



Measuring the Academic Vocabulary knowledge of Graduate level students: A Study.

Mr. Ravibabu Velaga

Assistant Professor of English

Department of English and Other Indian and Foreign Languages,

VFSTR Deemed to University

Vadlamudi, Guntur, A.P, India.

Dr.K.V.B. Ravindrababu

Associate Professor of English

Department of English and Other Indian and Foreign Languages

VFSTR Deemed to University

Vadlamudi, Guntur, A.P, India.

Dr. M. Suresh Babu

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities,

B V Raju Institute of Technology, Narasapur, Telangana, India.

Abstract:

Since English language has the huge vocabulary, it's big challenge for the teachers of English at university level is to know the existing level of the students' academic vocabulary knowledge level and to suggest the word list for improving their vocabulary needed at that level. This study investigates the existing knowledge of the Academic Word List of the ESL learners at the graduation level. It clearly elevates their current knowledge of the AWL and suggests that there is a need to update their knowledge of vocabulary to deal with the subjects at their graduation level in order to understand their academics well and getting the good grades followed by good professional career too. To know that how much percentage of words from AWL are known by the graduate students at university level a test has been conducted for them using the words from AWL. The learners have got very less marks in that test. The results have shown that graduate ESL learners don't know many words from AWL to deal with their subjects at the university level and there is clear indication that shows a need for intervention to improve their Academic Vocabulary.

Key words: Vocabulary, Academic Word List, existing knowledge

Introduction:

Vocabulary is the major component for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to become proficient in all four skills, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Inadequate vocabulary impacts their understanding the subjects like English, Science and business at the graduation level. It's not that how much knowledge that the ESL learners have at their graduation level as advanced learners, but it is how much word power they have in their brain (Lewis, 1997). In the same way, McCarthy (1990) says that even the ESL learners masters the grammar and able to pronounce the words in a better way, but without having the knowledge of words it is not possible for them to communicate in English language in a meaningful way

(p. viii). **Biemiller (2005)** said that of course knowledge of vocabulary may not give the guarantee for success but, lack of that knowledge leads to failure.

To give some examples to support the above quotes, knowledge of the first 2000 words will give the knowledge and source required for everyday basic oral communication. Similarly, next 1000 words knowledge provides additional source for spoken English. Followed by learning the first 3000 words will support the learners to start reading the authentic texts. Recent research indicates that having the knowledge of most frequent 5000 words will give more comfort to the learners to read the authentic texts with an ease. Followed by, in particular to L2 language learners, having 10,000 words of English will give more confidence to the learners to handle the challenges at the university level also. **(Hazenberg and Hulstijn, 1996).**

To help us to differentiate among the vocabulary words, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) frame work helps us. They categorised the vocabulary into three tiers. Tire one is probably called general vocabulary which teachers and students use in our daily conversations and learn them without any instruction. West's (1983) General Service list covers all these words. The second tier of words which are high frequency words are to be taught to the learners in order to make use those words in their writing as well as speaking. The third tier of vocabulary is subject specific vocabulary which is very useful for only for that particular domain only.

This paper narrow down to the general academic vocabulary, the words which are widely used in academic books in four disciplines, arts, commerce, law and science.

Literature Review:Academic vocabulary is needed for the success of a student in his academic career (Hyland & Tse, 2007; Springer, 2013). Without having adequate vocabulary, a leaner cannot master these languages skills. Vocabulary is like a blood in human body which helps all organs to work properly and perfectly.

Nation (2001) opined that lack of vocabulary knowledge often leads to failure in academic as well as in a professional career of a student. Nation had given an example that a medical student doesn't know the meaning of "analysis" lives will be lost. Similarly, a student studying engineering doesn't know the words like albeit, ambiguous, distorted, integral etc. their understanding of the subjects where those words appear will be affected greatly. So, it's the need for the teachers at the graduation level to check the existing knowledge of the students and ready them for tertiary level education. One more aspect is, if the students don't have the required academic word knowledge, they lose their confidence in the academic settings. Friedberg, Mitchell, and Brooke (2016) said that a student must know the complex words and phrases to understand the reading texts in the classroom as well as participate in a fruitful discussion. One more important aspect is, lack of academic vocabulary knowledge diminish the productivity of the learner both in the academic context and professional working conditions.



Research is showing that students reading capacity and understanding capacity is closely associated with their vocabulary level. **Nagy and Townsend (2012) view academic vocabulary as a component of academic language and state that argue that the capacity to read and understand texts from various content areas or disciplines is closely related to students' vocabulary knowledge.** This vocabulary knowledge doesn't limit to one subject or one field. Students who have rich vocabulary can understand their subjects in a better way compared to the students who have low level of vocabulary. This broad understanding about the vocabulary clearly paves the way to know what is the academic vocabulary and the importance of it at the university level.

Finally, once the learners master the academic vocabulary, they can use it as a permanent tool in their own thinking, creating and expressing their own ideas and even they can use them in their decision making skills too. (Washburn, 2009).

L2 learners who are at the university level in the English medium environment need Academic vocabulary because the sub-technical vocabulary occurs across the range of academic disciplines. By using this information, teacher of English can identify whether the learners need any lexical support to improve their reading or teachers can identify the lexical deficiencies of the learners which can be taken care of by testing the existing levels of their own students and should provide the support needed to meet their academic goals and followed by their professional goals.

Significance of Academic Word List (AWL)

AWL (Academic Word List) is considered as the best source because it is not restricted to one specific field but it covers 28 subject-areas from four faculty sections (Arts, Commerce, Law and Science Academic Word List (AWL) was developed by the Avril Coxhead as the part of her M.A thesis, Associate Professor, university of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. The AWL is well known for its usage to enhance the academic vocabulary of the learners required in the academic context). Avril Coxhead compiled AWL from a corpus of 3.5 million running words of written academic text by examining the range and frequency of words outside the first 2000 most frequently occurring words of English, as described by the Michel West (1953). The AWL contains 570 total word families and covers 10% total words in any of the academic text (**Avril Coxhead (2000)**). So, this difference has given evidence that AWL is very useful to the university level students to meet their academic goals and is worth studying.

In this connection, questions come into the picture that whether the ESL students at their graduation level have adequate academic vocabulary or not?

ESL learners at UG Level in Andhra Pradesh seem to have less proficient in English while communicating, expressing their idea and thoughts succinctly in a given context It is observed that it may be due to various factors: medium instruction, low self-esteem, regional and parental background, teaching methods & materials used in the English classes and the inadequate level of vocabulary knowledge which obviously impacts their communication and their understanding about the subjects they study in their courses. ESL learners do not have adequate academic vocabulary to meet their academic needs. Even they do not have an idea about the required vocabulary at that level also.

The current study:

As the researcher has been teaching English for the last six years to university level graduates, he found that his 1st year B. Tech students have very low academic vocabulary that may not be sufficient to deal with their subjects at the university. Therefore, he wanted to investigate that how much percentage of words from AWL are known by his students

The purpose of the study is to investigate the idea that ESL learners at the university level have the sufficient academic vocabulary or not. They need to deal with many subjects under humanities branch to pave the way for their career. If they don't have sufficient academic vocabulary they can't understand those subjects including their English text books which they study in the 1st year itself. So, it is a need of the hour for them to learn the academic vocabulary since it is adding the another 10 percentage vocabulary to their existing vocabulary. In addition, AWL covers the four broad areas Arts, law, Commerce and Science. By mastering the AWL, a student at the university level will face the any academic challenge with ready to learn attitude.

The present research tries to find out the answers to the following questions.

1. What is the existing knowledge of Academic Word List of university level graduates?
2. If so, what aspects of academic words are to be known by the learners at graduate level?

Methodology:

Participants: Sixty-two students were taken as subjects for this study. Out of them, 29 students are girls and 33 students are boys. All are from the age group of 18 years since they completed their intermediate in various colleges in Andhra Pradesh state itself. The participants were first B.Tech Engineering graduates from the stream of Computer Science and Engineering from Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research (Deemed to be University), located in Vadlamudi, Guntur (District), in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. They also completed a course in English in their first semester titled "English Proficiency and Communication Skills", a lab course which helps them to take Cambridge Assessment English, Preliminary English Test (PET) of B1 level exam on Common European Framework of Reference. In their second semester they studying another English course called Technical English Communication (TEC) which deals with reading, writing, listening and speaking based on mostly lessons from technical topics. The researcher is the teacher cum instructor for the TEC and has been the counsellor for them for that semester too. So, he has a fair idea about their academic performance for those two semesters and knew the subjects personally.

Instrument:

The researcher has made the question paper consists 60 questions by covering the three aspects of a word, word meaning, word forms and word collocation which play major role in understanding word. All the questions were taken from the book **Focus on vocabulary: Mastering the Academic Word list by Diane Schmitt and Norbert Schmitt** from all the chapters because that book covers 504 words out of 570 words from AWL. These words are taken randomly from the AWL. It is a paper based test is taken by the participants. The three major aspects were included in the test: word meaning, word forms and word collocation respectively in section-A, Section-B and Section-C

Section-A consists 25 questions and testing the knowledge of word meanings of the subjects. The questions are in the format of matching the words with their meanings, read the word in isolation and cross out the one word which is not the synonym of that word from the given four words, fill in the gaps from the given

words in the table where words are used in the context by reading the sentence, read the sentence and find out the best possible word matches the meaning of the target word highlighted in the given sentence, read the word in the context in two sentences followed by learners to write their own sentence by using that word. All the questions were testing the knowledge of word meaning of the test takers.

Section-B consists 20 questions and were testing the knowledge of the learners word formation skills and using the form of the word like adjective, adverb and verb forms in the context. Questions are given in 4 models and all do check whether the learners are able to use the correct form of given word in isolation as well as in the context

Section-C consists 15 questions testing the learners ability of word collocations. Three types of questions are given. All questions test the ability of word collocation knowledge of the test takers. In the first model, the test takers have to read the target word in the context in three given sentences and understand how the word is collocating with the other words in context and they have to write one sentence on their own sentence in the same context. One clear example was given at the beginning of each model. In the second model, the target word is paired with different words to form different collocations. Three sentences were given like that and by reading those three sentences, learner has to fill the gap in the fourth sentence with the target word collocated with other word from the given three examples. In the last model of this section, the target word has to be matched with the set of words regularly occur with it. Set of words were given in the box to select and one example was given for understanding. Given example is the word “labor” always occur with the words “shortage, saving, market, unskilled”

Ex: labor

--*shortage*

--*saving*

--*market*

--*unskilled*

Procedure:

Data was collected through the test to know the subjects’ knowledge about the Academic Words List in the mentioned three aspects, word meaning, word forms and word collocation. The test has 60 questions based on the words randomly selected from the AWL and the researcher clearly expressed the purpose of the study to the subjects before conducting the test. He clearly mentioned to the subjects that the test was being conducted to know their existing knowledge of the AWL. He instructed them that they had to answer all the questions given by reading the questions carefully. 90 minutes’ time was given for the learners to finish the test.

Results analysis

Test Scores:Section-A (Word Meaning) Scores

Marks	SA- students
<25%	1
26-50 %	13
51-75%	39
76-100%	9
Total Students	62

Table-1

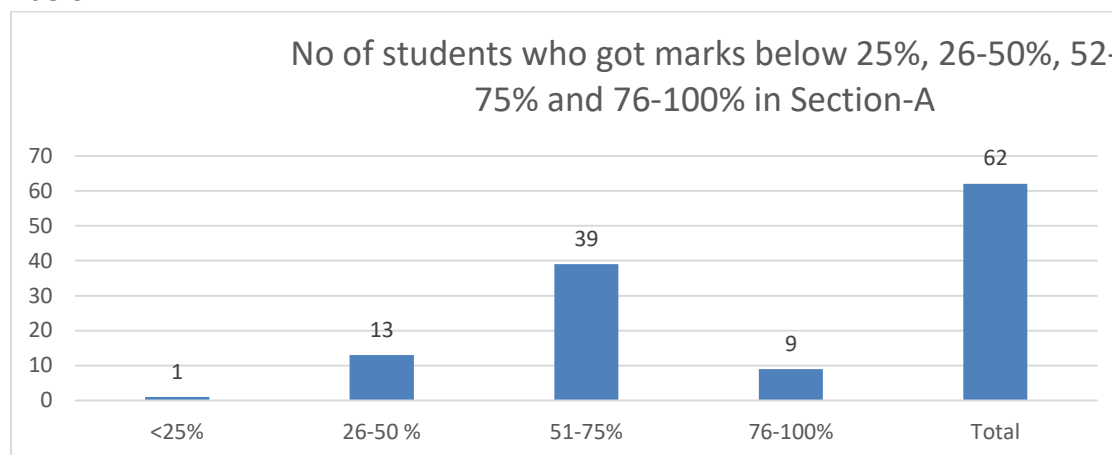


Chart-1

Table 1 shows the performance of the subjects on the word meanings which is the first aspect of the test conducted. words meaning is tested through various models, only one student scored below 25% marks. 13 students scored the marks in between 25-50 % of marks. 39 students scored the marks in between 51 to 75 % marks. It means lot of students do not know the meanings of the words tested Only 9 students scored above 75% marks. It means very less number of students (only 9 students out of 60) got above 75% marks in this particular aspect word meaning.

Section-B (Word Form) Scores

Marks	SB students
<25%	6
26-50 %	17
51-75%	30
76-100%	9
Total	62

Table-2

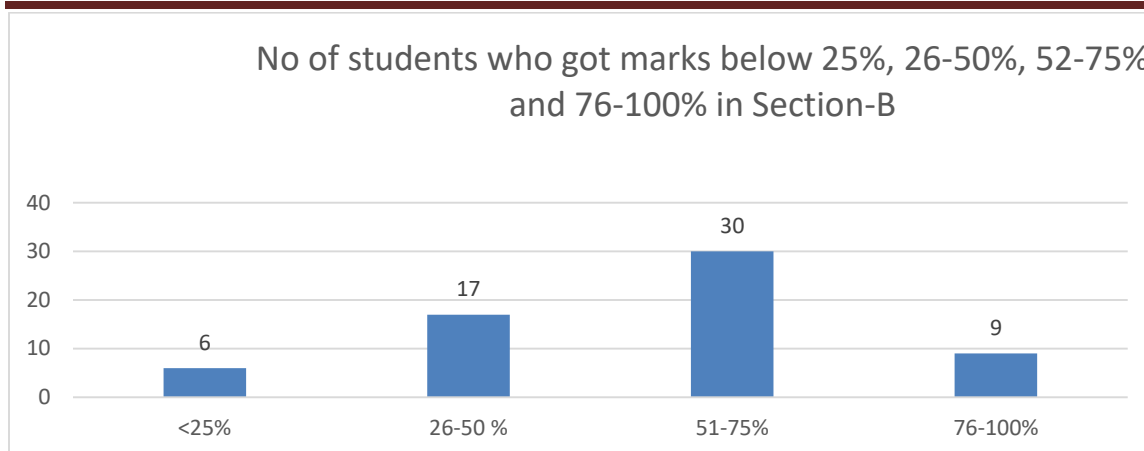


Chart-2

In Section-B, where word forms are being tested, 6 students scored below 25% marks out of 62 students. 17 students scored the marks in between 26 % above and below 50 % marks. It is slighter than the one fourth of the attended students. 30 students scored the marks in-between 51- 75 %marks and this number is almost half of the students took the test. Only 9 students scored the marks above 75 % marks which is a smaller number.

Section-C (Word Collocation) Scores

Marks	SB students
<25%	14
26-50 %	7
51-75%	32
76-100%	9
Total	62

Table-3

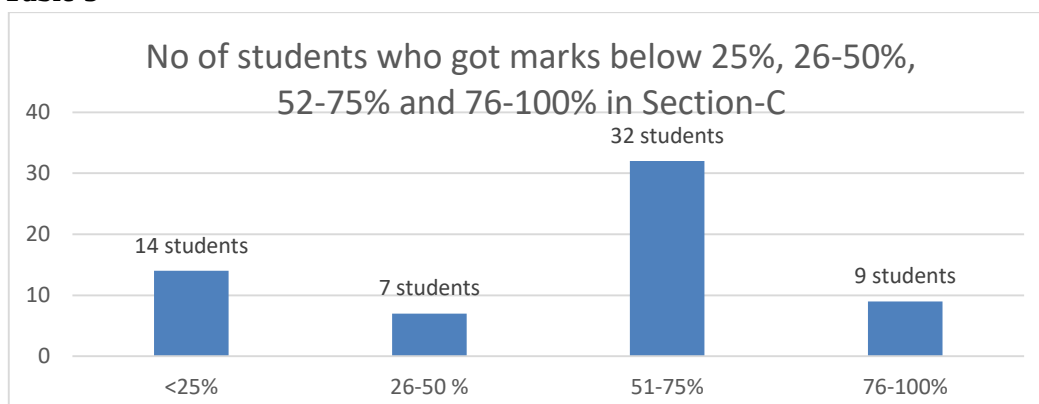


Chart-3

In Section-C, where word collocations are tested, 14 students scored just below 25% marks which is slightly high number when compared to the earlier sections A and B. But only 7 students scored the marks above 25 % and below 50% marks which is very low when you compare to earlier sections at that percentage. 32

students scored 51 to 75% marks which is almost same when compared to earlier sections at the same percentage. 9 students scored above 75% marks which is exactly similar when compared at that percentage. This score (between 76-100 %) is equal in all three sections and indicating that very few students (9 students out of 62) only knew the meanings of all three aspects of words: word meaning, word form and word collocation. **Total Score of all the 3 section (Out of 60 Marks)**

Students

Total Marks	Total students
<25%	5
26-50%	16
51-75%	33
76-100%	8
Total	62

Table-4

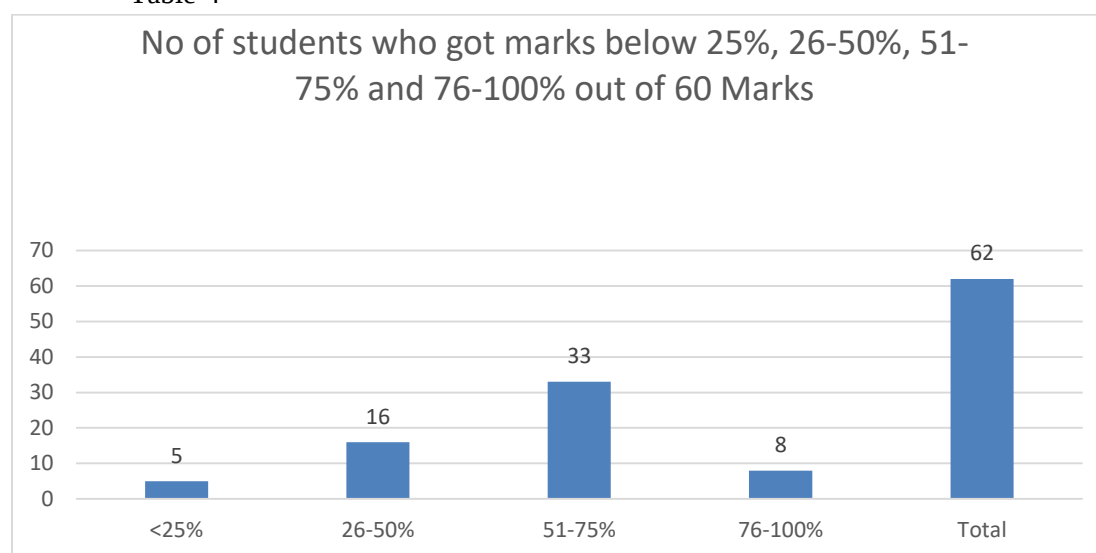
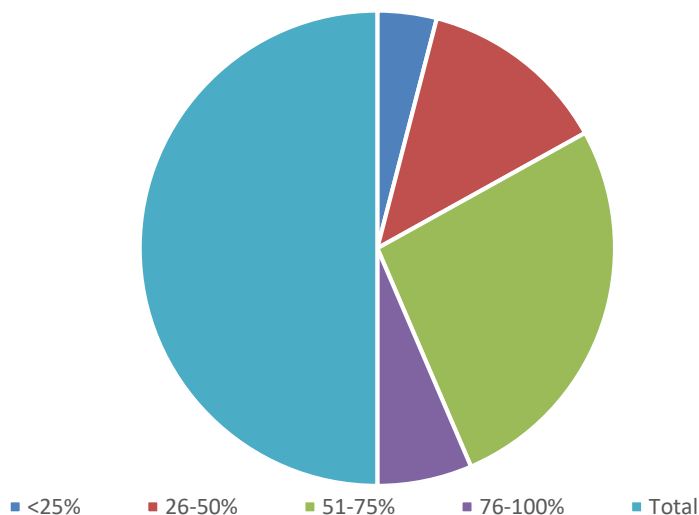


Chart-

If total marks are considered, i.e., 60 marks all together Section-A, B and C, 5 students scored below 25% marks. 16 students scored the 26% above and 50% below marks which is almost one fourth of the total number of students 33 students scored the marks in between 51 to 75 marks which is more than 50% of total students. Only 8 students scored above 75% marks which hardly 8% of total students attended. Test results are showing that there are only 8 students who got scored above 75% marks out of 60 marks and another 5 students who got very less than 25% of marks. 33 students scored the marks in between 51-75% marks out of 60 marks.

Total Test Results



Discussion:

The findings clearly show that students at university level have no complete knowledge about the AWL. Even though they know some words, they don't identify the form of that particular word or understand the other forms of the same words. Ex: Explicit: the learner may know the partial meaning of Explicit –Clear or making easy to understand, but he doesn't know the other forms of the same words like noun forms and adjective forms such as 'Explicitness' and 'Explicitly'. In other case, learners may know the word 'Accommodate' but they can't use the word 'Accommodation' in their writing as they are not aware of the noun form of 'accommodate'.

Table-4 has shown that a significant number of students, means 33 students scored the 50% above marks and 75% below marks which is the highest in the scored when it is considered the overall marks. It means, other half of the students scored the below 50% marks except 8 students who have shown good knowledge of AWL.

When It is evident in the table -1, where Section-A of the test (word meanings) is considered, it is evident that 39 students scored 51-75 percentage of marks of 25 marks of that particular section. This scores are showing that students are have somewhat good knowledge when they deal with word meanings. In that section, that is the highest percentage they got when it is compared with other sections in the test.

Table-2 is clearly indicating that, only 30 students are able to score in between 51-75% of marks. 23 students scored below 50% of marks in this part. From the result it is clear that, in part-2, where word forms are tested, almost 40% of the students felt difficulty in dealing with the word forms compared to word meanings. When above 75% is considered, in the both sections A and B, same number of students (9 students) scored the same percentage.

Table-3 indicates that almost the same result that 32 students scored above 50% of marks and below 75% marks. 23 participants scored only below 50% of marks. One clear difference is 14 students out of 62

students couldn't score even 25% of marks. From this result it is clear that almost 25% of students felt lot difficulty when they deal with word collocations. Only 7 students scored above 25% and below 50% marks unlike in other section because in section-A only 1 student scored below 25% marks and 6 students scored below 25% of marks in Section-B. It is the clear evidence that a large number of students (14 students) scored below 25% of marks. It is the highest numbers when we consider below 25% among all the 3 sections. One common fact is in all the three section only 9 students scored above 75% of marks irrespective of the testing item.

It is clear from the results, either from the individual sections of the test or overall result that only 50% of students (around 30 to 32) could score above 50% of marks and below 75% of total marks of the test. Only 10-15% of students (9 students out of 62) can score above 75% marks and good at dealing with the words from AWL. It is clear that close to 40% students are not clear about the word meaning, forms and collocations.

Conclusion:

The results clearly indicate that there is a dire need for the students to enhance their academic vocabulary. Their existing general vocabulary as well as the limited academic vocabulary is not sufficient to successfully deal with the subjects at their graduation level. It is strongly recommending that AWL can fill that gap to the maximum extent because it is already proved that it can cover the 10% of running words mentioned the above fields. So, Instructors of English and English teachers at the college or university level can use the AWL as a great source to teach academic vocabulary to their learners. Moreover, the AWL can be used in the learner's phones and they can have the instant access to the list which will speed up their learning even in the absence of the teacher. AWL is an unavoidable resource of academic vocabulary for the ESL learners at the graduation level. The study concludes that students at university level not only just knowing the AWL words but also they must know the word meaning, word forms and word collocations of AWL. This study also suggests that teachers should provide a kind of awareness among the students about the academic vocabulary in the first semester itself to master AWL and its need of the hour.

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