

Academic Vocabulary in Psychology Research Articles: A Corpus-Based Study¹

Ismail Kodabande², Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
Nasrin Kodabande³, Independent Researcher, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

The current corpus-based study investigated the lexical profile of psychology research articles based on General Service List (GSL) (West, 1953) and Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000). To this end, a corpus of 8,500 psychology research articles with around 74 million words was analyzed. The results showed that the AWL accounted for 13.12% of the tokens in the corpus. Further computer analysis of the corpus revealed that 472 out of 570 word families in the AWL have been used frequently in psychology research articles. The study also identified 693 word types outside the GSL and the AWL which occurred frequently in the corpus and accounted for 6.1% of the tokens. Finally, the findings of this study revealed that 1,537 high frequent AWL and non-GSL/AWL word types (rather than word families) provided around 17.91% coverage of the corpus, while the high ranking 570 word types in this list accounted for about 13.44% of the corpus which is higher than the coverage of the 570 AWL word families combined (with about 3000 types). Based on these findings, the study concluded that although the AWL is a valuable pedagogical resource for teaching academic vocabulary, there is a need to develop more restricted and discipline specific word lists to cater for the needs of students in different subject areas. The study also highlights the significance of these findings.

Resumen

El presente estudio investigó el perfil léxico de los artículos científicos de psicología basado en la Lista de Servicios Generales (GSL) (West, 1953) y la Lista de Palabras Académicas (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000). Con este fin, se analizó un corpus de 8.500 artículos con alrededor de 74 millones de palabras. Los resultados mostraron que el AWL representaba el 13,12% de los tokens en el corpus. Análisis informáticos posteriores del corpus revelaron que 472 de 570 familias de palabras en el AWL se han utilizado con frecuencia en artículos de investigación psicológica. El estudio también identificó 693 tipos de palabras fuera del GSL y el AWL que ocurrieron con frecuencia en el corpus y representaron el 6.1% de los tokens. Finalmente, los hallazgos de este estudio revelaron que 1,537 tipos de palabras frecuentes de alto nivel de AWL y no GSL / AWL (en lugar de familias de palabras) proporcionaron alrededor del 17.91% de cobertura del corpus, mientras que los 570 tipos de palabras de alto rango en esta lista representaron aproximadamente 13.44 % del corpus que es más alto que la cobertura de las 570 familias de palabras AWL combinadas (con aproximadamente 3000 tipos). Con base en estos hallazgos, el estudio concluyó que, aunque el AWL es un recurso pedagógico valioso para enseñar vocabulario académico, existe la necesidad de desarrollar listas de palabras específicas más restringidas y disciplinarias para satisfacer las necesidades de los estudiantes en diferentes materias. El estudio también destaca la importancia de estos hallazgos.

Introduction

Identifying and categorizing academic and discipline-specific vocabulary is important to a variety of stakeholders in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. According to Coxhead and Nation (2001), this type of vocabulary refers to those items that occur with reasonably higher frequency across various academic genres, but with much lower frequency in other text types. It has been argued that learning academic vocabulary is a major challenge for first year undergraduates (Li & Pemberton, 1994), and knowledge of academic vocabulary is essential for reading academic texts and for successful writing in different subject areas (Corson, 1997). As a result, over the past years, there has been a concern among teachers and researchers to develop different vocabulary lists to serve the needs of language learners (Farrell, 1990; Xue & Nation, 1984). Since its creation, the Academic Word List (AWL) has been employed extensively in EAP programs, materials development, and vocabulary tests (Coxhead, 2011). According to Coxhead and Nation (2001), the pedagogical value of the AWL as a teaching instrument lies in the fact that when combined with General Service List (GSL) (West, 1953), it covers about 90% of the words in most academic texts. Coxhead (2011) also claims that the AWL has a great potential in helping instructors and students to set vocabulary learning goals by focusing on the most useful vocabulary items in EAP

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² ismail.kh.tefi@gmail.com

³ nasrin2966@gmail.com

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Table of Contents Psychology Articles

1. Understanding the eBook Psychology Articles
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Psychology Articles
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Psychology Articles
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Psychology Articles
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Psychology Articles
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Psychology Articles User Reviews and Ratings
 - Psychology Articles and Bestseller Lists

5. Accessing Psychology Articles Free and Paid eBooks
 - Psychology Articles Public Domain eBooks
 - Psychology Articles eBook Subscription Services
 - Psychology Articles Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Psychology Articles eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Psychology Articles Compatibility with Devices
 - Psychology Articles Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Psychology Articles
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Psychology Articles
 - Interactive Elements Psychology Articles
8. Staying Engaged with Psychology Articles
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Psychology Articles
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Psychology Articles
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Psychology Articles
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Psychology Articles
 - Setting Reading Goals Psychology Articles
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Psychology Articles
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Psychology Articles
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
- Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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