

Course Topic: Teaching Vocabulary, Teaching English for Academic Purposes**Course Instructor:**

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Course Synopsis:

In 2000, Averil Coxhead determined that there was a set of words that was crucial for success in an English academic context, the Academic Word List. This brought about a large change in the way vocabulary for English for Academic Purposes was viewed. In this course, we will look at what the Academic Word List is, the background to its development, why it is important for both instructors and students to be aware of it, and finally some strategies and activities to use when teaching the Academic Word List.

Course Agenda

1. What is the Academic Word List?
2. Understanding the Structure of the Academic Word List
3. Why is the Academic Word List important?
4. Teaching the Academic Word List: Strategies and Activities

1. What is the Academic Word List?

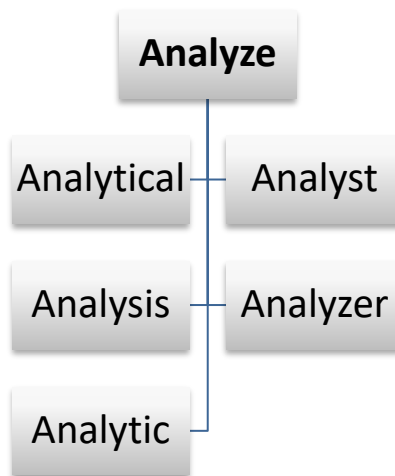
The **Academic Word List (AWL)** is a list of the 570 words which appear with the most frequency in English-language academic contexts. The list was compiled by Averil Coxhead at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

To determine the AWL, an analysis was done of over 3,500,000 words of text from academic journals, textbooks, course workbooks, lab manuals, and course notes from the Liberal Arts (history, psychology, sociology, etc.), Commerce (economics, marketing, management), Law, Math and Science (biology, computer science, mathematics). The AWL is not specific to any one field of study; it does not include any technical words that have a very narrow usage. The AWL is, therefore, useful to all English language learners who want to move on to study in a higher education context.

2. Understanding the Structure of the Academic Word List

Headwords

The AWL contains 570 headwords. A **headword** is the main word in a word family. For example, the first word in the AWL is 'analyze'. Members of the 'analyze' word family include: 'analytical', 'analysis', 'analyst', 'analyzer' and 'analytic'.



Sublists

The headwords are then ranked in order of frequency. Finally, the entire list of 570 headwords is divided into sublists. Sublist 1 consists of the 60 most common words in the AWL. Sublist 2 contains the next most frequently used words and so on. Each sublist contains 60 word families, except for sublist 10, which contains 30.

For the complete AWL, go to: www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/awl-headwords.

The General Service List

It is important to understand that knowing the AWL alone will not ensure that our students have sufficient vocabulary for success in higher education. A key assumption behind the AWL is that it should

build upon student knowledge of the General Service List (GSL), a list of the 2,284 most important words in English. The words on the GSL have both high frequency (like the word ‘the’) and a large range of use (like the verb ‘to be’). So students need to know the GSL words in addition to the AWL words to have a solid vocabulary for an academic context. When students know both the GSL words and the AWL words, they will know approximately 90% of the words used in academic texts.¹

More Information

For more Information on the Academic Word List and the General Service List see:

- Nation, I.S.P. 2008. Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques. Heinle Cengage Learning. Chapter 8.
- The Academic Word List at www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/.
- Leah Gilner. 2011. A Primer on the General Service List. at <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/April2011/articles/gilner.pdf>

3. Why is the Academic Word List Important?

The Academic Word List is important for both teachers and students because:

- English has the largest vocabulary of any language. Learning that vocabulary is, therefore, an enormous challenge for our students. The Academic Word List provides our students with a way to prioritize their vocabulary learning into 570 headwords, rather than the thousands and thousands of other English words that are out there to be learnt.
- Vocabulary size is a key predictor of academic success. It is, therefore, particularly important for English for Academic Purposes students to increase the size of their English vocabulary, with an emphasis on those words found in an academic context.

4. Teaching the Academic Word List: General Strategies

Don’t just hand your students the AWL and say ‘learn these words’! To help you avoid doing this, we will take a look at some general strategies for teaching the AWL.

1. *Put the words into a context*. Remember that the AWL is organized by frequency, not theme. The words are thematically unrelated. Because of this, the words in the list are also not within a context. One of your first strategies, then, is to put the words in context—either by putting them into a reading or a listening text that has a clear topic or is set in a clear situation.
2. *Teach collocations*. In addition to putting the AWL words into context, we also have to teach our students the words that appear frequently with the AWL. For example, when teaching ‘analysis’ we could also teach the following collocations: market analysis, data analysis, chemical analysis and system analysis.
3. *Teach all of the words in the word families*. The words on the AWL are headwords. There is, therefore, a set of words within the word family of each headword that students need to learn. Teach each headword and then all of the words in that word family.
4. *Work with parts of one sublist at a time*. There are a lot of words on the AWL - too many words for students to learn and work with at one time. The sublists, at 60 or 30 words each, are a little

¹ Nation, I.S.P. 2008. Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques. Heinle Cengage Learning. p. 128

bit more manageable but also quite large. We might want to divide our sublists further into groups of 15 words, so that the learning task is achievable.

5. *Recycle the words.* Don't just introduce a set of words once. Introduce the words one week, revisit them the next week and review them the following week.
6. *Provide students with the opportunity to use the words in real contexts.* Most of the textbook-based activities for the AWL contain controlled practice and rote learning activities. While completing this type of activity is a necessary first step in learning the AWL words, these activities should always be followed by activities that allow for word use in real contexts.

5. Teaching the Academic Word List: Specific Activities

1. Students complete rote learning, controlled practice activities with the words from an AWL sublist, for example: definition matching, crossword puzzles, fill-in-the-blank, categorizing and multiple choice questions.
2. Students identify the word class, antonyms and synonyms of words on an AWL sublist. They write definitions for each word along with example sentences.
3. Students complete a fill-in-the-blank activity in which they have to select the correct word from the word family of an AWL headword. For example, they have to select from among 'analyze', 'analysis' and 'analytical'.
4. Students find all of the members of the word families for assigned words from the AWL. They define the words and write example sentences for each.
5. Students read a text in order to identify words from one of the sublists on the AWL. They define each word they find based upon the context clues in the text.
6. Students listen to a lecture in order to identify words from one of the sublists on the AWL. They define each word based upon the information in the lecture.
7. Students read a piece of academic writing they have completed and underline the words they find that are on one of the AWL sublists provided by the teacher. Students continue to work with their piece of writing to see if there are any opportunities to add in more of the words from the AWL sublist.
8. Students analyze a presentation they have developed and note down their use of words from one of the AWL sublists provided by the teacher. Students work with their presentation to find appropriate places to use more words from the sublist.
9. Students complete conversation activities in which they have to use a certain number of words from one of the sublists. You can turn this into a game by dividing students into teams and awarding points for each AWL word that they use.
10. Students complete online rote practice activities for the AWL words. See for example: <http://www.englishvocabularyexercises.com/academic-word-list/index.html>

A final Reminder: DON'T just hand your students the Academic Word List to memorize. All of the guidelines for good vocabulary teaching and learning apply to the words on the Academic Word List.

Thanks for participating!

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