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ACADEMIC VOCABULARY MASTERY AND PERCEPTION FOR EFL STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITAS BINA DARMA

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Abstract: this study aims to investigate the essential and unsolved issue during English learning in tertiary level. Unlike in high school, English is taught by using common lexicon and the students are required to communicate actively with uttered everyday conversation. Meanwhile, the vocabulary they received during their previous education failed to help them in further education. The writer assumed the fact that academic vocabulary mastery becomes the major problem in their comprehension in understanding academic articles, journal and research. Through this study, the writer found out that 50 students from English study program were on the unsatisfied level in the academic vocabulary mastery. About 76,3% respondents were on the poor to good level and around 23,7% were on the level good to very good. However, none of them is able to be on the excellent level of vocabulary mastery. Furthermore, the students' attitude towards the aspect of academic vocabulary mastery showed positive responds. They dominantly affirmed that Academic vocabulary help them understand better in reading academic papers. The knowledge of the academic vocabulary will build their confidence in their ability to read academic material and identify the important points in academic material better. Mastery in academic vocabulary considered very important for students to read more effectively, help them review lecture notes and do skimming and scanning more effectively in learning independently during their tertiary level education.

Keyword: Academic vocabulary, attitude, tertiary education

1. Background of study

Language runs in every basic need in various aspects of our daily lives. Merely it is not only used limitedly to communication, rather it extends into the immense branches of knowledge and human sciences. Languages are capable of developing human knowledge and extending it for the benefit of human kind (Zedan&Toure, 2013). without language there will be a huge failure in delivering many information, current discoveries, new technologies, issues and many other changes in this universe. One of the essential function of language is playing a role as a media for education. The ability of understanding English, which mostly utilized to present scientific informations seems advantageous for students of tertiary education.

Generally In Indonesia, universities required their students to learn better English. we can see english written in their curriculum as a compulsory subject. Even some universities apply english test as an enrollment test and the other certified English test before they

complete their study in that university. This means English is universally a targeted language to tertiary students, because dominantly academic papers, journals and articles that they read and comprehend are conveyed in global language, nevertheless they will experience difficulties. one of the challenges in this area is vocabulary.

Vocabulary is the body of words used in a particular language. These words convey specific meaning and can be in the form of single items and phrases or chunks of a group of words. Accordingly, Lewis (1993) asserted that lexis or the vocabulary is the core or heart of a language. Hatch and Brown (1995:1) define vocabulary as a list of target language words for particular language or a list of words that the individual speaker might be. Vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas.

To have a good interpretation in academic environment, the students require to have sufficient academic vocabularies. Academic vocabulary is used to teach content across all academic disciplines. According to Marzano (2004), academic vocabulary and academic terms allow learners to analyse, infer, and provide conclusions in academic disciplines. This group of words are generally applied in particular aspects or fields in academic. the words uncommonly used in everyday situations so that the students fail to understand the academic paper they read. therefore, the academic vocabulary mastery is very important to students of tertiary level.

However, the writer found that the undergraduates in a university where she works are not familiar with familiar academic vocabulary. This is easily found in their way in comprehending the referenced journal or articles during their study and classroom discussion. After interviewing the students, some of them responded that they failed to recognize the vocabularies. For their daily English, they use a conversational lexis that described by the result of their writing and speaking skill. Through this paper, the writer found out the students level of academic English vocabulary as well as their attitude towards the knowledge of academic vocabulary.

2. Literature review

2.1 Learning at the tertiary level

In Indonesia, especially in Universitas Bina Darma, generally English is one of the compulsory subjects because of its urgency of various needs like one of the requirement to

finish the study in certain level which measured by TOEFL test or others English proficiency test. Those English test used to classify the English competence of the candidates in finding jobs, communicating in global community, reading English instruction in manual book, and many more reasons for learning English in this global era. However, this necessity is unable to find the ideal strategy to fulfill these needs. The survey done by English Proficiency Index (EPI) in 2016 stated that Indonesia has been applied English in curriculum since elementary school, yet our human resources who graduated from tertiary education gained lower level in English proficiency than the other ASEAN countries. This issue becomes the obstacle for Indonesia to develop our labor to compete globally.

Learning English in tertiary level may be different from lower level education in Indonesia. In elementary school to high school, we used to learn communicative English with common lexis for daily conversation. The English teachers provide sources to improve English skills like reading, listening, speaking and writing. This type of teaching and learning process must effect our further ability in English. Meanwhile, in tertiary level, students will dominantly center themselves in learning process. They will not depend on the lecturers to absorb the information. Students independently find their own way to gain information like using social media, browsing, reading articles, journal and other possible sources. Thus, learning international language is essential for them.

Learning autonomously as university students takes more challenges. The lecturers provide less assistance in getting information. Students must read more, understand better for the academic articles, journal, or books which written and conveyed in higher level of language. The lexis or terms that probably is not very familiar among students. The vocabulary that might be the first time meet their readings but truly important to get the essence of what they read. Furthermore, learning in tertiary level acquires higher level of language comprehension in order to get along well during the process.

2.2 The Importance of Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and,

conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. The importance of vocabulary is demonstrated daily in and out the school. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Some researchers such like Read (2000) have realised that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Rivers and Nunan (1991), furthermore, argue that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication. Research has shown that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome.

Many researchers argue that vocabulary is one of the most important components in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this. Wilkins (1972) states that there is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. In addition, scholars such as Richards (1980) and Krashen (1989) state many reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary. First, a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. Second language acquirers know that they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that the lack of vocabulary is a major problem. On the other hand, vocabulary has been acknowledged as L2 learners' greatest single source of problems. This remark may possibly reflect that the openness of a vocabulary system is perceived to be a cause of difficulty by learners. Thus, gaining more vocabulary in language learning has grown lots of benefits to understand the target language.

2.3 Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary, also variously known as *useful scientific vocabulary*, *subtechnical vocabulary*, *semi-technical vocabulary*, *specialized non-technical lexis*, *frame words*, generally refers to the set of words that fits into the academic discourse (spoken or written) and can be used across many disciplines. Paquot (2010) defines academic vocabulary as being a set of options to refer to those activities that characterize academic work, organize

scientific discourse and build the rhetoric of academic text. These definitions, however, are general statements and do not specify what constitutes academic vocabulary. General academic vocabulary could be fitted into the second tier, so long as it is not viewed synonymous with content-specific academic vocabulary. This paper narrows the horizon on general academic vocabulary, words that are used across disciplines and students often encounter them in their reading and should be able to use in their academic activities.

2.4 The Importance of Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is needed to follow through and succeed in an academic career (Hyland & Tse, 2007; Sprenger, 2013). Nagy and Townsend (2012) view academic vocabulary as a component of academic language and state that argue that the capacity to read and understand texts from various content areas or disciplines is closely related to students' vocabulary knowledge. They also assert that familiarity with academic vocabulary is critical for teachers to support learners' understanding and use of the language of the disciplines. On the importance of vocabularic knowledge, Nation (2001) also says that learning English vocabulary is one of the most important tasks facing English learners and that learners with limited knowledge of words are likely to experience failure in their professional and academic settings. If a medical student, for example, does not know what *analysis* means, lives can be lost. Moreover, students may find it difficult to understand core concepts of their school subjects if they do not possess sufficient knowledge of the vocabulary. Another aspect of importance in the academic experience is that if students do not understand to a well extent the language spoken in the classrooms, they may lose the confidence they need to continue with their studies enthusiastically. In order to gain knowledge through independent reading and participate in meaningful discussions in the classroom, students must master the complex words and phrases that characterize the language of school.

A further important aspect of acquiring academic vocabulary presents itself in the outcome that students need to have, whether in a work or academic environment, as lack of qualification and low communication skills paralyses or dims students' productivity and creativity. A final reason why academic vocabulary is extremely vital is that it can be used as an intellectual tool to encourage students' critical thinking, problem solving and decision making skills (Washburn, 2009). Vocabulary such as *bias*, *comparison*, *conclusion*, *evidence*,

can raise students' awareness and critical assessment of the contents they read. The importance of gaining academic vocabulary is therefore explicit.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

This study used purposive sampling. The respondents were from the English study program at Univeritas Bina Darma. All of the registered students in their first, second, third and fourth year were selected for this study because the total students from all academic years are only 55 students. Therefore, this result of this study aimed to show the result of their knowledge of academic vocabulary.

Table 1. The total respondents in every academic year

Year of study	Number of respondents	Percentage
First year	15	28.3%
Second year	15	28.3%
Third year	13	24.5%
Final year	10	18.8%

3.2 Research Instrument

To measure the students mastery on academic vocabulary, the students were required to define 261 words based on Oxford Academic Word List. This Academic word list has been used to measure the students ability towards vocabulary in academic environment. The result were categorized in 4 different categories, Poor, Enough, Good, Very good, and Excellent. The test has been done in 120 minutes.

To measure students' perception and attitude towards the academic words, the writer used the adopted questionnaire by researchers from Universiti Sains Malaysia. The closed-ended items in the questionnaire were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Multiple reliability analyses were conducted on the questionnaire to minimize limitations imposed by issues pertaining to reliability. Reliability analyses, using the SAS 9.4 software platform, were applied to measure the internal consistency of each construct as well as the internal consistency of the instrument as a whole. The questionnaire consisted of 6 items.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Academic vocabulary mastery

This section showed the result of respondents' level of academic vocabulary mastery.

Table 2: level of academic vocabulary mastery

Level	Students	%	Average of correct answer
Poor	12	21,8	50
Enough	30	54,5	80
Good	10	18,2	125
Very Good	3	5,45	153
Excellent	0	0	0

Table 2 shows the level of academic vocabulary mastery of students in Universitas Bina Darma majoring in English study program. The data shows that there are 12 students or 21,8% respondents on the poor level of academic vocabulary mastery. There are 30 students or 54.5% respondents on enough level. For good level, there are 10 students or 18,2% respondents. The very good level has 3 students or around 5.45% respondents. However, everyone failed to reach the excellent level.

The table also shows the average of correct answers based on the test of academic vocabulary conducted to 55 students. The result shows averagely the students understand 50 academic vocabulary. The enough level averagely understands 80 words. On the other hand, the students of good level understand 125 words and the very good level students have 153 words averagely in the test.

4.2 Students' Perception towards Academic Vocabulary

This section showed the students' perception towards the knowledge of academic vocabulary.

Table 3: level of academic vocabulary mastery

Item	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%
1. Knowledge of the AV will help me understand better when I read academic material (textbooks, journal articles and academic publication	0	0	18,2	54,5	27,3
2. Knowledge of the AV will help me be more confident in my ability to read academic material	3,6	9,09	23,7	45,4	18,2

3. Knowledge of the AV will help me identify the important points in academic material better	0	0	27,2	32,7	40
4. Knowledge of the AV will help me read more effectively	0	0	20	18,2	61,8
5. Knowledge of the AV will help me review lecture notes more effectively	3,6	7,3	45,4	27,3	16,4
6. Knowledge of the AV will help me do skimming and scanning more effectively	0	0	36	40	24

1: *Strongly Disagree*; 2: *Disagree*; 3: *Slightly Agree*; 4: *Agree*; 5: *Strongly Agree*

Table 3 shows the students' perception and attitude towards the academic vocabulary. There were around 81,8% affirmed ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree"), however 18.2 % of the respondents that knowledge of the academic vocabulary will help in terms of reading academic materials such as textbooks, journal articles and academic publications. Academic vocabulary is assumed to help around 63% ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree") students to be more confident in their ability to read academic material. However 23,7% of respondents slightly agree for that. The majority (72,7%) confirmed that knowledge of the academic vocabulary will help them identify important points in academic materials better and the other 27,2% of the respondents slightly agree. On the same positive note, 80% ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree") and 20% ("Slightly Agree") confirmed that knowledge of the academic vocabulary will help them identify important points in academic materials better. For point 5, 43,7% respondents ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree"), 45,4% students ("Slightly Agree") confirmed that academic vocabulary will help them review lecture notes more effectively. However, around 10,9% stated that academic vocabulary is not really helping to review the lecture notes. The last point conveyed that the knowledge of academic vocabulary will help the students do skimming and scanning more effectively. Around 36% respondents ("Slightly Agree") and the other 64% ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree") for this point.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The finding data from this study provides the information that majority of the students of English study program in Universitas Bina Darma achieved poor and enough categories. Few students were on the good level and only 3 students were on the very good level. However none of them reached the excellent level. The academic word list test was conducted to measure their understanding towards academic vocabulary. The results justify

the finding from Nagy (2015) that lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge is already an obvious and serious obstacle for many students. He added that vocabulary and comprehension obviously have strong relationship. If teachers teach students more words, they will understand the text better. The better understanding they have, the better academic performance they achieve. Thus, this probably the major cause of students' unfamiliarity interpretation in reading academic journal and articles.

On the other hand, the attitude towards the knowledge of academic vocabulary revealed that they believe of having positive effect for having more academic vocabulary. This is a good signal from them to respond well in future vocabulary teaching and learning. They have gained a motivation to start developing their mastery in academic vocabulary which they assumed to improve their academic performance.

Hopefully, through this study, the teacher as well as the students will recognize the importance of developing more academic vocabulary. Not only beneficial for reading comprehension but also writing academic paper and conveying their critical idea in seminar. The students must also understand the differences of learning in secondary school and tertiary education they are in now. therefore, they will work harder independently to pursue their goals.

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