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Interview

Insights and Innovations: An Interview with Averil Coxhead on Teaching and Learning Academic Vocabulary

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Abstract
Professor Averil Coxhead is an applied linguist and educator known for her work in vocabulary acquisition and English language teaching. She is particularly recognized for her development of the Academic Word List (AWL), which consists of 570 head words that are commonly found in academic texts across various disciplines. The AWL aims to help English language learners enhance their proficiency in academic English by focusing on high-frequency academic vocabulary. Professor Coxhead's work on the AWL has been widely referenced and implemented in English language teaching materials and curricula around the world. Professor Coxhead is affiliated with Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, where she has conducted much of her research and teaching in applied linguistics. During an interview on April 10, 2024, Dr. Barry Lee Reynolds and Dr. Sophia Skoufaki asked Professor Coxhead about her journey into studying academic vocabulary and her views on the state of the art and necessary future research. Professor Coxhead discussed the complexities of academic vocabulary, offered strategies for teaching it effectively, and explored the role of technology and knowledge of first-language cognates in academic vocabulary learning in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) settings. Professor Coxhead emphasized the need for practical research focusing on vocabulary application and bridging the gap between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research and classroom practices.

Keywords
Academic vocabulary, Academic Word List, EAP, EMI, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching

Barry: Professor Coxhead, thank you for joining us today. What sparked your interest in vocabulary and specifically in academic vocabulary?

Years ago, I taught English for general purposes in Romania, Hungary, and Estonia. Through my language learning experiences in those contexts, I realized that vocabulary was more crucial for effective

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communication than grammar [for me]. I lacked the practice and expertise to determine precisely what language I needed and when. I vividly remember a Hungarian teacher who, in just the second lesson, began teaching me the second conditional tense—phrases like "If I were a doctor, I would operate." In that moment, I realized my immediate need was for words like "bananas," "oranges," "chicken," "noodles," "bus tickets," and "numbers" rather than complex grammatical structures. This realization prompted me to reflect on the importance of vocabulary, something I hadn't considered while learning te reo Māori in primary school in New Zealand or studying French in high school.

Upon returning to New Zealand after six years abroad, I pursued a postgraduate diploma at Victoria University of Wellington. During one of his classes, Professor John Read mentioned the university word list Paul Nation had developed and said it needed revision, sparking my interest. Concurrently, I was teaching on the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at the university, where I observed the challenges students faced in identifying which words to focus on given their diverse linguistic backgrounds and academic goals. Some students, for instance, were compelled to study economics by their parents despite harboring aspirations of becoming fashion designers.

This discrepancy between students' interests and their academic requirements intrigued me and led me to delve into research on academic vocabulary. As a teacher, this exploration allowed me to refine my understanding of my learners' needs and tailor my teaching methods accordingly. It helped me develop a clearer framework for guiding students through the acquisition of relevant vocabulary. This journey marked the beginning of my fascination with academic vocabulary.

Barry: Thank you for sharing. It's fascinating to hear about the diverse paths that lead researchers to vocabulary studies. Your insights provide a smooth segue into our next question. Could you explain what academic vocabulary is and how it differs from general and technical vocabulary?

Back in the day, I used to think there was a straightforward answer to that question. We can categorize vocabulary into general, academic, and technical, as Paul Nation has discussed. However, it's become clear that words and phrases can fall into multiple categories, including academic vocabulary (see Nation, 2016).

This complexity emerged during my initial research with the Academic Word List, which primarily focused on general academic vocabulary.

This category encompasses vocabulary that supports learning across different disciplines, regardless of students' specific fields of study. It's the kind of vocabulary that proves beneficial in EAP classes or English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, regardless of whether students are engineers or design enthusiasts. These words often appear in both general and academic contexts, carrying similar meanings, yet they may also hold specialized significance within particular subject areas.

The nature of academic vocabulary is such that it's deeply embedded within an educational framework. Terms like "hitherto" rarely surface in casual conversation, just as "stuff" and "thing" seldom find a place in academic written discourse. Navigating these distinctions can be challenging, as words may straddle the line between high frequency and academic usage or between general and discipline-specific contexts.

In this field, a significant challenge lies in ensuring that both learners and teachers grasp the nuances of academic discourse, whether spoken or written. Recent research, such as Yen Dang's work on academic spoken English and the Spoken Academic Word List (Dang et al., 2017), highlights the disparities between vocabulary-rich written academic English and more conversational spoken forms. Analyzing textbooks in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and EAP revealed disparities between recommended formulaic expressions and actual usage in academic settings. This disconnect underscores the importance of aligning teaching materials with the reality of academic communication in university settings, whether through EMI classrooms or EAP courses. It prompts us to consider the language students encounter in these contexts and the challenges they may face as they navigate academic discourse.

Barry: Your insights are so valuable. Secondary school teachers often face the challenge of deciding how to allocate their limited time for vocabulary teaching effectively. They frequently seek guidance on whether to prioritize academic vocabulary over general vocabulary, especially when students already possess a solid foundation in the latter. What approach would you recommend for teachers grappling with this decision? Should they dedicate their time exclusively to teaching academic vocabulary, or would a mixed approach be more beneficial?

I firmly believe that the most effective approach is a principled one. It involves educating learners about the various types of vocabulary and equipping them with the necessary strategies for effective vocabulary acquisition. I advocate for utilizing Paul Nation's "Four Strands" framework as a guiding principle (Nation, 2007). It's essential to acknowledge that direct vocabulary instruction alone isn't the most efficient way for learners to acquire vocabulary. We live in a world where time is limited, and memory doesn't work as neatly as we might hope.

One glaring gap I've noticed in many classrooms and curricula is the lack of emphasis on output, particularly in speaking and writing. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods, such as gap fills, often fall short in aligning with memory processes, as evidenced by research conducted by Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer, Stuart Webb, and myself (Boers et al., 2014). These activities don't always facilitate meaningful communication or retention.

In considering vocabulary instruction, we must prioritize activities that promote meaning-focused input and output rather than solely focusing on language forms. This involves contextualized learning through reading and listening, as well as expressing meanings through speaking and writing. While language-focused instruction has its place, it's crucial not to overemphasize form at the expense of meaning.

When dealing with academic phrases, in particular, breaking them down into individual parts can hinder comprehension. Instead, we should focus on teaching vocabulary in meaningful chunks, understanding that certain phrases are inherent to academic discourse and tend to co-occur.

Another crucial aspect often overlooked is fluency. In our quest to introduce new vocabulary, we must not neglect reinforcing previously learned material. Paul Nation advocates for dedicating a significant portion of instructional time to revisiting and reinforcing previously learned vocabulary to ensure its retention in long-term memory (Nation, 2007).

In selecting vocabulary for instruction, relevance and utility should take precedence over novelty. Low-frequency words, while intriguing, may not serve students' immediate needs. Additionally, ensuring continuity and depth in vocabulary instruction can enhance students' fluency and comprehension.

Ultimately, learners benefit most when they actively engage in meaningful communication and are supported by well-designed instructional practices. By focusing on meaningful input and output, incorporating fluency-building activities, and reinforcing previously learned vocabulary, teachers can empower students to become proficient users of academic language.

Sophia: Your emphasis on leveraging students' existing knowledge to enhance their understanding of academic vocabulary is compelling. Academic vocabulary often carries multiple meanings, making it essential to scaffold learning experiences effectively. Can you share some strategies for EMI vocabulary teaching that capitalize on students' prior knowledge to facilitate their grasp of meanings that tend to occur more frequently in academic setting? How can educators transition learners from general to more specialized senses of vocabulary effectively?

Absolutely. I advocate for an approach that integrates students' subject expertise and utilizes contextualized learning experiences. When teaching EMI classes, I often encourage students to dissect academic texts containing challenging vocabulary. We analyze words within their contextual framework, examining their usage patterns and nuances. Additionally, I leverage the expertise of students who

possess prior knowledge in specific subject areas. By involving them as resources within the classroom, we foster collaborative learning environments where students collectively explore and understand subject-specific vocabulary.

Furthermore, I implement revision activities where students engage with vocabulary through interactive exercises. For instance, I might present a set of words related to a particular topic and prompt students to identify connections and hierarchies among them. This encourages them to delve deeper into the semantic relationships between words and enhances their understanding of subject-specific terminology.

Repetition and reinforcement are vital components of vocabulary instruction. I ensure that students revisit and practice previously learned vocabulary continuously, recognizing that mastery requires ongoing exposure and application. By integrating vocabulary into various learning activities and providing regular opportunities for practice, students solidify their comprehension and retention of academic language.

I also emphasize the concept of frequency in vocabulary acquisition. Academic vocabulary encompasses words that are both specialized and commonly used. By highlighting the frequency of certain terms and their relevance across contexts, students gain insights into the multifaceted nature of academic language.

Incorporating technology into vocabulary instruction can also be beneficial. Tools like corpora enable students to explore language patterns and collocations independently, empowering them to deepen their understanding autonomously. For instance, I recently conducted research on training learners to utilize the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for vocabulary analysis. The findings indicated that students who engaged with corpora in writing activities demonstrated increased usage of collocations in their writing, highlighting the efficacy of technology-enhanced learning approaches.

Ultimately, effective EMI vocabulary teaching requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges and builds upon students' prior knowledge while providing opportunities for meaningful engagement and practice. By integrating subject expertise, contextualized learning experiences, and technological resources, educators can empower students to navigate and master academic vocabulary effectively.

Barry: Another related question I have pertains to technology. Specifically, how do you envision technology addressing the academic vocabulary challenges encountered by students in EMI settings? Essentially, we're delving into vocabulary acquisition here. Do you believe technology offers solutions to these challenges within EMI classrooms, particularly for students transitioning from secondary to tertiary education?

Absolutely, I do. Currently, I'm exploring a website called EAP Foundation, which I find immensely valuable. Are you familiar with it? https://www.eapfoundation.com/vocab/academic/ It's a comprehensive resource that focuses extensively on academic vocabulary. While this website may represent a somewhat narrow definition of technology, it serves a crucial purpose by providing applied linguistics researchers with clear explanations of academic vocabulary. Additionally, it offers practical tools for text analysis, such as identifying academic collocations. For instance, I recently used it to analyze the usage of academic collocations in a textbook from a Chinese context, aiming to assess its alignment with EAP vocabulary standards.

What stands out about platforms like these is their array of tools that empower learners. From understanding collocational patterns to identifying common phrases and functions, learners can employ techniques like word clouds to visualize vocabulary usage. I'm currently advocating for the integration of such tools into teaching practices, like utilizing word clouds to highlight common collocations. It's crucial to dispel the myth that English is arbitrary; in reality, it follows clear patterns, and these tools help illuminate those patterns for learners.

While technology offers promising solutions, we must also acknowledge its limitations. For instance, the rise of AI presents challenges regarding learner autonomy and genuine language production. Simply relying on Grammarly for text correction doesn't foster true language mastery; learners must actively engage in generating language themselves. It's about creating conditions for authentic learning experiences, where learners develop a deep understanding of language and can apply it effectively.

Furthermore, we need to consider how vocabulary instruction fits into the broader curriculum. Webb and Chang's work (2012), for example, suggests a structured approach to vocabulary instruction that aligns with overall program goals. By integrating technology into these frameworks, we can enhance vocabulary learning across all four language skills.

As for vocabulary assessment, tools like the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation and Beglar, 2007) can provide valuable insights into learners' lexical knowledge. However, we must interpret results cautiously, considering factors like age and language exposure. Nonetheless, research suggests that vocabulary size correlates with language proficiency, emphasizing its importance in language acquisition.

Let me share a personal anecdote that illustrates the profound impact of effective vocabulary instruction. I once had a student who had attended my EAP class over the summer and then pursued two semesters of studies, possibly in economics—I can't recall exactly. Towards the end of the academic year, he visited my office unexpectedly. Standing in my doorway, he expressed, "You know, the Academic Word List..." I nodded, familiar with the term being the one that developed the list—likely unbeknownst to him. He continued, "I encounter those words constantly in my academic studies." This moment encapsulated the essence of meaningful vocabulary instruction. It's not merely about presenting a list of words; it's about instilling a deeper comprehension of language usage and its underlying principles. This anecdote serves as a testament to the transformative power of equipping students with the tools to navigate academic discourse effectively.

Lastly, we must recognize the significance of bilingualism and the role of learners' first languages in second language acquisition. Shutting down one language in favor of another hinders language development; instead, we should embrace parallel language use and leverage learners' existing linguistic resources.

I hope this offers some clarity on how technology, coupled with effective pedagogy, can address academic vocabulary challenges in EMI settings.

Sophia: Your previous point resonates with another of our questions. I recall your collaboration with Jennifer Greene (Greene and Coxhead, 2015) on the book *Academic Vocabulary for Middle School Students*, where you provided practical guidance on identifying cognates. For instance, you mentioned the strategy of highlighting prefixes and suffixes to identify cognate words. What are your thoughts on incorporating cognitive awareness activities like these into EMI teaching?

Indeed, there are varying perspectives on cognates, but I firmly believe in leveraging anything that aids learners without hindering them. When I was developing the Academic Word List, it became evident that over 80% of the words, despite there being only 570 head words, had Greek or Latin origins. This presents a significant advantage for speakers of languages like Greek or Russian. Cognates serve as a valuable resource that learners can tap into. Sometimes, learners are surprised to find words in English that exist in their first language, such as Japanese. Recognizing these connections between languages can be immensely beneficial for language acquisition.

In my own experience learning French, there was significant emphasis on false friends, which often led to confusion. However, the concept of avoiding interference in language learning was enlightening. While learning words that look and sound similar simultaneously can lead to mix-ups, training learners to recognize clear cognates can be highly effective. For example, in the Norwegian context, Kimberly Skjelde (2023) found that learners didn't readily recognize cognates due to the diverse sources of Norwegian vocabulary. However, she highlighted the immense potential of cognates as a learning

resource, despite some learners' lack of exposure to academic vocabulary in their first language. This parallel education dynamic, as seen in the case of Samoan children transitioning to English-medium instruction, underscores the importance of nurturing proficiency in learners' first languages alongside their second language development.

Sophia: Moving on to our next question, what areas related to academic vocabulary learning and teaching do you believe researchers should prioritize? You've touched on this in your previous answers, but I am interested if you have any additional insights to share.

I'm particularly keen to see more research focusing on the practical application of academic vocabulary for learners, especially concerning multi-word units. I often find some research areas challenging, especially those that compare learners' usage against some normative style. Instead, I advocate for investigating the nature of vocabulary input learners receive. This is where I find the training of learners to use resources like COCA intriguing. By engaging learners in project-based work that emphasizes language exploration and pattern recognition, we equip them with valuable skills to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and usage.

Also, there's a gap between corpus-based research findings and their implementation in the classroom. It's crucial to bridge this gap by examining how findings from such studies can inform instructional practices. This involves scrutinizing textbooks, the activities they include, and how teachers utilize these materials in teaching. As we know, classroom dynamics can prompt educators to adapt their lesson plans on the fly. For instance, if an activity lacks sufficient output, teachers may pivot to discussion-based tasks to stimulate engagement.

Clarity is paramount in vocabulary instruction. Students should understand the purpose behind each learning activity and the underlying principles guiding vocabulary acquisition. These principles are no secret: interest, noticing, and frequent exposure are key. It's essential to make these strategies transparent to students, emphasizing why they matter and how they're incorporated into classroom practices. Effective teaching isn't about allocating more time to vocabulary instruction; it's about using existing time strategically to meet learners' needs. That's my approach.

Sophia: Yeah, Averil, your insight into focusing on multi-word expressions is fascinating. You've conducted research on how collocations can be learned (Toomer et al., 2024) and on how to enhance their use in spoken English (Thompson et al., 2023), primarily in general English contexts. I'm curious about your thoughts on how this research could transition into the realm of EAP.

There are several avenues we could explore in this area. For instance, we've been investigating learning as a chunk and methods to emphasize this aspect. Frank Boers has contributed significantly to this domain, particularly in developing more effective strategies for memorizing chunks of language. Additionally, there's been intriguing research on eye-tracking, examining what we focus on and how that influences learning.

When we examine the Academic Word List, one observation stands out: these words tend to co-occur with each other. For example, if you encounter "assessment," you'll likely come across "evaluation" as well. Exploring these patterns further could provide valuable insights into how these words interact and prime each other.

It's crucial to address any misconceptions students might have regarding academic vocabulary. If they perceive it solely as long, technical Greek or Latin terms associated with medical jargon, they miss the broader significance of high-frequency vocabulary in everyday language use. Academic vocabulary is interconnected with general English, emphasizing the importance of even small words in academic contexts.

My previous work, such as analyzing corpora and textbooks (e.g., Yang and Coxhead, 2022), has shed light on what teachers actually use in the classroom. For example, my examination of TED talks

revealed that, despite being designed for spoken delivery, they contain language more akin to written texts (Coxhead and Walls, 2012). Understanding the nature of the texts teachers use can inform better support strategies.

Dissemination of research findings is crucial. The success of projects like the Academic Word List owes much to accessibility. For instance, my colleague Irina Elgort's (https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist) initiative to create a website for the Academic Word List significantly increased its visibility and impact. Moving forward, it's essential for researchers to always consider how their work can benefit teachers and learners. Whether it's exploring technology integration or understanding classroom dynamics, research should aim to address practical needs effectively.

Sophia: Thank you, Averil, for your insightful responses and generosity with your time today.

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vocabulary research has focused on incidental learning from reading novels, playing video games, text reconstruction, and listening to academic lectures. He has also conducted vocabulary studies on word card use, reader choice, lexical coverage, contextual richness, perception, extramural engagement, and metacognition, among others. He admits being a bit star-stuck interviewing Professor Coxhead, a moment he'll cherish between bouts of vocabulary analysis and methodological ponderings.

Sophia Skoufaki is Associate Supervisor at the University of Essex, UK. She specialises in vocabulary studies and discourse analysis, currently focusing on English L1 speakers' knowledge of English academic vocabulary and EFL teachers' conceptualisation of coherence in writing. Her earlier vocabulary research examined English academic word learnability and polysemy as well as the effectiveness of idiom teaching approaches inspired by Cognitive Linguistics. In terms of discourse analysis, she has explored the potential contribution of coherence theories to coherence error detection in EFL learners' writing. She has thoroughly enjoyed collaborating with Dr. Reynolds, Professor Coxhead and all the contributors of this special journal issue.