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RESEARCH PAPER

Developing EFL Academic Writing at Higher Secondary Level with Frequency Word-list: Pakistani English Corpus Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to test the effectiveness of a corpus frequency word list on academic writing skills of higher secondary EFL learners. EFL faces challenges in acquiring proficiency in academic writing skills, primarily due to a lack of core vocabulary. This challenge hampers their academic performance. A quantitative design was employed, with 30 EFL learners divided into experimental and control groups. The former received instruction on frequent words, while the latter received traditional. The study's findings found a significant improvement in vocabulary scores in the experimental group compared to the control group, indicating the potential of frequency-based vocabulary intervention in academic writing skills among higher secondary EFL learners. The findings recommend incorporating frequency-based vocabulary instruction into EFL curricula.

Introduction

EFL writing presents significant challenges for non-native learners, particularly in academic writing. Politzer-Ahles et al., 2020) mentioned a few challenges: correct lexical choices, grammar, and sentence structure. One of the main challenges is the need for more vocabulary (Bazerman et al., 2012) and the lack of skill for using the vocabulary practically in a specific context. Despite various studies addressing linguistic challenges, there still needs to be more effective strategies for teaching practical vocabulary usage in particular contexts, particularly for higher secondary EFL learners (Flowerdew, 2019).

Additionally, some words that students are exposed to during academic readings have no use in their daily language usage. Due to a lack of awareness regarding the core vocabulary, students waste their energy memorizing unusual words that later become a part of their passive vocabulary. This key point proved a significant need for developing learners' vocabulary to improve their progress in language learning and professional career paths. (Clenton & Booth, 2020). Moreover, it can help them in their regular academic settings, especially for Higher Secondary EFL learners, to know the related academic vocabulary that can help them with their academic writing skills, resulting in better academic performances.

Recognizing this critical role of vocabulary in foreign language proficiency, the role of frequent academic words must be addressed in language proficiency development. For this purpose, the specialized vocabulary retrieved through corpus can be good for developing English for specific fields and purposes. The current study is, therefore, significant because it aims to address a critical challenge of academic writing,

narrowing it down to addressing the core issue of vocabulary, a famous concern of ESP vocabulary studies (Coxhead, 2018b). This field is getting enriched in attention for its valuable contributions to the expanding literature. The present study aims to help foreign language learners at higher secondary levels through corpus frequent vocabulary lists retrieved from a corpus created with Punjab Public curriculum text.

EFL learners face numerous challenges in developing their academic writing skills. One of the challenges is the need for the correct vocabulary for the right moment. This challenge arises when learners are less aware of the most commonly used words and lack knowledge about the context in which they are to be used. Studies from the 1980s and 1990s have considered vocabulary skills a prerequisite for developing writing skills (Reviewed by Tom Cobb 2002); however, learning the correct vocabulary is still an issue.

Literature Review

Corpus methodology has become a significant trend in linguistic research, offering new tools to address longstanding challenges EFL learners face. In the past few years, researchers have incorporated techniques based on corpus methodology to solve EFL learners' challenges. Still, the newly emerged trend has many dimensions to be researched, one of which is solving the academic writing problem of higher secondary EFL learners through a list of frequent academic words.

Xodabande, Atai, Hashemi, and Thompson (2023) proposed an academic list of mid-frequency words to contribute to chemistry academia. This contributes to validating focused vocabulary in the educational discourse of sciences like chemistry. Researchers compared British and American English usage varieties to identify 560 core vocabulary words. This study proved beneficial in understanding the importance of core vocabulary lists. Hence, the study's findings suggested that a corpus with a larger token size could be used to identify specialized vocabulary for any specific field.

Dang, Webb, and Coxhead (2022) contribute to helping teachers and students choose the most effective academic list of frequent words in a sea of existing academic lists of frequent words for a better return for learning. To accomplish this objective, the researcher compared the four well-established lists. The comparison findings show that more considerable resources like frequency lists for language learning would be more effective than others in getting maximum and effective lexical items for both written and spoken corpora. After determining whether teachers have teaching expertise in English as a foreign language, the researchers concluded that the frequency lists retrieved from larger corpora could provide a more advantageous vocabulary list for learners of a foreign language.

Akhter, Anwar, and Qureshi (2019) determined the EFL word list that is more essential at the secondary level to help students learn maximum frequent English words. For this, the researcher takes the corpus data from a corpus of Pakistani English. The data is processed through the Wordsmith Tools to retrieve an academic list of frequent words. The study determined the importance of learning core words and the significance of corpus methodology in developing the vocabulary of learners of a foreign language studying at the secondary level.

Qureshi and Akhter (2019) worked to extract the core vocabulary of frequent words for EFL learners. For this purpose, the researcher used The English Web Corpus (enTenTen). The academic list of frequent words is retrieved using Sketch Engine. The

study proves significant for Urdu language teachers, learners, lexicologists, and lexicographers and is equally crucial to grammarians.

Dang and Webb (2016) contribute by comparing the lexical items of four academic lists of frequent words. These four academic lists belonged to the 18 different corpora. The corpora with corpus text belonging to English language varieties language were used for the study. Their comparison results suggest that academic lists from the British national corpus, COCA2000, provide a more considerable lexical extent. Additionally, the New-GSL provides comparative maximum coverage for lexical items and has proved more beneficial for EFL learners' frequency wishlists.

The contributions of Nation (2004) and Brown (2014) are worth counting when comparing three or fewer high-frequency academic words. The only limitation is that their resultant comparative list of words is only extracted from the written corpus. Still, this study highlights the importance of word frequency lists for EFL learners.

Overall, the highlighted studies discuss the importance of a list of frequent academic words for foreign language learners. While numerous studies have explored various word lists, there still needs to be comprehensive academic word lists tailored explicitly for higher secondary EFL learners to enhance their academic writing skills that can potentially improve learners' writing skills, especially for EFL learners at the higher secondary level. Because the academic performance of higher secondary level learners proves to be a crucial stepping stone for their career development, recommending an academic list of frequent words can help develop their academic writing and enhance their academic performance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical base for this study lies in Nation's concept of language comprehension about vocabulary acquisition. Nation (2001) emphasizes the relative importance of a small set of frequently used words that can enhance learners' overall language comprehension and proficiency. He further suggests specific vocabulary sizes needed for particular proficiency levels. He claims that if learners learn the first 2000 frequently used words in a language with correct grammatical forms and usage in the right concepts, they can get 80 percent enhanced language comprehension and proficiency. He proposes that vocabulary knowledge involves understanding the form of lexemes, their different verb forms, and correct pronunciation and spelling. He further described the importance of understanding specified vocabulary's meaning, contextual us,e, and grammatical functions.

Material and Methods

The current study follows a corpus methodology with a pre-assessment/achievement test design and a quantitative approach. An academic list of frequent words (AWT) is retrieved from a corpus based on academic books from the Punjab Curriculum of higher secondary students. To prove the effectiveness of this academic list of frequent words for higher secondary EFL learners, the researcher randomly selected thirty students from a public sector college in District Sahiwal to participate in the study. The students attempted a pre-assessment through which their current proficiency level was evaluated. Afterward, the initial sample of thirty learners is split into two groups, the reference group and the intervention group, each containing fifteen learners. The reference group gets traditional language teaching while the reference group learns about frequently occurring words, their use in context, and grammatical forms, along with conventional language teaching for thirty days after the

pre-assessment. After this experimental teaching, students appear in another proficiency test with a score of forty and a format of fill-in-the-blanks for four paragraphs. Each paragraph contains ten scores with multiple blanks, where the students have to use their knowledge about words' context and grammatical forms. The pre-assessment and achievement test outcomes are analyzed. The analysis included generating tables to visually represent the data, clearly comparing the proficiency levels between the reference and an experimental group.

Results and Discussion

The present study takes a pre-assessment /achievement test design with a quantitative approach to test whether the academic frequency wordlists are effective in developing scholarly writing in EFL learners at higher secondary levels or not. For this purpose, the study will use a random sampling of 30 students as a sample. A division of the sample into a reference group and an intervention group, the researcher takes a pre-assessment and achievement test from learners under the supervision of a language teacher, consisting of 40 scores. The tool for assessment is designed in fill-in-the-blank format and presented within English text passages. Data for the pre-assessment and achievement test is collected quantitatively based on scores assigned to the pre-assessment and achievement test. The statistical analysis of the pre-assessment /achievement test is displayed in the form of tables. The following table represents the results of 30 learners in the pre-assessment:

Table 1
Pre-test Marks

Frequency distribution for marks	No. of students (out of 30)	Percentage %
5 to 9	6	20
10 to 14	14	46.67
15 to 19	8	26.67
20 to 24	2	6.67

According to the displayed table entitled "pre-test marks," six students out of 30 (20%) scored marks between 5 to 9, 14 out of 30 students(46.6%) scored marks between 1o to 14, 8 out of 30 students (26.6%) scored marks between 15 to 19, and 2 out of 30 students (6.6%) scored marks between 20 to 24. Considering that no student scored marks above 25 out of 40. (as shown in graph 1).On the other hand, the achievement test result for the reference group is represented through the following table:

Table 2
Control group's post-test result

Frequency distribution for marks	No. of students	Percentage %
5 to 9	8	53.33
10 to 14	6	40
15 to 19	1	6.67

Of the students from the reference group in the achievement test, eight students out of 15(53.33%) scored marks between 5 and 9, 6 students out of 15 (40%) scored marks between 10 and 14, and 1 student out of 15 (6.67%) scored marks between 15 to 19 because no student could score 50% on a vocabulary proficiency test while teaching through traditional methods. (as shown in graph 2). Following table represents statistical analysis for the intervention group:

Table 3
Experimental group's post-test result

Frequency distribution for marks	No. of students	Percentage %

25 to 29	7	46.67
30 to 34	5	33.33
more than 35	3	20

Of the students from the intervention group, seven students out of 15 (46.67%) scored marks between 25 and 29, 5 students out of 15 (33.33%) scored between 30 and 34, and 3 students out of 15 (20%) scored marks more than 35. No student from the intervention group got marks below 25 after learning an academic list of frequent words and traditional language teaching. (as shown in graph 3). Hence, this shows the difference in students' performance before and after the intervention.

The frequency graphs show the comparative analysis of the reference and intervention groups. According to this comparative review, in the reference group, over half of the students (53.3%) scored in the lowest range (5 to 9), 40% of students scored in the middle range (10 to 14), and a small proportion (6.7%) scored in the highest range (15 to 19). The scores are heavily concentrated in the lower range, indicating that most students scored on the lower end of the spectrum. On the other hand, for learners from the intervention group, nearly half of the students (46.7%) scored in the range of 25 to 29, and One-third of the students (33.3%) scored in the range of 30 to 34 and 20% of students scored more than 35.

The scores are concentrated in higher ranges compared to the reference group, indicating better performance among students. So the scores of the reference group Scores are predominantly in the lower range (5 to 9), with a majority of 53.3% and only 6.7% achieving higher scores (15 to 19), and scores of the intervention group are predominantly in the higher range (25 to 29), with 46.7. A significant proportion (20%) scored more than 35. This statistical analysis shows the difference in learners' performance in the reference and intervention groups. The reference group has the lowest scores, indicating that students generally performed below average. The intervention group had higher scores, suggesting that students performed better than the reference group.

Similarly, the comparative review for the preassessment and achievement tests showed a visible change in students' progress. The display of results for preassessment suggests that students need to gain knowledge regarding the contextual use of core vocabulary when asked to fill in the suitable word. The results showed that no student failed to score below average after getting additional instructions on correctly using academic frequent vocabulary.

Their progress shows a below-average result. In contrast, the performance of the intervention group drastically uplifts the importance of intervention of academic lists of frequent words. In essence, the difference in the progress of both groups- the reference group and intervention group- shows the difference in performance and made the difference in the effectiveness and efficiency change in the traditional method and innovative approach of corpus linguistics and frequency word lists. So, this discussion proves the limitation of the conventional method and the effectiveness of the corpus academic frequency list in developing scholarly writing in EFL learners getting higher secondary education.

The present study's findings indicate that if students from higher secondary levels get the teaching of the academic list of frequent words taken from the Punjab textbook, with knowledge of usage and context, their academic writing could be enhanced. It is evident through experimental teaching in the current study that two groups were made through a sample of 30 students. Both the reference and intervention

groups received traditional language teaching with equal opportunities to learn grammar rules and structures and other conventional teaching as customs in language classrooms. The intervention group additionally benefited from teaching a list of frequent academic words with an explanation of word use and their context, along with traditional teaching. In the pre-assessment students' scores, eight students out of 15(53.33%) scored marks between 5 to 9, 6 students out of 15 (40%) scored marks between 10 to 14, and 1 student out of 15 (6.67%) scored marks between 15 to 19. Hence, no student could score 50%. In the achievement test, seven students out of 15 (46.67%) scored marks between 25 and 29, 5 students out of 15 (33.33%) scored between 30 and 34, and 3 students out of 15 (20%) scored marks more than 35. Hence, all students score above 50%. The distinction between the scores of the pre-assessment and achievement tests proved the effectiveness of frequent vocabulary in academia for enhancing academic writing skills in a foreign language for higher secondary students. The practical improvement in students' academic writing is observed in using correct vocabulary in an accurate context, recognising suitable vocabulary for specific contexts, and knowledge of correct grammatical forms of lexical items in writing passages. Using the findings, Usingrs may consider incorporating corpus-based solutions, such as academic frequency lists, to improve students' academic writing skills in foreign or second language learning classrooms. Moreover, this will enhance their academic performance and help them select successful career paths.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study attempted to resolve one of the challenges of academic writing: EFL higher secondary learners' need for more vocabulary. Corpus methodology retrieved a list of frequent academic words to enhance the learners' vocabulary. To investigate the effectiveness of the list of frequent academic words, an experiment was conducted in which 30 higher secondary EFL learners were selected through random sampling. A pre-assessment and achievement test design with a reference group vs. intervention group strategy and a quantitative approach was chosen for the study. Each group received traditional language teaching, but the intervention group also learned corpus frequency lists of core academic words related to contextual use. Then, an achievement test was conducted to test the experiment's effectiveness. The study's findings demonstrate that teaching frequent vocabulary, emphasising their use and context, significantly enhances the academic writing skills of higher secondary EFL learners. This study aimed to contribute to developing the academic writing of higher secondary EFL learners and to investigate the effectiveness of a corpus list of frequent academic words in helping higher secondary EFL learners develop academic writing. This study is significant for EFL learners and educators to promote practical language skills.

Recommendations

Based on the effectiveness of the list of frequent academic words proved through the current study, upcoming researchers could consider developing a corpus list of frequently used core vocabulary specific to academic books for students of other levels, such as matriculation level, secondary or graduate level. Additionally, future studies could consider taking a broader sample to generalise the results so that learners can make their academic writing proficient by facilitating core vocabulary. Thirdly, such same-scale research could also be done for other educational boards in Pakistan except for the Punjab Board, Pakistan, as it has been covered in the present study.

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