# Analyzing Lexical Features and Academic Vocabulary in Academic Writing

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**Abstract. Introduction.** Academic writing is considered to be an important means of sharing knowledge and academic experience. The article investigates lexical features of academic writing and academic vocabulary, correlation of academic vocabulary and writing proficiency.

The main objective of teaching EAP is the development and further improvement of communicative skills of post-graduate students in professional and academic fields. There is a reasonable necessity to study and improve practical aspects of foreign language education of postgraduate students, contributing to the effective mastering of English for academic purposes (EAP), development of academic writing skills, mastering academic vocabulary.

**The purpose of the research** is to analyze such lexical features as lexical diversity, lexical complexity, lexical density, word frequency and academic vocabulary usage of postgraduate students' academic writing outcomes in the process of learning English for academic purposes.

Theoretical and practical methods of research have been used in the article: theoretical analysis of scientific researches, methods of logical generalization, observation, analyses of EAP students' academic writing outcomes.

**Results of the research.** The article highlights specific peculiarities of academic writing like formal structure, specific rules, citation, traditional English grammar usage, punctuation, spelling etc. In the frame of the article we explored lexical features and academic vocabulary in English academic writing of EAP learners' in the process of learning English for academic purposes. We studied the relation between academic vocabulary and writing abilities. The author investigated ways of word complexity, paying special attention to affixes and compound words. Different approaches to the analyses of lexical density and diversity are implemented. The most frequent academic words (nouns, verbs and adjectives) are analyzed.

**Conclusion.** Our results showed a strong relation between academic vocabulary and writing proficiency of postgraduate students. Our empirical observation revealed correlation of lexical diversity and academic writing quality of EAP learners. Academic vocabulary demonstrates significant interrelationship with the quality of writing. Word frequency correlates with word difficulty. According to our findings advanced learners predominantly use less frequent words and have larger vocabulary size.

**Keywords:** lexical features, academic vocabulary, academic writing, lexical complexity, lexical diversity, word frequency, lexical density.

**Introduction**. The role of English for academic purposes (EAP) is increasingly growing. This expansion is conditioned by its dynamic development. EAP is an educational approach that involves teaching postgraduates to use the English language relevantly for studying and conducting research. It is a fast growing branch of English for specific purposes (ESP). Researchers underlined that English for academic purposes is currently experiencing a period of continuous global growth (Akşit & Mengü, 2020; Ilchenko & Kramar, 2020). English for academic purposes has become a global phenomenon and a central focus in academic community. The main objective of teaching EAP is the development and further improvement of communicative skills of post-graduate students in professional and academic fields. It embraces a wide range of tasks connected with the development of learners' skills of conducting oral and written academic communication (making reports, presentations, participation in scientific discussions, conferences, congresses etc.), interpreting foreign scientific texts from the specialty they major in; working with academic authentic foreign language texts, skillful usage of knowledge of academic terminology, grammatical structure etc.; academic writing abilities (writing reports, reviews, annotations, essays, theses, articles) etc. Therefore, there is a substantiated need for further development

and improvement of theoretical and practical aspects of foreign language education of postgraduate students, contributing to the effective mastering of English as a means of professional and academic communication and for performing a successful scientific activity.

It is a learner-centered approach. Therefore it is challenging for both teachers and students, as the learner himself and his/her situation or conditions (target needs) are in the focus of attention. It comprises a number of language activities, but the main emphasis is placed on learners' development of academic writing skills, mastering academic vocabulary, academic reading (conference proceedings, articles), discussions, individual assignments etc.

Academic writing is a challenging task for non-linguistic students in particular. Scientists view academic writing as the major means of circulation of knowledge, exchange of academic experience in academic disciplines and the key to the successful development (Hernandez, 2022).

EAP learners face significant challenges in the process of academic writing. Those difficulties may be connected with development of the content and ideas, syntactic problems, usage of linguistic terms, poor punctuation, incorrect grammar structure, academic vocabulary, getting timely and provision of a constructive feedback (Gupta et al., 2022); problems with spelling, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, failure to cite sources, wrong choice of the appropriate academic words (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022).

Academic vocabulary fosters student achievement in learning EAP. It is considered to be one of the most significant indicators of postgraduate students' mastering of the subject area content. Moreover, lexical knowledge is defined as a strong criterion of developmental stages of writing ability, indicating writing proficiency (Vo, 2019; Yu, 2018; Lavallée & McDonough, 2015). However, enhancing academic vocabulary can be challenging for non-linguistic EAP students. Thus, provision of constructive feedback in the process of foreign language study should be given on a regular basis (Chyzhykova, 2021) in order to support students in mastering EAP. Moreover, postgraduate students need an individual support (both English language and general dissertation) during their postgraduate study (Gupta et al., 2022); developing EAP students' problem solving skills, fostering their autonomy and critical thinking skills (Akşit & Mengü, 2020).

**Literature review.** Grammatical and lexical features of academic writing are in the focus of attention of such scholars as O. M. Bieliaieva, H. Habil, K. Havrylieva, A. Imani, Yu. V. Lysanets, L. Slipchenko, H. Morokhovets, S. Vo, X. Yu and others. Thus, U. Maamuujav explored the problem of measuring lexical features, usage of academic vocabulary, complex scoring of writing quality; P. Meara, R. Smith studied lexical frequency profiles; S. Granger and M. Paquot devoted their research to the usage of lexical verbs in academic discourse. Lexical, grammatical and also discourse-semantic peculiarities of academic writing and the role of local grammar features is the subject of research conducted by H. Su and L. Zhang (2020). The authors analyzed grammar terminologies and phraseologies.

S. Bailey, P. Davidson, V. Langum and K. Sullivan investigated specifics and challenges in the process of academic writing. H. P. Hernandez studied syntactic features of scientific writing. A. Ansarifar; H. Shahriari and R. Pishghadam paid special attention to the problem of syntactic development and complexity from the point of view of phrasal modification features in second language academic writing. Noun phrase complexity in the academic writing has been analyzed. Grammatical complexity in academic foreign language has been researched by D. Biber and B.Gray. The authors analyzed nature of grammatical complexity, phrasal structures and dependent clauses. E. Hinkel studied specific grammar constructions and their attendant lexical elements. Special features of teaching foreign language to PhD students have been analyzed by N.M. Dukhanina; practical aspects of academic writing in English and Ukrainian have been studied by O.Semenog and O. Fast, I. Serebrianska, T. Tymoshenko, N. Grechykhina and others. The authors focused their attention on such important components of academic writing as scientific terminology, academic integrity and related concepts like cultural aspect and academic ethics.

However, despite the number of scientific papers devoted to academic writing and its lexical features, lexical features of academic writing of non-linguistic postgraduate students and peculiarities of academic vocabulary usage of non-native learners have not been highlighted to the full extend.

**The aim of the article** is to analyze lexical features and give a description of academic vocabulary usage in postgraduate students' academic writing in the process of learning English for academic purposes.

To achieve the purpose, we outlined the main tasks that we tried to solve in the frame of our research: analysis of lexical features (lexical diversity, lexical complexity, lexical density, word frequency); study the peculiarities of academic vocabulary usage by EAP learners in academic writing; analysis of academic word forms that appear more frequently in the academic outcomes of postgraduate students; identification of academic writing challenges from the perspectives of postgraduate students.

**The research methods.** We used such theoretical and practical methods of research in the article: theoretical analysis of scientific researches, methods of logical generalization, observation, analysis of EAP students' academic writing outcomes.

**Results and Discussion.** In scientific literature the specific peculiarities of academic writing is underlined. Among them are the following ones: formal structure, specific rules, strict rules for citation when supporting ideas, using themes connected with abstract concepts, sticking to traditional English grammar, punctuation, spelling etc. (Davidson, 2019, p. 15). The outcomes may involve such activities as writing essays, reports, book review, introduction and conclusions, reflective writing etc. (Davidson, 2019). It implies the development of such skills as independent reasoning, research skills, preparation for professional practice, writing for oneself and the audience (Davidson, 2019, pp.16-17).

In particular, writing argumentative essays is considered to be an essential part of academic writing (Ilchenko & Kramar, 2020). It is based on two core tasks, aiming at the development of discussion skills and problem-solving skills. It is also necessary to be able to use argument structure, data, and facts etc. (Ilchenko & Kramar, 2020, p.50]. Integrative thinking (viewing the problems as a whole), critical thinking, the ability to differentiate between facts and opinion, identifying logical fallacies are considered by the authors to be of great importance in academic writing training (Ilchenko & Kramar, 2020). Scientists underline that rich and complex vocabulary significantly contributes to the quality of academic writing (Maamuujav, 2021).

In the frame of the article we explored lexical features and academic vocabulary in English academic writing of EAP learners in the process of learning English for academic purposes. We studied the relation between academic vocabulary and writing abilities. In fact, the study was an attempt to investigate word frequency, lexical complexity, diversity, density. Our results showed a strong relation between academic vocabulary and writing proficiency of postgraduate students at the individual level.

Word complexity can be defined as orthographic and morphological complexity of a word (Lawrence et al., 2022). Another definition viewed lexical complexity as a formation of a single lexical word and how difficult it is to understand (Imani & Habil, 2014). In addition, scientists (Imani & Habil, 2014) underlined that academic terms may be formed by means of adding different affixes to the word roots and thus creating various meanings. In other words, the more affixes (derivational, inflectional) can be added to the root of the word the more complex the meaning of the word is (Imani & Habil, 2014). The researchers underlined such characteristic and function of derivational affixes as: they change the part of speech and the meaning of the word; occur in noun, verb and an adjective; they may change the context meaning to the word totally, but in some case, derivational affixes do not change the context meaning but only the part of speech meaning (Simaremare et al., 2021). Among derivational one can find such affixes as dis-, re-, un-, ir-, il-, in-, im-, -ize, -tion, -ary etc. They give concrete meaning to the words as in such examples as disagree, rewrite, innovation, uncomfortable, irregular, illegal, indivisible, impossible, modernize, binary (Glossary of linguistic terms, 2003). The function of certain derivational affixes is the creation of new

base forms (Simaremare et al., 2021, p. 47). Derivational affixes are classified into prefix (un -, dis-, pre-), suffix (-ment, -ly, -ness,), infix, and circumfix (en-en, in-ation, un-y) (Simaremare et al., 2021, p.46-50). Inflectional affixes indicate grammatical information such as case, modality, number, person, tense, voice; they do not change the word class of the stem, producing a predictable change of the word meaning (Glossary of linguistic terms, 2003). Among the most common derivational affixes in academic writing outcomes of EAP learners we found out the types of affixes that are prefixes (un-, re-, pre-, dis-, on- , over -, trans-, micro-, under-, inter-), suffixes (-ly, -ing, -ion, -ed, -y, -er, -ive, -ous, -ation -ant, -ness, -ment, -ious,), and circumfixes (un-y, re-ation, re-ing, trans-ed, dis-ed, in-ation, inter-ion). Hence, the more affixes are added to the root word, the more complex the meaning of the word will be (Imani & Habil, 2014, p. 45). For instance: identify, identification, unidentifiable, misidentify; occur, reoccur, occurrence; available, unavailable, availability; prove, provability, provable, provably, unproved; regard, regardless; solve, unsolvable etc.

Compound words are another way of word complexity (Imani & Habil, 2014). Compound words contain a stem that is made up of more than one root (Glossary of linguistic terms, 2003): they can be written separately (open compound words – cell phone, common sense), with a hyphen (hyphenated compound words - up-to-date, observer-based) and sometimes as one word (closed compound words – nevertheless, background, within) (Imani & Habil, 2014). Complexity may also be measured by the number of syllables, morphemes or letters and can be related to individual differences in vocabulary learning (Lawrence et al., 2022).

Lexical density can be measured by different approaches: 1) it is referred as correlation of content words to total number of words, lexical words compared to function (grammatical) words (Imani & Habil, 2014; Maamuujav, 2021); 2) lexical density is measured along clauses (the quantity of lexical items (can be more than one word per clause); and the most practical one 3) number of content words per clause (Imani & Habil, 2014). Hence, it could be assumed that academic writing outcomes of high quality may demonstrate higher percentage of content word. However, in some scientific researches no significant correlation of density and academic writing quality was found (Maamuujav, 2021; Yu, 2018), while lexical density was considered to be highly correlated with lexical diversity (Maamuujav, 2021).

Scientists have applied different approaches to study lexical diversity. Some researchers associated it either with vocabulary richness or lexical density. In particular, lexical diversity is defined through the notion of different words or the difficulty and rarity of the used words (Yu, 2018, p.57). Thus, lexical diversity indicates the range of vocabulary and ability to avoid repetition. The high level of lexical diversity indicates better writing quality (Yu, 2018, p.58). Our empirical observation showed strong correlation of lexical diversity and academic writing quality of EAP learners.

Academic vocabulary has strong correlation to writing quality in EAP acquisition. We agree that the higher percentage of lexical units that refer to academic vocabulary demonstrated better results in academic writing, while lower percentage of academic vocabulary usage, high-frequency and basic words are typical for low scored essays (Maamuujav, 2021).

We have summarized noun, adjective and verb data relating to academic vocabulary on the basis of vocabulary data found in the design of English teaching materials for academic purposes:

*Table 1*

**Academic vocabulary data of EAP learners' writing outcomes**

| Academic Vocabulary | | |
|---|---|---|
| nouns | verbs (lemmas) | adjectives |
| research | describe | important |
| study | include | significant |
| challenge | demonstrate | challenging |

| technology | associate | Major |
|---|---|---|
| discussion | analyze | reasonable |
| innovation | define | effective |
| suggestion | solve | different |
| majority | produce | various |
| example | report | crucial |
| conclusion | illustrate | essential |
| difference | create | substantial |
| function | outline | strategic |
| requirement | restrict | relevant |
| assumption | measure | simultaneous |
| impact | explore | acceptable |
| aim | add | initial |
| consumption | discuss | profound |
| domain | argue | specific |
| factor | provide | similar |
| aspect | represent | particular |
| principle | attempt | experimental |
| integration | occur | explicit |
| significance | prove | considerable |
| implementation | highlight | appropriate |
| advantage | reveal | scientific |
| implication | indicate | applicable |
| perception | examine | peculiar |
| findings | identify | fundamental |
| purpose | increase | sufficient |
| survey | comprise | valid |
| result | show | widespread |
| achievement | contribute | absolute |
| skill | evaluate | critical |
| solution | assume | dependent |
| basis | contradict | actual |
| source | integrate | numerous |
| perspective | facilitate | equal |
| dimension | foster | evident |
| exception | emphasize | final |
| majority | expand | general |
| phenomenon | conduct | identical |
| quality | implement | certain |
| investigation | obtain | formal |
| issue | invest | incomplete |
| criterion | interact | extensive |
| formation | acquire | individual |
| group | claim | competitive |
| growth | adapt | leading |
| exception | reduce | frequent |
| outcome | specify | main |
| hypothesis | consist | internal |
| method | stimulate | modern |
| importance | deal | distinct |
| measurement | retain | influential |
| improvement | evolve | necessary |
| approach | reflect | basic |
| experiment | observe | rapid |
| information | classify | complex |
| feature | refer | obvious |

Among overused verbs we have observed verbs denoting in-depth research (show, analyze, examine, explore, observe), verbs describing data (demonstrate, indicate, reflect), showing components (include, comprise, consist), agreement or disagreement with that perspective (agree, prove, discuss, deny, argue, claim), cognitive verbs (identify, describe, explain). Among the most commonly used English nouns in students' academic writing we selected such words as: research, study, aspect, advantage, purpose, aim, example, discussion, method, problem, issue, challenge, technology, approach, example, achievement, experiment, investigation, information, difference. Among overused adjectives were noticed the following ones: important, different, specific, scientific, effective, experimental, significant, challenging, necessary, certain, fundamental, complex, basic, main, widespread etc.

Word frequency reflects how often certain words appear in texts (Lavallée & McDonough, 2015). It may be defined as word listing in accordance with how frequently they occur in a text (the most common or important words). In scientific researches lexical frequency is correlated with lexical formality (Imani & Habil, 2014). Moreover, frequency is also a predictor of word difficult (Koirala, 2015). The scientific exploration demonstrates that more proficient writers are inclined to use less-frequent words (Imani & Habil, 2014). The other tendency shows that with increasing frequency, difficulty decreased. It can be explained by the factor that low frequency words are either difficult to master for EAP learners or are considered to be unknown ones (Koirala, 2015). It has been demonstrated that the size of frequency effect reduced as a result of the learner's vocabulary volume. Moreover, frequency effect depends upon learner's language proficiency (Monaghan et al., 2017).We completely agree with the researches that confirm the idea that frequency decrease with the increasing of difficulty and the fact the advanced learners predominantly use less frequent words and have larger vocabulary size (Koirala, 2015; Monaghan et al., 2017).

**Conclusion.** English for academic purposes is now a growing branch of English for specific purposes. The main goal of teaching EAP is mastering communicative skills in academic domain. It includes a wide range of tasks connected with the development of EAP learners' skills to conduct oral and written academic communication (making reports, presentations, participation in scientific conferences and congresses, writing scientific articles and theses etc.), working with foreign scientific literature, mastering academic vocabulary, academic reading and discussions that prepare post graduate students for professional and academic communication and for performing a successful scientific activity.

Academic writing is a significant part of teaching EAP. It is a means of exchanging ideas and scientific experience. Academic English writing is a challenging task, especially for non-linguistic students. Academic vocabulary mastery is considered to be one of the key factors of writing proficiency. Vocabulary knowledge and lexical proficiency contribute significantly to the quality of academic writing.

The results of the research showed a link between academic vocabulary knowledge and writing proficiency of postgraduate students at the individual level. Moreover, word frequency usually increases with the decrease of word difficulty. Lexical density in its turn is highly correlated with lexical diversity. Lexical diversity is associated with the ability to avoid repetition and indicates better writing quality. Our empirical observation showed strong correlation of lexical diversity and academic writing quality of EAP learners. Lexical complexity is also a factor that indicates the quality of academic writing. Moreover, advanced learners predominantly use less frequent words and have larger vocabulary size. A rich and complex vocabulary considerably influences the quality of academic writing. A higher percentage of usage of academic lexical units showed better results in academic writing, whereas a lower percentage of academic vocabulary, high frequency, and basic words were used in low-scoring writing outcomes. All these factors should be taken into account both by students and teachers in the process

of academic writing teaching and learning, in the process of designing English teaching

materials and when assessing EAP learners' academic writing outcomes.

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**Аналіз лексичних особливостей та наукової лексики в академічному письмі**

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**Анотація**. Вступ. У статті досліджуються лексичні особливості академічного письма та наукова лексика, співвідношення академічної лексики та письма.

Основною метою викладання англійської мови наукового спрямування є розвиток та подальше вдосконалення комунікативних навичок аспірантів у професійній та академічній сферах. Існує необхідність вивчення та вдосконалення практичних аспектів іншомовної освіти аспірантів, яка сприяє

ефективному оволодінню англійською мовою для академічних цілей. Академічне письмо справедливо вважається важливим засобом обміну знаннями та науковим досвідом. Тому виникає обґрунтована потреба вивчення лексичних особливостей академічного письма аспірантів під час вивчення англійської мови наукового спрямування.

**Метою дослідження** є аналіз таких лексичних особливостей, як лексичне різноманіття, лексична складність, лексична щільність та насиченість, частота слів, а також аналіз академічної лексики у письмових роботах аспірантів у процесі вивчення англійської мови наукового спрямування.

У статті використано теоретичні та практичні **методи дослідження**: теоретичний аналіз наукових досліджень, методи логічного узагальнення, спостереження, аналіз результатів академічного письма аспірантів під час вивчення англійської мови наукового спрямування.

**Результати дослідження**. У статті висвітлюються особливості академічного письма, такі як формальна структура, правила цитування, використання традиційної англійської граматики, пунктуація, правопис тощо. У рамках статті ми досліджували лексичні особливості та академічну лексику в англійському академічному письмі аспірантів у процес вивчення англійської мови наукового спрямування. Ми вивчали зв'язок між академічним словниковим запасом і навиками академічного письма. Ми також провели дослідження щодо способів ускладнення слів, приділивши особливу увагу афіксам і складним словам. Реалізовано різні підходи до аналізу лексичної щільності та різноманіття. Проаналізовано найуживаніші академічні слова (іменники, дієслова та прикметники) в академічних роботах аспірантів.

**Висновок.** Результати показали зв'язок між академічною лексикою та навичками академічного письма аспірантів. Наше емпіричне спостереження виявило кореляцію лексичного різноманіття та якості академічного письма аспірантів. Виявлено значний взаємозв'язок між особливостями академічного вокабуляру з якістю академічного письма. Частота слів корелює зі складністю слова. Згідно з нашими висновками, аспіранти з високим рівнем володіння англійської мови наукового спрямування переважно використовують менш вживані слова та мають більший словниковий запас.

**Ключові слова**: лексичні особливості, академічна лексика, академічне письмо, лексична складність, лексичне розмаїття, частота слів, лексична щільність.