stemming from the fact that the researcher was the UK-based participating students' tutor. The issue of reactivity, however, is likely to have been reduced by the fact that the interviews took place at the end of the academic year after completion of the IFP. Moreover, eliminating the problem of reactivity is not always a prime consideration provided that the researcher understands how their presence may have shaped the collected interview data, which ought to be interpreted accordingly (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Academic vocabulary acquisition

From the interviews with the 17 IFP students, two main factors relating to the acquisition of academic vocabulary were identified. These include the use of appropriate sources and instructed environment.

4.1.1. Appropriate sources

Drawing on reading and reference sources was reported by approximately three quarters of the students (13 out of 17 students) as one of the perceived sources of new academic vocabulary, as exemplified by the students' quotes below:

The readings and the researching I did helped me a lot to pick up certain words ... there are like special words that I picked up from the other writers.
(Student 1)

The studies we would be reading, the examples of writing, I'd see a word and think I don't know this word, I need to know this word ... I'm gonna go and look it up. (Student 2)

[New words came from] the materials you are reading for your coursework because you have to do research so sometimes you get to learn new words when you come across a word you don't know in a material and if you want to use the material you have to check it out and I think it helps. (Student 8)

By reading new books and by reading academic articles ..., by reading academic sources I got the vocabulary from there. (Student 16)

This finding emphasises the students' perception of reading sources playing an important role in academic vocabulary acquisition. This result is in line with research on vocabulary learning through reading in first (L1) and second language (L2) contexts, which has shown a close relationship between reading and vocabulary growth, highlighting the importance of multiple opportunities to read (e.g., Carver, 1994; Nagy, 1997; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Nation, 2001; Zimmerman, 1997). Reading has, therefore, often been suggested as an effective way of expanding learners' vocabulary repertoire. Carver (1994), for example, states that for learners to expand their vocabulary, they need exposure to reading materials which will enable them to encounter unfamiliar words. Similarly, Nation (2001) notes that reading can result in learning small amounts of vocabulary, particularly exposure to texts containing repetition of unknown vocabulary. The importance of repeated exposure to lexical items in texts is also supported by Nagy (1997), who points out that a single encounter of a word in reading will not lead to a considerable depth of word knowledge.

The benefits of exposure to reading texts for vocabulary gain have also been emphasised in academic contexts in relation to academic vocabulary acquisition, where numerous opportunities to read suitable texts have been found to be particularly important for the acquisition of academic vocabulary (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). This results from the opportunities to encounter academic vocabulary in contexts that provide information about the properties of a word, which contributes "to the learners' knowledge about the multifaceted nature of words" (Zimmerman, 1997, p. 136), thereby exposing learners to the complex meanings and grammatical properties of academic words (Krashen, 2012). The benefits of reading for academic vocabulary gains are also supported by research showing a correlation between how much learners read and how many words they know (Parry, 1991; Zimmerman, 1997).

The perceived benefits of reading for the acquisition of vocabulary demonstrate the vital role of incidental or implicit learning; that is, learning that leads to the learning of vocabulary items as a by-product of other activities (e.g. reading), which are not specifically aimed at vocabulary learning (Ellis, 1999; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Learners thus ought to be provided with sufficient exposure to suitable reading materials, in particular reading sources which would repeatedly expose them to new academic vocabulary items so as to facilitate academic vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, practitioners ought to equip learners with appropriate learning strategies that would focus the learners' attention on unfamiliar academic words met in reading materials and how these newly met vocabulary items are used in context (Coxhead, 2012; Gebril & Plakans, 2016).

In addition to the importance of appropriate reading sources, two students mentioned the thesaurus as a source of new vocabulary:

Thesaurus helps a lot because you get to get a lot of different words that you can use to substitute the other words. (Student 8)

[new words came from] thesaurus when I'm doing paraphrasing or summarising just to give it my own words from there. (Student 10)

This result highlights the importance of suitable reference sources in the acquisition of academic vocabulary. In particular, monolingual reference sources, such as thesauruses, were perceived by

the participants as a contributing factor to the acquisition of new academic vocabulary items. The ability to use such reference sources effectively can be considered important as these sources give learners access to a large vocabulary and their meaning often accompanied by other information about the words together with examples of use. The benefits of drawing on a thesaurus was also found by Salehi and Habibi (2015), for instance, who investigated Iranian intermediate EFL learners' attitudes towards using the thesaurus feature of Microsoft Word for vocabulary development. In their study, the participants reported several benefits of using a thesaurus, including exposure to numerous synonyms and unfamiliar words.

A further source of acquisition of academic vocabulary was the Academic Phrasebank (The University of Manchester, 2020), which is an online resource designed primarily for L2 academic writers. The Academic Phrasebank contains predominantly content-neutral (i.e. discipline non-specific) academic phraseological expressions organised according to the main sections of a research paper (e.g. introducing work, referring to sources or describing methods) as well as according to general communicative functions characteristic of academic writing (e.g. being cautious, being critical or giving examples) (The University of Manchester, 2020). One student reported the usefulness of this reference source and their reliance on this source not only in the process of acquiring new academic expressions, but also during the process of completing their written assignments:

We used the Academic Phrasebank; there were a lot of words to use in essays and reports, so I picked them up from there. (Student 14)

Drawing on the Academic Phrasebank (containing phrases as opposed to individual vocabulary items) shows the student's awareness of the importance of individual lexical items used in their phraseological environments in written production. This finding highlights the benefits that the participant perceived in being provided with reference materials containing academic phrases. The importance of phraseologies in the academic register has also been emphasised by others (e.g., Hyland, 2008; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010), who note that the absence of phraseologies may point to a lack of communicative competence in academic contexts.

The learners' perspectives thus highlight the importance of being introduced to the various reference sources available on which the learners can draw, not only for the acquisition of academic vocabulary, but also for subsequent integration of these newly acquired academic vocabulary items during the writing process. Among the reference resources that practitioners could introduce to their learners are various academic word lists, for example, which provide compilations of the most frequently occurring single-word vocabulary items, as well as phraseologies in academic contexts. These include, for instance, the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), the new Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner & Davies, 2014), the New Academic Word List (Browne et al., 2013), the Academic Keyword List (Paquot, 2010), and the Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon (McCarthy, 2019). These different word lists containing single-word vocabulary items have been compared and contrasted by Therova (2020) with the aim of assisting EAP practitioners in making informed decisions with regard to the choice of these word lists in their pedagogical practices. In addition to these, several word lists of multi-word expressions are available to EAP practitioners, including the Academic Collocation List (Ackermann & Chen, 2013), the Phrasal Expression List (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012) or the Academic Formulas List (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010).

Considering the perceived importance of both reading and reference sources, practitioners ought to assist learners in developing vocabulary learning strategies that would enable them to use both types of sources effectively and in a complementary manner; that is, the use of reference sources could complement the use of the various reading materials to which the learners are exposed in order to assist them in the learning of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered in the reading sources. Practitioners could also train learners to draw on reference materials for productive purposes in integrating newly acquired vocabulary items in their written production. A certain amount of classroom time should thus be dedicated not only to introducing learners to various suitable

reference materials, but also to helping them develop strategies to use these sources effectively and independently in both comprehension as well as language production.

4.1.2. Instructed environment

Another recurrent theme identified in the interviews was the role of the instructed environment, reported by approximately two thirds of the students (11 out of 17 students) as one of the perceived sources of the acquisition of academic vocabulary, illustrated by the interview excerpts below:

During classes ...the teachers when they explain to us they speak academically so we are trying to speak with someone to be academic... we are trained to focus on academic [vocabulary]... there's no general English speaking in the class, not that much at least from the teachers. (Student 1)

I think mainly what did improve is my vocabulary in the lectures and in the seminars... (Student 9)

In our sessions they were introducing us new topics and with those new topics we learned new words too. (Student 15)

There were a few examples given to us in class. (Student 17)

This result shows that the students perceived the instructed environment as an important aspect of academic vocabulary learning with the teacher playing a crucial role in the acquisition of academic vocabulary in formal education contexts. This corroborates other research into the deployment of academic vocabulary. Corson (1997), for instance, states that the teacher is indispensable in formal education as the provider of the most basic assistance that academic learning can receive. The key role that the instructed environment plays in the process of acquiring academic vocabulary is also pointed out by Nation (2001), who claims that although learners may initially encounter new vocabulary items in texts, this meeting need to be accompanied or followed by intensive study. Specifically, Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) suggest that the most frequently occurring words are given explicit attention in class as they consider it a good first introduction to words. The benefit of such explicit learning lies in attention being focused directly to the information that the learners need to learn, thereby providing the greatest chance for acquisition (Schmitt, 2000). This is also supported by Carlo et al. (2004), who recommends that teachers give learners ample structured opportunities to encounter new words in authentic and engaging contexts.

This finding relating to explicit or intentional vocabulary learning, whereby the instructed environment provides the students with the conscious and focused study of words involving activities intended to result in vocabulary learning, highlights the crucial role that students perceive practitioners to play in the acquisition of academic vocabulary. Therefore, practitioners ought to ensure that academic vocabulary items are given sufficient attention in lessons by making explicit academic vocabulary instruction an integral part of an EAP classroom. This focus on academic vocabulary should involve not only introducing learners to new academic words, but should also extend to instruction on the deployment of these vocabulary items in production. In an instructed environment, learners' attention should hence be drawn to appropriate academic vocabulary items encountered in texts as well as to an appropriate integration of these vocabulary items in subsequent language production. Practitioners should also consider the amount of modelling with which they provide learners in terms of the deployment of academic vocabulary in academic written production (Coxhead, 2012).

This explicit focus on academic vocabulary should include a variety of aspects relating to vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2001) proposes a model describing what is involved in knowing a word, which at the most general level involves form, meaning and use. These aspects of word knowledge are also in line with Laufer's (1997) set of properties necessary to knowing a word, which include form, word structure, syntactic pattern, meaning, lexical relations, and collocations. These aspects

of knowing a word can be learned in different ways. Research into vocabulary acquisition has shown that effective vocabulary learning involves instruction on developing vocabulary learning strategies, which ought to be considered by practitioners when facilitating vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 2000). These strategies include discovery vocabulary learning strategies for learning a word's meaning and consolidation vocabulary learning strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered (Schmitt, 1997).

Within the category of discovery strategies are determination and social strategies, with the former referring to learners discovering a word's meaning by guessing from context, for instance, while the latter involves asking someone who knows, such as a teacher. The consolidation strategies also include social strategies as well as various memory strategies (e.g. the use of mnemonics), cognitive strategies (e.g. repetition and the use of mechanical means to learn vocabulary), or metacognitive strategies used by students to control and evaluate their learning. Schmitt (2000) suggests that rather than using isolated learning strategies, learners use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies concurrently. Hence, practitioners should facilitate vocabulary learning through introducing learners to these various vocabulary learning strategies to help them become aware of the different ways in which they can acquire and consolidate academic vocabulary.

4.2. Academic vocabulary development

The development of academic vocabulary relates to the improvement in the usage of productive academic vocabulary deployed in the IFP students' written assignments. The interviews generated three aspects relating to the development of the 17 participants' academic vocabulary. These include tutor feedback, peers and practice.

4.2.1. Feedback

The important role that tutor feedback plays in the improvement of productive academic vocabulary was reported by more than half of the participants (9 out of 17 students) as shown by the interview excerpts below:

We can send drafts to the teachers and I can remake it from the feedback.
(Student 3)

The feedback was very helpful, that was the most helpful part of it. (Student 8)

Just feedback, through the IFP I got help with my phrasing of words from my IFP co-ordinator. (Student 12)

Use of proper words is what I would get feedback on ... [getting feedback] certainly did help me. (Student 16)

The vital role of tutor feedback, as perceived by the students in this study, corroborates other studies investigating academic vocabulary in university students' writing. Knoch et al. (2014), for instance, state that without feedback, students are unaware of any deficiencies in their texts. They also point out that providing generic feedback on writing, which fails to draw the students' attention to language use, may be a disservice to learners as it may leave them with the impression that their writing language production does not need improvement. In another study, Knoch et al. (2015) state that the absence of feedback on written production may have been one of the reasons for lack of improvement in the students' writing, including lack of improvement of academic vocabulary.

Since academic vocabulary is a key element of academic writing style, this finding highlights the importance of providing students with feedback on their written production in general, and has been emphasised by many. Ferris (2003), for instance, argues that the provision of feedback on student writing is the most important factor in the learners' writing development. Weaver (2006), who investigated students' responses to tutors' written feedback, found four main feedback areas that students considered unhelpful: comments that were too general or vague, lacked guidance,

focused on the negative, or were not related to the assessment criteria. Other reported reasons why students fail to consider tutor feedback is their lack of understanding of the tutors' comments or because the feedback given does not motivate or guide them sufficiently. Weaver (2006) thus suggests that practitioners should ensure that their feedback is not only constructive and clear, but it is also related to assessment criteria and gives guidance on how to improve future performance.

This study's finding emphasising the participants' perceived importance of tutor feedback thus calls for practitioners to ensure that learners are provided with sufficient feedback, which among other aspects of academic writing also explicitly focuses on the deployment of academic vocabulary in written production. In addition, tutor feedback should reflect the marking criteria and should include clear guidance on further improvement as well as suggestions on how learners can achieve that improvement (Weaver, 2006). Furthermore, practitioners should enable and encourage students to seek feedback on assignment drafts prior to submission as formative feedback is effective in improving student academic writing (Wingate, 2010), while summative (i.e. post-submission) feedback has been reported to have less value since it is often ignored and in some cases not even seen by students if the assignment is submitted at the end of the term (Leki, 2006). In such cases, the feedback will not lead to further learning or improvement in academic writing as the learning process comes to an end (Chang, 2014).

The vital role of formative feedback is closely related to the importance of dialogic feedback, which focuses on the students' text in process as opposed to providing feedback on a written text as a completed product. This approach to feedback is closely related to the reconceptualisation of the widespread practice of 'feedback' as 'talkback' (Lillis, 2003) prominent in the Academic Literacies approach foregrounding practice over text, in line with the view of academic writing as a social practice (Lea & Street, 1998). The perceived importance of this dialogic approach was noted by one student, who found "having the opportunity to talk and connect with my tutors" (Student 2) helpful in the process of completing their written assignments. Considering that written assignments are a high-stakes activity, such a dialogue can be seen as crucial to students' academic success.

4.2.2. Practice

Nearly one third of the students (5 out of 17) reported that they had perceived practice as a contributing factor that positively impacted the improvement of their productive academic vocabulary, including various formative tasks:

We had a lot of formative tasks as well that we had to do and we got a lot of feedback on it. (Student 1)

It's nice to have the formative, to have a chance to write something that you don't feel the pressure of it being graded. (Student 2)

[Vocabulary improved owing to] writing all those papers, we had to use different words, keep the paper not in the same routine and things like that so we had to use different words so definitely it [academic vocabulary] did [improve]. (Student 15)

This finding relating to the students' perceptions of the importance of being provided with ample opportunities for writing practice, including formative assignment tasks, has also been reported by several vocabulary and writing researchers (e.g., Carlo et al., 2004; Cons, 2012; Knoch et al., 2014, 2015; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Neumann, 2014). Nagy and Townsend (2012), for instance, emphasise the importance of opportunities to practise newly acquired academic vocabulary items in relevant authentic contexts. This is supported by Carlo et al. (2004), who note that providing opportunities for learners to practise newly acquired vocabulary items through writing is crucial, similar to Cons (2012, p. 630) who suggests that writing should be assigned frequently as English learners "need more writing practice in general to become more comfortable with the act of writing so that they will feel more comfortable using more words overall, specifically academic words". This is in line with Coxhead (2012), who calls for practitioners to consider the

amount of academic writing practice with which they provide learners. Similarly, Knoch et al. (2015) also report that the participants in their study, who did not think their writing improved, attributed this primarily to insufficient writing practice. As far as formative tasks are concerned, Neumann (2014, p. 92) points out that “students need a space without marks to really improve and expand their language repertoire” as they may choose to follow the familiar in assessment situations and not take risks. Such risk avoidance may be seen as detrimental to the students’ language development since risk-taking in language production has been found to be associated with L2 learning success (Neumann, 2014).

Therefore, given the benefits of being provided with frequent opportunities for writing practice, practitioners ought to consider the amount of time dedicated to writing, and learners should be given a space to take risks in the form of ample opportunities to practise writing both in class under teachers’ guidance as well as independently without the pressure of being assessed. Considering the perceived importance of receiving tutor feedback (4.2.1), the learners’ written production should always be accompanied by feedback relating to the usage of academic vocabulary.

4.2.3. Peers

Three students noted the benefits of learning from their peers, for example in group work activities:

The group work you have, the group activities, that helps because you get to benefit from each other. (Student 8)

[I discussed] the different style of writing with my friends; I took the essays of those who got higher marks and read it and see how I can improve on that ... I had my friends check my work for the mistakes. (Student 9)

We have to speak English with each other, there were students from various countries so the only language we could speak was English so that I guess that also helped me improve my vocabulary. (Student 16)

The key role that peer support can play in academic vocabulary development emphasising the importance of providing students with opportunities to learn from peers, which enables them to draw on each other’s vocabulary resources, is also noted by others (e.g., Corson, 1997; Dobao, 2014; Huong, 2006; Lin, 2018). Corson (1997, p. 703), for instance, suggests that although the teacher often provides initial access to academic meanings, it is the later dialogue with classmates or friends that provides an “important series of reconceptualizations needed to master rules of use across different contexts and across the many subtle changes in sense that words and other signs have in different texts.” Group work or a similar dialogic activity hence needs to follow the initial conceptualization so as to benefit the language output (Corson, 1997). The merits of learning vocabulary from peers in group work was also mentioned by Huong (2006), who found that the students in her study were drawing on each other’s vocabulary knowledge by either asking their peers when they encountered an unfamiliar word or by listening to the interaction among the group members. Huong’s (2006) findings thus highlight the benefits of group work, which lie primarily in giving the group members an access to more capable peers who may know the required vocabulary to convey the ideas and concepts necessary for the group discussion. Some researchers have compared working in groups with working in pairs or individually. Dobao (2014) compared L2 vocabulary learning in pairs with learning in groups, and found that group interaction results in significantly more instances of L2 vocabulary learning compared to pair interaction. Students’ improvement in vocabulary knowledge linked to group work was also found by Lin (2018), who compared the effectiveness of group and individual work on Chinese university students’ vocabulary knowledge gain. Lin’s (2018) study shows substantially higher vocabulary gains resulting from working in groups compared to working individually. The reported advantages of group work include giving and receiving information, discovering richer lexical information and support for retention.

Due to the benefits of peer support and group work with regard to vocabulary development, some researchers (e.g., Jelodar & Farvardin, 2019; Swain, 2001) recommend the use of collaborative writing tasks, including collaborative pre-writing tasks which Jelodar and Farvardin (2019) believe can play an important role in improving learners' writing ability. The value of such collaborative writing lies in working on a common goal and sharing the responsibility for the final writing product which encourages group members to discuss the language they are using and draw on each other's linguistic resources. In doing so, learners can offer assistance to other group members since no two learners possess the same strengths, weaknesses, knowledge or resources, which can lead to achieving a level of performance beyond their individual level of competence (Dobao, 2014). Practitioners thus ought to not only make learners aware of the benefits of group work, but should also facilitate and integrate group work in their lessons. Specifically, to improve productive academic vocabulary in writing, learners should be assigned collaborative writing tasks, for instance (Jelodar & Farvardin, 2019; Swain, 2001). When facilitating group work, practitioners also ought to consider the group composition and put learners into groups based on both their linguistic background as well as competence so students with different L1s and varying levels of linguistic ability are grouped together (Harmer, 2007). Separating students with a common mother tongue is intended to promote the use of English only, while grouping students with different linguistic abilities should enable weaker learners to learn from their more capable peers.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored international foundation-level students' perceptions of the sources of acquisition of academic vocabulary and the main factors contributing to the development of these vocabulary items in their written production. The students' perspectives reported in this study highlight the importance of exposure to suitable reading and reference sources, the vital role of the instructed environment and peer support, as well as the value of writing practice together with receiving tutor feedback. These findings are in line with best practice guidelines in EAP contexts and reiterate the importance of these pedagogical practices for developing novice student writers. These include practitioners' awareness of the importance of sufficient attention being given to both reading and reference sources in their teaching practice, as well as equipping learners with strategies on how to use these sources effectively not only for acquisition of academic vocabulary, but also in language production. Next, this study has underlined the key role of explicit focus on academic vocabulary in lessons including instruction on the integration of academic vocabulary in written production. Further, it has highlighted the perceived benefits of being provided with sufficient opportunities for writing practice, which should always be accompanied by tutor feedback relating to the deployment of academic vocabulary. Finally, group work has also been noted as an important factor contributing to the learning of academic vocabulary through peer support.

Despite these important implications for pedagogy, the limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Among these is the relatively small sample of participants representing one university only. Next, further aspects which may have impacted the acquisition and development of the students' academic vocabulary, such as student motivation or level of integration, were beyond the scope of this study. Another potential limitation of this study could be seen in the data collection procedure using interviews, particularly in relation to the students' lack of awareness of other factors that may have played a contributory role in the acquisition and development of their academic vocabulary. Further research would, therefore, benefit from studies into the acquisition, deployment and development of academic vocabulary in a larger sample of novice student writers across a greater number of universities. It might also be useful to focus on other factors potentially impacting students' productive academic vocabulary, such as teaching practices and students' level of integration, motivation, and learner styles.

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