

British Students' Knowledge of Polysemous Academic English Vocabulary

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THE ISSUE

Academic words are often used at university and many of them are polysemous – but do university native-speaker students know their meanings?

WHY CARE

- help estimate native university students' learning needs
- promote and inform explicit academic vocabulary instruction in foundation and in-sessional EAP courses

OUR FINDINGS

- ✓ Large variation in scores in a productive (gap-fill) test of the most frequent meanings of 20 frequent academic polysemous words. Productive test scores *didn't* differ between 1st and 3rd year students.
- ✓ Little variation in scores in a receptive (MCT) test of the most frequent meaning of the same words. Receptive test scores *didn't* differ between 1st and 3rd year students.
- ✓ Vocabulary Size Test scores and receptive test scores correlated significantly with productive test scores for both student groups.

1. RATIONALE

Out of the first 1000 lemmas in the Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner and Davies 2014), 664 are polysemous (Skoufaki and Petric 2017).

• 71.66% of the 427 AVL lemmas identified as useful for university students' writing in at least 90% of disciplines by Durrant (2016) are among the 664 more frequent polysemous AVL words. So students need to know frequent polysemous AVL words not only receptively but also productively.

Little research on the knowledge of meanings of academic polysemous words (Schmitt 1998)

• A test of students' productive knowledge of frequent academic words' meanings is necessary. Findings from this test will also suggest receptive knowledge of the meaning of these words (e.g., Laufer and Goldstein 2004).

Do university students who are native speakers of English develop their productive knowledge of these words without explicit teaching?

• Examining this issue may help us see whether instruction of the meanings of polysemous academic words and practice with them would be helpful to some students.

2. THE STUDY

Testing words selected based on frequency and part of speech from the first 664 polysemous lemmas in the Academic Vocabulary List.

Three vocabulary tests:
• a test of productive knowledge with a gap-fill task, which tested knowledge of the form-meaning link and the ability to recall the form, if given a definition and sentence context, for 20 frequent polysemous academic words.



52 British English native speaker undergraduates
32 1st-years
20 3rd-years

• a test of receptive knowledge with a multiple-choice task, which tested the ability to recognise the most frequent sense of each word

He is interested in this political _____, (set of ideas that explain something)
He has a _____ about why the child didn't ask for help. (opinion which he could not prove but which he thought was correct)
He explained to me the _____ behind his classroom teaching. (set of rules and principles on which an activity is based)

• Vocabulary Size Test (Nation and Beglar 2007)

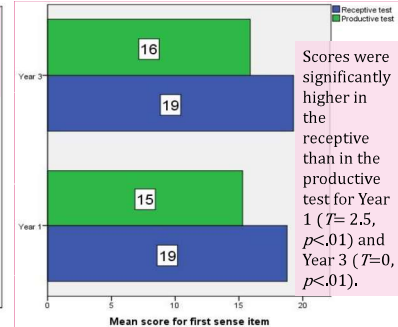
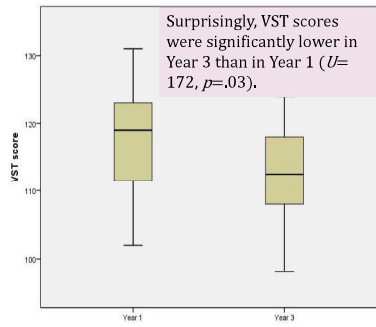
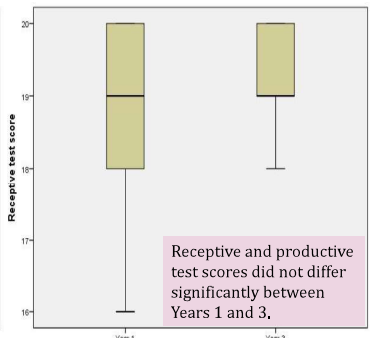
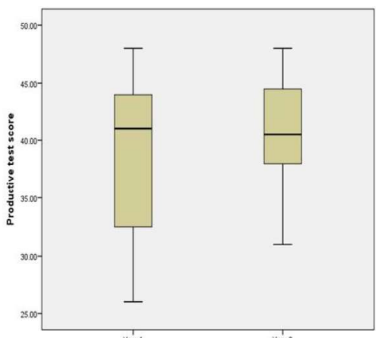
theory: he doesn't like this theory.
a. plan intended to achieve something
b. kind of entertainment
c. something that people often do
d. set of ideas that explains something

Productive test (gap-fill task)

Vocabulary Size Test
Receptive test of the most frequent sense of each polysemous word

3. RESULTS

How did students do in the tests?



Do results in any test pair (productive, receptive, VST) correlate significantly?

Spearman's rho, Year 1 data

	Receptive test	VST
Productive test	.37*	.63**
VST	.29	

Spearman's rho, Year 3 data

	Receptive test	VST
Productive test	.44*	.69**
VST	.27	

*= significant at .05 level
**= significant at .01 level

4. CONCLUSIONS

- Since a significant increase in scores was not found in either the receptive or the productive test between Years 1 and 3, it seems that students who come to university with low productive knowledge of academic vocabulary could benefit from direct teaching of academic vocabulary.
- The significant and high correlation between the VST scores and the productive test scores suggest a positive relationship between vocabulary size and the knowledge of the senses of frequent academic words for these participants (see Schmitt 2014).

References

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