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EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING ACADEMIC WORD LIST (AWL) THROUGH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Fithriyah Inda Nur Abidah¹

Gabriel Fredi Daar^{2*}

¹Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indoensia

²Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Indonesia

*Email: freddydaar@gmail.com

Abstract: This study investigates students' perceptions and experiences of learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI) within an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Flores. Employing a qualitative approach, the study aims to explore the perceived benefits, challenges, application beyond the classroom, and suggestions for improving AWL instruction. Twenty undergraduate students were purposively selected based on their vocabulary proficiency and enrollment in the Academic Vocabulary course. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and student reflection journals, and were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework. The findings reveal that students perceive learning AWL through CBI as beneficial, as it enables contextualized vocabulary acquisition, supports academic writing and reading, and increases motivation. However, challenges include difficulty in memorizing vocabulary, understanding academic texts, and balancing language and content focus. Outside the classroom, students apply AWL through reading academic texts, writing assignments, participating in discussions, and using digital resources like podcasts and

social media. Suggestions for improving AWL instruction emphasize prioritizing high-frequency AWL words, integrating interactive learning activities, promoting consistent usage in writing, and utilizing digital tools to support vocabulary development. The study concludes that CBI enhances vocabulary learning by making it more meaningful and applicable to academic contexts, yet requires pedagogical adjustments to address learner challenges. These findings have implications for instructional design in academic English courses, highlighting the importance of contextual, learner-centered, and multimodal vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: perceptions, experiences, AWL, CBI

INTRODUCTION

The Academic vocabulary has become one of the critical components of students' success in higher education, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Academic vocabulary consists of words that frequently appear in academic texts across various disciplines, making it essential for comprehension and production in academic contexts (Coxhead, 2000). The Academic Word List (AWL) developed by Coxhead (2000) and other domain-specific vocabulary lists, such as the New Academic Word List (NAWL), have been widely used to support EFL learners in acquiring the necessary lexical resources for academic success. Integrating academic word lists into instructional frameworks, such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI), can improve vocabulary learning. It could be conducted by contextualizing word usage within meaningful academic content (Snow & Brinton, 2017).

Indonesia, as a country where English is not the native language, has been placing greater focus on enhancing university students' English abilities, especially in academic contexts. However, even with the increasing demand for academic English competence, many Indonesian EFL students face difficulties in mastering and using academic vocabulary effectively (Fitriah, 2020)

(Sumardi et al., 2022). This issue is largely attributed to conventional teaching approaches that prioritize memorization over learning vocabulary in context. Therefore, it is essential to adopt instructional methods that embed academic vocabulary within relevant and meaningful content to support improved understanding and usage.

Previous studies have explored the application of Academic Word List in English language learning. Masrai & Milton (2018) measured the contribution of academic and general vocabulary knowledge to learners' academic achievement, Durrant (2016) studied the relevance of Academic Vocabulary List relevant to university student writing, Choo et al. (2017) investigated the significance of the Academic Word List among ESL tertiary students in a Malaysian public university. The studies highlighted the impact of Academic word list on students' achievement and capability such as in writing. Studies on Content-based Instruction also underscored its benefit on students' learning goal and achievement (Wafiroh et al., 2022; Arulselvi, 2016; Vanichvasin, 2019; Wafiroh et al., 2022). However, research on the effectiveness of learning Academic Word Lists through CBI remains limited, particularly in EFL contexts of Indonesia.

A noticeable research gap exists in understanding how academic vocabulary lists is learnt through the application of CBI in Indonesian EFL learners. While studies have examined vocabulary learning strategies and CBI separately, few have explored how these two elements can be effectively combined to maximize learning outcomes. Given the increasing need for effective vocabulary instruction in Indonesian higher education, it is crucial to investigate an instructional approach that aligns academic vocabulary learning with content knowledge development.

This study aims to investigate the students' perception and experience of learning Academic Word List in Academic Vocabulary course. It covers the benefits of learning AWL, challenges, how students apply learning AWL outside the classroom and

recommendation for future learning of AWL. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether this learning process enhances learners' ability to understand and use academic vocabulary in reading and writing tasks. To address these objectives, the research formulates the following questions: (1) What are the benefits of learning AWL through Content-based Instruction? (2) What challenges encountered by the students while learning AWL? (3) How do the students apply learning AWL aoutside the classroom? By answering these questions, the study contributes to the literature on academic vocabulary instruction and provide practical implications for EFL educators. The findings of the study is expected to offer pedagogical insights into how vocabulary instruction can be meaningfully incorporated into subject-specific content, particularly improving students' language skills and academic performance.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs qualitative approach to investigate students' perceptions and experiences of learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Conten Based-Instruction in the classroom. Qualitative research allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by exploring the benefits of learning AWL through CBI, challenges, how students apply learning AWL aoutside the classroom and recommendation for future learning of AWL. The research setting is an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at the Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Flores.

Participants

The participants of the study consist of 20 undergraduate students enrolled in an EAP course at the Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Flores. The participants were taken purposively based on some criteria; 1) student passed the basic vocabulary course; 2) possessing good vocabaulary mastery, proven

by the academic scores; 3) taking Academic Vocabulary course; 4) willing to participate in the study. By selecting students at a similar proficiency level, the study ensures that the results are not influenced by vast differences in linguistic background. Ethical considerations are strictly adhered to, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Students are informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data of the study were collected using qualitative methods. It's applied to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and experiences of learning AWL thorough CBI. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and student reflection journals. Interviews are conducted with selected students. There were four main topics to be asked: 1) the benefits of learning AWL through CBI in classroom; 2) challenges found during the learning process; 3) how students apply learning AWL aoutside the classroom; 4) recommendation for future learning of AWL. Classroom observations focused on student engagement, interaction, and application of AWL vocabulary during lessons. To further triangulate findings, students' written assignments and recorded presentations were analyzed for AWL vocabulary usage and academic discourse development. The data of interview transcripts and classroom observation notes then are analyzed thematically using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) framework. Coding techniques are applied to identify key themes related to students' engagement, challenges, and overall perceptions of AWL learning within CBI. Emerging patterns are categorized to provide a detailed interpretation of student experiences.

RESULTS

The following presents the data of study on students' perception and experience of learning Academic word List (AWL) through content base-instruction. These two main theme cover four sub topics to be explored, consisting of the benefits of learning AWL through CBI, challenges, how students apply learning AWL outside the classroom and recommendation for future learning of AWL.

The benefits of learning Academic Word List (AWL) through Content Based-Instruction (CBI)

Based on the study, learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI) provides meaningful and practical advantages for students engaging in academic English. Many participants acknowledged that CBI allows them to acquire vocabulary in context, making learning more natural and relevant. One student explained, *"We learn real vocabulary, and we don't memorize it separately. It helps me understand easily, remember better, and use it directly for academic tasks."* Another participant emphasized that *"studying AWL through CBI makes the vocabulary easier to understand because we see it used directly in academic texts."* This contextualized exposure to vocabulary enables students to connect new words with real academic content, resulting in better retention and application. Furthermore, the learning process becomes more engaging and less abstract. One student mentioned, *"It's easier to understand academic words because they are used in content related to our field of study."* These responses suggest that learning AWL through CBI transforms vocabulary acquisition into an active and integrated learning experience.

In addition to improving vocabulary retention, participants reported that learning AWL through CBI significantly enhances their academic performance and linguistic confidence. For example, a student stated, *"I feel more prepared for academic writing and reading after learning AWL in this way."* Another added, *"It helps me write more formally and understand texts better, especially those used in journals or*

lectures." Several learners also mentioned how this method supports preparation for standardized academic English tests such as TOEFL and IELTS, with one commenting, *"These tests often use academic vocabulary, so it's useful for improving my scores."* Some participants reflected on the long-term benefits of the approach, such as increased linguistic awareness and academic readiness. *"I can now tell the difference between academic and non-academic words,"* one participant said, while another emphasized, *"It helps me build critical thinking and learn how to speak and write more professionally."* Overall, the interview responses indicate that CBI-based AWL instruction supports students not only in learning vocabulary but also in becoming more effective academic communicators.

The Challenges in learning AWL through CBI

The study found that two key themes emerged from the students' responses regarding the challenges of learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI): difficulty in remembering and understanding vocabulary, and the complexity of academic contexts. Many participants expressed that the large number of unfamiliar words made the learning process overwhelming. One participant stated, *"The challenge I face in learning AWL is the large number of vocabulary items that I have to memorize, and sometimes they are hard to understand even in context."* Another said, *"I still struggle to translate the words into English,"* reflecting a gap in students' foundational academic vocabulary. Several students also mentioned issues with similar word meanings and proper usage, such as, *"Some words have different meanings depending on the context,"* highlighting the confusion learners experience when trying to use AWL accurately in academic settings.

The second theme is related to limited instructional materials and media, along with technical and psychological learning challenges within the CBI approach. Some students noted that if the

materials used are not varied, their exposure to a wider range of AWL is restricted. For instance, one participant commented, *"If the materials don't cover a range of topics, then the AWL words we learn are limited."* Another participant said, *"CBI often delivers content too fast. If we haven't mastered the AWL yet, we fall behind,"* indicating how pacing and content difficulty can impact comprehension. Technical challenges such as limited internet access were also noted, with a student simply stating, *"The problem is just the network."* Furthermore, several learners struggled with balancing language and content focus, as shown in the quote, *"I think the challenge is balancing language focus and content."* One student also mentioned, *"It's hard to identify academic words in a text and the lack of vocabulary becomes a barrier."* These findings suggest that the challenges in learning AWL through CBI extend beyond linguistic difficulty and involve instructional design, resource accessibility, and cognitive demands imposed by complex academic texts.

The Application of Learning AWL outside of the classroom

Regarding the application of learning AWL outside the classroom, several students reported various ways of applying Academic Word List (AWL) vocabulary, ranging from independent learning activities to collaborative and interactive practices. Some students mentioned reading academic texts, such as journal articles, news, or research papers, to familiarize themselves with AWL usage in real contexts. One response stated, *"I apply AWL by reading academic texts for assignments like journals or articles, and I use a dictionary when I find unfamiliar words."* Others emphasized the importance of writing, *"I use AWL when writing essays, assignments, or summaries of academic texts,"* and *"I keep a personal journal where I practice using AWL vocabulary."*

Students also described more interactive approaches, such as joining clubs, participating in discussions, and speaking English with peers. One student explained, *"I practice AWL vocabulary by*

talking in front of a mirror or with a friend,” while another added, “I think forming a thematic club like a debate, science, or film club in English helps us use AWL in a fun and engaging way.” Listening activities were also highlighted as a helpful strategy. For instance, students mentioned listening to podcasts, academic presentations, or English news to become more familiar with AWL vocabulary in spoken form. One student shared, *“I listen to academic podcasts and news in English. It helps me recognize AWL in natural conversations.”*

Other responses reflected the use of AWL vocabulary in daily and academic interactions, such as participating in group discussions, making presentations, and writing assignments. Some students also reported using social media or communication platforms to practice English, like chatting with native speakers or watching educational videos. A few mentioned practicing by translating unknown words and expanding their vocabulary through independent research. One student shared, *“When I hear new words, I look up the meaning immediately and try to use them later,”* while another stated, *“I apply AWL by trying to speak formally in discussions or during presentations.”* These interview data demonstrated a variety of practical and creative strategies applied by the students to internalize and use AWL vocabulary beyond the classroom setting. It highlighted the integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking practices.

Suggestion for improvement in teaching and learning AWL in academic Vocabulary Course

The study found that to improve the teaching and learning of the Academic Word List (AWL) in the Academic Vocabulary course, a key strategy is to prioritize the most frequently used words, particularly those in Sublist 1. These words form the core foundation of academic discourse and are applicable across multiple disciplines. By focusing on these high-frequency terms, students can gradually build their academic vocabulary. Instructors should

provide opportunities for students to encounter these words in diverse contexts, such as reading academic texts, listening to lectures, or engaging in discussions. This approach not only solidifies their understanding of the words but also allows them to recognize how these words function in real-world academic settings.

Incorporating interactive and engaging learning activities can significantly enhance students' retention and usage of AWL words. Activities such as word games, quizzes, group discussions, and role-playing exercises allow students to practice using academic vocabulary in a low-pressure environment. These activities encourage active learning, increase student participation, and promote a deeper understanding of how the words can be applied in various contexts. Moreover, instructors should encourage students to use AWL words in their own writing, such as essays, summaries, or even daily reflections. This provides students with regular practice and an opportunity to receive valuable feedback on their language use.

In addition to traditional classroom activities, integrating technology can enhance the learning experience and make it more accessible. Tools like online flashcards, vocabulary-building apps, podcasts, and instructional videos can help students review and engage with AWL words outside the classroom. These resources allow for self-paced learning, where students can revisit difficult words or practice pronunciation and usage at their convenience. Furthermore, incorporating real-world texts, such as journal articles or research papers, exposes students to authentic examples of how AWL words are used in academic discourse. Consistent exposure to these words in varied contexts will strengthen students' ability to use them effectively in their own academic work.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI) enhances

vocabulary acquisition by embedding words in meaningful academic contexts, thus improving understanding, retention, and usage. This aligns with findings by Hanafiah et al. (2022) who argue that vocabulary learned through context-rich environments is more likely to be retained and actively used. Similarly, a study by Arulselvi (2016) supports the idea that CBI increases learners' motivation and engagement, as it connects language learning directly with students' academic interests and disciplines. In contrast, Joe (1998) found that while contextual learning aids retention, explicit vocabulary instruction may still be necessary for learners to fully grasp less frequent or complex academic terms. These studies reinforce that CBI provides a practical and cognitively engaging approach for acquiring AWL vocabulary, turning passive memorization into active and meaningful learning.

The interview data indicate that learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI) contributes not only to vocabulary retention but also to enhanced academic performance, linguistic confidence, and test preparedness. These findings are supported by Farani (2016), who found that CBI strengthens students' academic literacy and equips them with the language needed for academic tasks like writing and comprehension. Similarly, Marashi & Mirghafari (2019) emphasized that integrating academic content with language instruction fosters critical thinking and improves learners' ability to use academic English appropriately across disciplines. Moreover, Coxhead (2000), in her seminal work on the AWL, noted that mastering academic vocabulary is crucial for success in higher education and standardized tests, as it forms the foundation of academic discourse.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis framework, two major themes emerged regarding the challenges students face in learning the Academic Word List (AWL) through Content-Based Instruction (CBI): linguistic-cognitive difficulties and instructional-contextual barriers. First, students reported difficulty remembering

and understanding the large volume of unfamiliar academic vocabulary, even within context. The depth of vocabulary knowledge including meaning, form, and use is hard to acquire without sustained exposure and practice (Choo et al., 2017; Bjork & Kroll, 2015). Learners also expressed confusion over polysemy and word usage across contexts. Academic vocabulary requires explicit attention due to its high lexical density and nuanced meaning (Haruna et al., 2024). The second theme concerns limitations in instructional materials, access to diverse content, and technical or psychological barriers. In line with Gibbons (2002), students noted that when CBI lacks varied or scaffolded materials, vocabulary exposure is restricted and cognitive overload increases. Additionally, issues such as pacing, internet access, and balancing language with content further compound learning challenges. These findings reveal that while CBI offers meaningful learning opportunities, effective implementation requires addressing both linguistic complexity and pedagogical design to support students' academic vocabulary development.

Regarding the application of learning AWL outside the classroom, the students' responses reveal a wide range of strategies for applying Academic Word List (AWL) vocabulary beyond the classroom. It illustrates their initiative in engaging with academic language through both independent and collaborative practices. These findings support the idea that vocabulary learning is most effective when extended into real-life contexts (Pascoe et al., 2018). It emphasized the use of academic vocabulary across multiple modes; reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The use of academic texts, personal journals, and writing assignments reflects the productive application of vocabulary. Meanwhile, interactive methods such as peer discussions, club activities, and listening to podcasts align with (Carter & Nunan, 2001) theory of language learning strategies, particularly social and metacognitive strategies that promote deeper learning and learner autonomy. These

activities also illustrate the integration of academic vocabulary into students' personal and academic identities, suggesting that meaningful exposure and usage across diverse contexts fosters not just vocabulary acquisition but also communicative competence. Ultimately, these practices indicate that students are not only learning AWL passively but are actively internalizing it through self-directed and socially engaged learning experiences (Malmström et al., 2018).

To enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning the Academic Word List (AWL) in Academic Vocabulary courses, it is essential to adopt strategic approach. Prioritizing high-frequency words, particularly those in Sublist 1, serves as a crucial starting point, as these words appear most commonly across academic texts and are foundational for comprehension and production in academic discourse (Coxhead, 2000). Frequent and varied exposure to these words through academic readings, lectures, and discussions helps students internalize both meaning and usage. Moreover, integrating interactive methods such as quizzes, group discussions, role-playing, and vocabulary games fosters deeper engagement and improves retention (Liu & Chu, 2010). Active learning enhances vocabulary acquisition. Encouraging students to apply AWL words in authentic writing tasks, promotes productive use and allows for instructor feedback. Additionally, incorporating technology such as flashcard apps, podcasts, and online videos, facilitates autonomous, self-paced learning and reinforces vocabulary acquisition through multimodal input (Situmorang et al., 2020; Akay & Gumusoglu, 2020). The use of real academic texts ensures that students are regularly exposed to authentic academic language, bridging the gap between vocabulary study and real-world application. Collectively, these strategies contribute to more effective and sustainable academic vocabulary development.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that CBI offers meaningful advantages, such as contextual vocabulary learning, improved retention, and enhanced readiness for academic communication. Students reported feeling more confident and prepared for tasks such as academic writing, reading, and even standardized tests. Learning AWL through content not only deepens vocabulary understanding but also promotes critical thinking and professional language use. However, the study also highlights notable challenges. Students struggled with the sheer volume of vocabulary, contextual ambiguity, and difficulties balancing language and content. Technical limitations and the fast pace of CBI instruction further hindered learning. These limitations suggest a need for more adaptive teaching strategies, varied materials, and enhanced scaffolding in instruction.

The study underscores the practical application of AWL learning beyond classroom settings. Students engaged in independent and collaborative strategies, including reading academic texts, joining English-speaking clubs, using digital tools, and writing journals. These out-of-class practices reflect a high degree of learner autonomy and motivation.

The implications of this study suggest that integrating CBI into vocabulary instruction can significantly enrich students' academic English proficiency. Yet, to maximize its impact, educators should design more scaffolded, learner-centered materials and integrate technology to support diverse learning needs. A key limitation of this study is its qualitative nature with a limited sample size, which may not capture the full diversity of learner experiences. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach or involve a broader participant base for more generalizable findings.

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