

Applying Formal Vocabulary to Academic Writing: Is the Task Achievable?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of an English course in teaching academic writing with reference to students' use of tone and style. It also conducts a thorough examination into the students' use of reference tools to tackle linguistic tasks. Students' two drafts from a process writing task were first compared and the results show that they failed to employ pertinent vocabulary or phrases generally used in academic writing, after having received their teachers' written feedback. Results obtained from in-depth interviews indicated that students lacked vocabulary knowledge to tackle the task which tested their knowledge of tone and style. Through both direct observation and students' recollection, it was revealed that students' skills in using reference tools to look up lexical information were rudimentary. I argue that while it was appropriate for the course to introduce the notion of academic word lists, the course needs to integrate the learning of such words into its curriculum. This study also recommends strengthening students' general knowledge of vocabulary and dictionary use through explicit teaching and training. Such knowledge and training are essential scaffolding for students to advance to acquisition of academic English.

KEYWORDS: *Academic word lists; Reference skills; Dictionary use training; Vocabulary knowledge; EAP course design; Process writing*

Hong Kong's tertiary education teaching medium is mainly English, and courses like English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes are common courses supporting the majority of students who are Hong Kong Cantonese speaking Chinese. Such courses aim at teaching academic literacy to help students handle academic discourse and context (both written and spoken). In Evans and Green's (2007) large-scale survey regarding Hong Kong tertiary students' language problems, students were found to be deficient mainly in academic writing and academic speaking. Furthermore, Evans and Green concluded that such learning problems stemmed from students' lack of an adequate command of both productive and receptive vocabulary in English. This conclusion was not surprising since earlier research revealed that the general English vocabulary size of first-year university students in Hong Kong was less than 3,000 words (Chiu, 2005; Fan, 2000a).

The notion of a definite list of academic words, as that presented in

Coxhead's Academic Word List (2000), is a popular teaching resource for many EAP teachers (Hyland & Tse, 2007). It presents not only a manageable size of academic vocabulary to be acquired within a short period of time, but also offers a methodical approach to help students overcome potential difficulties of reading and writing within an academic context.

With such studies in mind, this paper examines the effectiveness of an EAP course in academic writing with reference to students' use of tone and style. In this paper, tone and style in academic writing refer only to the formality of writing achieved, for example, through the use of formal vocabulary.

Rationale of this Case Study

The findings presented in this paper trace their roots to a compulsory first-year course for engineering major students at the English-medium *Hong Kong University of Science and Technology* (HKUST). The course is taught over two semesters with twenty-eight hours of class time each semester. It has been offered for three years with few changes. In this paper, I discuss the teaching objectives of the second semester course, which I have been teaching since its inception.

With three years of teaching the same course to three different groups of first-year students, and working with various teachers in the teaching team, I believe it is a good time to contemplate the effectiveness of the course in achieving its objectives. Moreover, Hong Kong tertiary education has initiated a *New Academic Structure* (NAS) which has been implemented at the secondary level since 2009. Under the NAS, all students in Hong Kong will have the opportunity to study up to Secondary 6 (instead of the previous Secondary 5 level), and the number of years of university undergraduate studies will be extended from three to four. At the moment, schools and faculties are busy revising existing, and designing new courses for the new curriculum. The first batch of four-year undergraduates will enter university in 2012. *The Language Centre* at HKUST, which offers the course being examined here, faces the challenge of meeting the objectives of the new structure. It is hoped that a study of the effectiveness of the English course being examined will elucidate points for designing new English courses to meet diverse students' linguistic needs.

An Overview of the English Course

The course has multiple teaching objectives with some targeting general cognitive and holistic development, such as critical thinking skills and team building, while others aim to relate to students' linguistic needs. In the second semester, the major linguistic foci for teaching are writing and presentation skills. For writing, students are asked to write an academic paper of 500 words on an innovative gadget or piece of technology. The task is process writing—students refine their writing following their teachers' comments on their first drafts and resubmit their work (second drafts).

The course also includes lessons to train students to use an in-house software program, *Check My Words* (CMW), to assist them to improve various aspects of

English (refer to <http://mws.ust.hk/cmhw> for the main features of the program). In general, the software program facilitates students' search for grammatical, lexical, and semantic support electronically, and accesses the Internet when needed. Aside from containing a large database of grammatical information pinpointing common errors made by local Chinese students, the program also hyperlinks students to websites on the Internet which offer linguistic evidence or information.

Scope of Study

Contents of the course taught in the two semesters are independent of each other and this paper focuses only on the second semester component, when academic writing is introduced. One teaching focus of the paper covers formal tone and style as characterized by, for example, the use of formal vocabulary.

In this study, students' writing will be examined to decide if the objective that they use formal tone and style in their essays to meet the requirement of the genre of academic writing has been achieved. Findings will be used to suggest changes, if appropriate, in the course content and structure.

After charting the study direction of some students to integrate formal vocabulary in their writing to attain the requisite tone and style for academic writing, further investigation on students' reference skills will be conducted. This secondary aim is to determine whether students can make effective use of various reference tools to improve this aspect of their writing.

Method

Design

The teaching content (formal tone and style of writing) followed the designated course material. Although some of the teaching points in the course book could be questioned as to whether they fully characterize formal English writing, it is not the intention of this paper to challenge the existing course content. This study examines the two pieces of students' writing required by the course. The aims are to investigate students' awareness of the kinds of mistakes they make in their writing, and the extent of their capability to correct their work using available reference tools.

Students were advised to avoid using the following features in their academic paper:

- phrasal verbs
- general verbs which fail to show precise meaning intended
- conversational English
- idioms and
- abbreviations and contractions.

These five features were used as the yardstick to determine if the formality of students' writing was appropriate in both drafts.

Procedure

Ninety-two students' first drafts were collected. On receiving the drafts, teachers wrote feedback to students using marking codes (see Table 1).

Selected papers were then shortlisted for detailed examination. These papers would have demonstrated, in general, an adequate or above-average writing competence but contained distinguishable errors in the area of tone and style. Papers which showed that the writers had poor grammatical and lexical competence to the extent that the meanings of their sentences were impeded or in general unclear, were considered not worthy of further analysis. The second drafts of the selected students' papers were later collected for comparison and analysis. A small sample of students was randomly selected and invited to participate individually in an in-depth interview to verify and complement the data obtained from analyzing the two drafts.

In the interviews, they were first asked to complete a proofreading exercise (see Appendix A) which required them to make changes to the original text for appropriate tone and style as required in academic writing. Students were asked to "think aloud" while deciding on changes to be made, and they were allowed to speak in Cantonese, their native language. Through listening to their "thoughts", asking questions, and observing, I recorded how students arrived at the changes and the rationales behind their decisions. When students finished the exercise, they were shown their two writing drafts. Following the order of appearance of the errors on the students' first draft, questions were asked on how they adopted the changes made.

Results

Findings from Students' First Drafts

One hundred fifty-three occurrences of error related to tone and style (coded with *Ts* or *Infml*) were identified. In the many instances when sentences were found containing multiple errors including tone and style, students would only be advised to review the sentence syntax and/or clarify the meaning of those sentences. In teachers' feedback, precedence was given to help students attain sentence clarity (both syntactically and semantically) in such cases. This course of action may explain the appearance of a relatively low number of tone and style errors found in students' first drafts.

Table 1

Marking Codes Related to Tone and Style Used in Feedback on Students' First Drafts

Type	Code used	Remarks
Tone and style	<i>Ts</i>	Inappropriate tone and/or style for the target audience of your paper.
Informal word	<i>Infml</i>	The word(s) used is (are) too general or conversational. Use of abbreviations/contractions, phrasal verbs, and idioms.

Six students' first drafts were shortlisted for further analysis. These papers demonstrated in general an adequate or above-average writing competence but contained distinguishable errors in the area of tone and style. The number and classification of the errors identified are shown in Table 2.

Errors are clustered around types 1, 2 and 3. A high frequency of error can be found in particular with the use of general verbs, with 18 occurrences. There was no record of use of idioms, abbreviations, and contractions. These two types of error are relatively obvious and easy to correct, and I surmise that most students would have eliminated such errors with the help of their classmates during the peer evaluation session in class before submission of their papers. On the other hand, error types 1, 2, and 3 demand a higher level of linguistic knowledge from both the writer and the peer evaluators to identify and change, and they remained as problems in students' papers.

Findings from Students' Second Drafts

Words or phrases marked as *Ts* and *Infml* on first drafts were identified and compared to the changes made in the second drafts; the results are shown in Table 3.

Attempts were made to change the highlighted errors on the first drafts but the success rate was rather low. Of the changes made to a total of 30 errors, only 7 were found to be acceptable with reference to the context in which the word/phrase appeared. Although problematic words or phrases were underlined and coded on students' first drafts, no changes were found in 10 highlighted errors, and 3 errors were simply deleted by students in their second drafts.

Table 2

Number and Classification of Errors Made by Six Sample Students in Their First Drafts

Types of errors	Number
Phrasal verbs	4
General verbs	18
Conversational English	8
Idioms	0
Abbreviations and contractions	0

Table 3

The Number and Results of Changes the Six Sample Students Made in Their Second Drafts

Total number of errors identified	30
Acceptable changes in draft 2	7
Not acceptable in draft 2	10
No change was made	10
Deleted in draft 2	3

Findings of the Proofreading Task and Interview

Among the six students whose papers were analysed, three were randomly chosen for in-depth interviews. The objectives of the interviews were, first, to address obstacles hindering students from making improvement to their drafts; second, to identify students' choice and use of reference tools to tackle linguistic tasks.

In the meeting with these students, they were first asked to identify and make changes to errors of tone and style in a short piece of academic writing on the same topic as the students' two drafts of writing. The errors to be identified and corrected in this piece of writing were common errors found in the students' first drafts.

Both Student 1 (S1) and Student 2 (S2) failed to approach the task according to instructions given. They seemed to have mistaken the task to be another proofreading task on grammar and collocation that the course required them to do online outside of class hours. Without intervention, both students were allowed to complete the task following their own decisions. In both cases, after the students indicated that they had finished, they were asked to read the instructions given for the task again and decide if they wanted to make any changes. Both followed the suggestion, but no changes were made. I then showed the students the pages in the course book related to *tone* and *style* and asked if they could recall what had been taught in that lesson. In both cases, students acknowledged that they remembered the lesson well. At this point they were asked again if they wanted to make changes to their tasks. Both students decided to approach the task again from the beginning and completed the task as required.

Student 6 (S6) approached the task as instructed and 20 minutes into the test indicated that she had finished. At that point, she had made changes to only four sentences. She was then shown the pages in the textbook on *tone* and *style* and given similar instructions as the previous two students. When asked if she wanted to make any more changes, she agreed and made changes to three more sentences.

Both S2 and S6 chose to work on paper copy while S1 preferred to work on a computer with Internet access. The results of the proofreading task are shown in Table 4.

The findings on how students arrived at the changes they made to second drafts are presented in Table 5.

(See Appendix B for a complete transcription of the recollections.). S1's references or strategies used in finding answers for his second draft were similar to those he used in approaching the proofreading task. Looking up Chinese

Table 4

Results of the Proofreading Task Performed by Three Sample Students

Student	Acceptable changes (out of 10)	Unacceptable	Unchanged
S1	4	6	0
S2	1	8	1
S6	7	0	3

Table 5

Strategies/Resources Students Adopted to Revise Tone and Style in Second Drafts

	Errors highlighted in first drafts	Revisions in second draft	Strategies/Resources adopted
S1	come from	originate in	<i>Google Dictionary, Yahoo Dictionary</i>
	put in	plug	CMW, <i>Google Dictionary, Yahoo Dictionary</i>
	have a breath	take breath	CMW
	goes through	flow through	CMW
	flow out	ooze from	<i>Yahoo Dictionary</i>
	hold sth. tight	attract sth. tight	Guesswork
	have a great protection	phrase deleted	Deletion
S2	have a good coach	engage a good coach	No data
	movement are not done	movements are not accomplished	Ask a friend
	movement are not being done	movements are being accomplished	Ask a friend
	to cope with other possible usage	no change	Disregarded
S6	gear would be put on	no change	Disregarded
	Give a temporary protection	no change	Disregarded
	get into the site	enter the site	Guesswork
	has the protective clothes	includes garments	Guesswork
	put on protective clothes	no change	Disregarded
	help a lot	no change	Disregarded
	lots of situations	no change	Disregarded

translation equivalents of the English words in question was always the core of his search regardless of which reference resources he was consulting. For example, he accessed *Google Dictionary* to research what he could use to replace “come from”, which was marked as *Infml* on his first draft. The following was his description:

I looked up “come from” from *Google Dictionary* and “originate” was one of the synonyms listed. Randomly I chose this word and looked it up from the *Yahoo Dictionary* because I wanted to see its Chinese equivalents. Two of the Chinese equivalents shown on *Yahoo Dictionary* were 來自 and 引起. These two words carried the same meaning I had in mind. I then read the example sentences (in both English and Chinese) and decided to adopt this word. Since “originate” was used with the preposition “in” in some example sentences, I used this combination in my second draft.

Another example from S1:

I wanted to describe the movement of “drops” so I went to *Yahoo Dictionary* for its Chinese equivalents and one of them given there was 露水 [same as “morning dew” in English which student apparently did not know]. From there I came across “condense” and that word pointed to other words and I found the word “ooze” which I decided to use.

Compared to S1, S2 and S6 were less systematic and assiduous in their attempts to correct their errors. According to S2’s recollection, she did not utilize any resources while revising her draft. She either disregarded the error highlighted or sought advice from friends for answers (she did not provide data for one account of the change she made). Throughout the proofreading exercise, she appeared to be hesitant in identifying the mistakes and searching the dictionary for information, and she sought reassurance through asking questions often. For example, when she was reading sentence 2 of the proofreading exercise she said:

I will make changes to sentence 2. But I don’t know which word is formal or informal. I only know if I look up the word “careful”, and if it is informal, the dictionary will tell me. Is that right?

She then looked up the word in the monolingual *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Third edition, 2003). And she continued:

This dictionary does not give information on synonyms. I’m sure “careful” is informal. Look at this word “carnal” on the following page [of the dictionary]. The word is labeled as formal. “Careful” is informal.

S2 stopped and stared at the dictionary entry. After a while I asked, “What is your decision?” and she responded,

I don’t know what to do.

S2 did not seem to understand the style label conventions used by the dictionary to present pragmatic information. Throughout the task, S2 often conferred with the researcher on her choices of answers, her understanding of words in the text, and the meaning of formal English. If S2 performed in the same manner when she revised her first draft, it would have been apparent why she mostly depended on her friends for answers or chose to disregard the mistake highlighted.

S6’s references or strategies used in finding answers for her second draft appear to be similar to those she used in the proofreading task. While working on the proofreading task, she spent a relatively long time staring at the print in silence. When asked of her general strategy to solve linguistic problems, she responded by saying, “guessing”. And she continued to say:

For writing my second draft, I didn’t use any resources to help me. I just sat and read the paper and saw what I could do.

S6 consulted the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary* (Sixth edition, 2004) three times and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

Table 6

Dictionary Search Record of S6 While Working on the Proofreading Task

Sentences from the proofreading task	Search word(s) used	Dictionary(ies) consulted	Results
A newly invented gadget called Sunnil has protection against UV light.	have	Oxford	No conclusion made
The sensor inside the cover does all the functions	functions	Oxford and Longman	Change "does" to "perform"
When it senses that the UV light is too strong, it will come up with a magnetic layer to protect the user's skin.	come up with	Oxford	Change "come up with" to "produce"

(Third edition, 2003) once, while working on her proofreading task (see Table 6).

S6 finished the proofreading task within the shortest time and she had the best score among the three students. Before she was prompted by the researcher to read the course book, she completed the task in 20 minutes; S2 spent 27 minutes (after spending 37 minutes in the first round when she approached the task wrongly). S1 spent 1 hour and 15 minutes on the task in the first round. After he had read the course book, he agreed to perform the task again at another meeting later on the same day. He spent the same amount of time in his second round of the task. S6 also had the most errors left unchanged in both the proofreading task (3 out of 10) and her second draft (5 out of 7).

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

In this study, it was first asked whether or not the teaching of academic writing in the English course being examined had been effective with reference to students' use of tone and style to achieve formality in academic writing. Results from the six sample students' first drafts indicated that all successfully avoided error types 4 and 5. This may be taken to mean that these students have acquired some basic knowledge to distinguish the genre of academic writing, or simply these types of mistake were eradicated in the peer evaluation session. The latter postulation seems more likely since both S1 and S2 failed to identify error types 4 and 5 in their proofreading exercise, though we could also argue that their retention of learning might have been low.

The six sample students undoubtedly made mistakes categorised as types 1, 2, and 3 in their first drafts. The fact that most of them failed to utilize their teacher's feedback and select appropriate vocabulary to replace the problematic words/phrases may suggest that they had not yet obtained the lexical and/or reference proficiency needed to perform the task. From observing the strategies S1, S2, and S6 adopted in the proofreading task, and listening to their explanations on how they arrived at the decisions made on those words in question in their second drafts, I construe that these students' vocabulary knowledge was poor.

Also, their skill in using the reference tools to seek lexical information was found to be only rudimentary.

Given that many problems exist in almost all types of teaching and learning, this paper focuses only on areas that allow improvement, and these include vocabulary learning, reference skills, and course design.

Academic Vocabulary Learning

If we consider learning to be a continuum, it is explicable that students failed to employ relevant vocabulary or phrases in the genre of academic writing to express their ideas in their first drafts. However, the process writing design adopted by the course should have allowed these students time to reflect on their writing and seek answers from various reference means. Why did they fail to deliver better quality work with regard to their vocabulary use in their second drafts? I believe this failure is related to students' limited vocabulary knowledge and limited resources in vocabulary learning.

The general English vocabulary size of first-year university students in Hong Kong has been found to be less than 3,000 (Chiu, 2005; Fan, 2000a). Those students with a poor vocabulary foundation are confronted with many learning obstacles when they commence their studies in an English medium university. The situation is aggravated when students are required to adopt academic language. This is the *lexical bar*, according to Corson (1995), which needs to be crossed if students want to be able to express their ideas successfully in this genre.

The designated English course addresses this problem in the second semester by requiring students to study 184 words retrieved from levels 6 and 7 of the *HKUST Academic Word List 08* which comprises academic words obtained from the HKUST database and Coxhead's *Academic Word List (AWL)* (2000). Students are asked to study the words in their own free time as well as employ an online vocabulary building program to assist their learning. A pretest at the beginning of the semester, and a posttest which is graded, are used to assess their vocabulary learning progress.

Compilers of the *HKUST Academic Word List 08* explain that the list contains 890 headwords and these words "occur frequently over a range of academic subjects. This list is important for students who wish to study at HKUST or any other English-medium institution, no matter what your field of study" (*My words* website at <http://mws.ust.hk>). Coxhead's AWL "contains 570 word families that account for approximately 10% of the total words (tokens) in academic texts but only 1.4% of the total words in a fiction collection of the same size" (2000, p.213). Furthermore, this notion of learning to write academic English through learning words from an academic word list has also been adopted by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Eighth edition, 2010). The dictionary's target-users are mainly learners of English at a higher level of language proficiency. In the latest edition, the dictionary has included Coxhead's AWL and highlighted the 570 words in the dictionary with a code for easy reference of users. The dictionary also advises its users to use these coded words to make their writing formal ("*Oxford Writing Tutor*" in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2010).

Two points here are worth further pondering. First, do these wordlists facilitate students' learning of academic vocabulary? Second, how do these 184 words relate to students' writing tasks?

Hyland and Tse (2007) are among those to question the representation of Coxhead's AWL in the lexical composition of academic writing. One of their conclusions was that AWL has underrepresented some disciplines, with computer sciences having the highest extent of word coverage (16%); and biology, the lowest (6.2%). They further challenge the value of relying "on decontextualised lists of vocabulary as a source of generally available and equally valid items for student writers across the disciplines. Within each discipline or course, students need to acquire the specialised discourse competencies that will allow them to succeed in their studies and participate as group members" (pp. 248-249).

There are arguably potential benefits in identifying a set of "register-level vocabulary choices" based on corpus evidence. Hyland (2007) explains that genre pedagogy is based on specific students' needs and such course design offers explicit explanation of what is to be learned, and a clear framework of the collaboration of language and contexts. Within this designated framework, it is obvious that there are words and grammatical structures which are more frequently employed when compared to other genres. While it is difficult to have definitive proof that the *HKUST Academic Word List 08* serves students better than Coxhead's AWL, HKUST's list seems to be pertinent in serving students studying at universities in Hong Kong. Besides 570 words on Coxhead's AWL, it includes another 320 corpus-based high frequency words found in first-year university students' textbooks of various disciplines across universities in Hong Kong. It is, therefore, reasonable for the English course being examined to have introduced words on this academic wordlist to students.

Yet, it is a questionable pedagogic decision requiring students to learn these academic words out of context. In all fairness, Coxhead recommends her list of words to be employed "to set vocabulary goals for EAP courses, construct relevant teaching materials, and help students focus on useful vocabulary items" (2000, p.227). The words are not meant to be studied and tested in isolation for the assessment of comprehension of their meanings.

Numerous studies have revealed that learning new words in context, by association and reading the same new words many times in meaningful contexts can increase the chance of acquiring them (Hulstijn, 1997; Zahar, Cobb, & Spada, 2001). There is evidence to support that meaningful communicative context and work will enhance success of vocabulary recognition and use (Nation & Newton, 1997). The 184 academic words that the HKUST English course requires students to learn are neither taught in the course, nor contextually related to any course materials. Throughout the course, students are not encouraged or required to apply vocabulary knowledge of these words in class discussions or in their writing. From students' perspectives, it is hard to see the relevance of these words in the course; in fact, few of these words appear in the students' two drafts of writing. To students, the message from the course with regard to these academic words is simple—study them for the blank-filling test at the end of the semester.

I propose that the course integrate the identified academic words into the

teaching materials, and/or incorporate them in reference materials students would refer to for ideas or information when they prepare for their writing tasks. Also, students should be encouraged to use these words in class for purposes such as to demonstrate they have understood the words and can apply them in expressing their thoughts. For example, students should be encouraged to use words on the list while conceptualizing their inventions in group discussions, and when peers are challenging each other on a particular design or theory behind the proposed invention. From students' perspectives, knowledge of these words should be perceived as a means to enable them to discuss a topic more precisely and pertinently than before, as demanded by their discipline of studies. Such class activities would also help students retain the newly-learned words. When the academic words serve a more central role in the scaffolding of students' writing task preparation, coupled with modeling and sufficient practice, there is a higher chance of students acquiring them, and in turn strengthening their general vocabulary repertoire.

Vocabulary Knowledge and Reference Skills

When the course teachers underlined and coded errors found on students' first drafts, they intended that students would use appropriate replacements for the words/phrases which were wrongly used. Students were explicitly taught to use CMW, which allows quick access to information on various aspects of vocabulary to enhance their writing accuracy. Also, they were encouraged to consult their teachers with any queries they might have. In the two writing drafts provided by the six sample students, of the 30 errors identified in the area of tone and style, only seven of the changes students made were acceptable, ten were not acceptable (grammatically and/or semantically) while no change was made in the remaining items. Three errors were simply deleted in these second drafts. From a teacher's perspective, these findings are discouraging; yet, similar results were obtained from the proofreading task given to three of the six sample students. Of a total 30 errors given in the task, they managed to correct twelve items successfully. Fourteen changes made were unacceptable and 4 errors were unchanged. What has inhibited these students from producing better quality work in their second drafts and in the proofreading tasks when all the help seemed to be within reach?

From the findings, we could detect the use of avoidance strategy, and in some cases fairly poor efforts were shown by students. In the second drafts, 37% of the errors remained unchanged. These results also lead one to surmise that students' motivation or attempts made in using reference books for support in reviewing their works were low in general. Such a supposition was partially supported in the interviews with S2 and S6 when both admitted they did not use any reference books to rectify errors identified for them in their second drafts.

The unchanged errors and unacceptable changes students made in the second drafts may also indicate that sample students lacked vocabulary learning strategies to tackle the problems. Nyikos and Fan (2007) logically and understandably assert that students with higher proficiency in vocabulary learning are capable of using a wider array of vocabulary learning strategies than those who are less

proficient. It was suggested earlier in this paper that first-year university students in Hong Kong have in general a relatively small vocabulary repertoire. Hence, students' poor vocabulary learning knowledge might have inhibited them from utilizing other reference resources for assistance to complete their linguistic tasks successfully.

Fan's (2000b) study surveying 985 tertiary students in Hong Kong found that students were not using much of the information provided in dictionaries, such as collocations, pronunciation, frequency, and appropriate usage of words. She suggests that students in general are not aware of the importance of these aspects of word knowledge. Indeed, most Hong Kong students may not have learned such aspects of vocabulary, or the learning might have been sporadic, at school. For example, it is recommended that pronunciation symbols (International Phonetic Alphabet) be taught in the English syllabuses at school level since the sound symbol is not a tested item in public examinations and is not taught in most schools in Hong Kong. Most Hong Kong students do not know how to use the pronunciation symbols in an English learner's dictionary (Chi, 2003).

Due to inadequacies in their understanding of what it means to know a word and lack of training on use of dictionaries for linguistic information, most students would resort to looking up translation equivalents of words in question, or when learning new English words. Fan (2000b) found that the majority of subject students used a bilingualised dictionary (English and Chinese), and their searches were limited mostly to definitions and translation equivalents. In Chi's (2009) survey, the Internet dictionary was found to be the most popular means for students to search dictionary information both for decoding and encoding tasks. The online dictionary in this case referred mostly to the *Yahoo Dictionary*, where Chinese equivalents are given. Findings of this survey also echoed Fan (2000b) in that students looked up mainly translation equivalents and definitions, with the former significantly more sought after than the latter.

A reliance on translation equivalent as the sole source of information when learning a new English word, and ignorance of other aspects of word knowledge, have created major obstacles in vocabulary learning among local students. S1's recall of strategies used in tackling his second draft and the strategies he applied in the proofreading task were consistent: based mostly on the meaning obtained from the Chinese equivalent found. Also, in both cases, the strategies he used restricted his success rate in correcting the mistakes. S1 explained that whenever he has an English word in doubt, he will turn to the *Yahoo Dictionary* to look up the Chinese equivalents and/or definitions, and the synonyms of the word. He only started using the *Google Dictionary* because this dictionary website was linked to CMW, and he followed his teacher's advice to use this to enhance his writing accuracy. In listening to S1 recount how he approached his second draft and observing how he worked, it is without doubt that S1 was conscientious in consulting various reference resources in his search. In this way, he was quite unlike most of the subject students in Chi's (2009) survey. However, his vocabulary learning strategy of using Chinese equivalents and/or definitions as the main point of reference for any decision made about the word under search misled him into many erroneous decisions, and eventually he failed to obtain

the appropriate answers for the task. For example, he wrote this sentence in his first draft:

People working in kitchens often absorb cooking fumes which come from cooking oil in high temperature

The word-combination *come from* was underlined and coded as *Infml* on the student's paper. S1 chose the phrase *originate in* to replace *come from* in his second draft after he read the Chinese equivalents of the word *originate* to be 來自 and 引起 from the *Yahoo Dictionary*. These two Chinese word-combinations probably could be used in a similar context if the sentence were written in Chinese. However, the lexico-semantic nature of the combination *originate in* does not agree with the context in S1's first draft. Moreover, the combination should be followed by the noun it describes. In this sentence, *which come from cooking oil in high temperature* is a relative clause to describe the kind of *fumes* in the kitchen. S1 should have searched the word *fumes* for a more precise collocation, and he would have found *emit* and *produce*, and could have rephrased the sentence as necessary. Another example regarding this strategy S1 used is from the proofreading exercise. The task contains the following sentence:

It has a cover at the top and it must be kept on tightly

S1 identified *kept on* to be problematic but he was not sure why. He decided to look up the combination *keep on* from the *Yahoo Dictionary* for its equivalent(s) in Chinese. From the synonym list, he found the word *proceed*. He read the Chinese equivalents of this word and decided to replace *kept on* with the word *proceed*. In this case, S1's initial search with the combination *keep on* from the *Yahoo Dictionary* misled him to view the combination as a phrasal verb. He read the Chinese equivalents of the word *proceed* for its meaning. Since he remembered that phrasal verbs were to be avoided in formal English, without truly understanding the sentence, he replaced *kept on wrongly* with *proceeded*.

In my opinion, if S1 is not challenged to change habits of depending heavily on translation equivalents to learn about words in general, his vocabulary learning will surely be compromised. According to Fan (2000b, p.131), "the more students looked up the Chinese equivalents of the English words, the more they would ignore other kinds of information in the dictionary, including English definitions".

In the proofreading task, all three students demonstrated rudimentary skills in, and limited knowledge of the dictionaries and other electronic reference tools they used. To help students with such difficulties, language teachers need to teach them explicitly what it means by knowing a word, how to search and decipher lexical information obtained from various reference tools, and apply the word in their linguistic task. It is also important that they receive training to select appropriate dictionaries to match their levels of English proficiency.

Most tertiary students in Hong Kong would have experienced using an English learner's dictionary (either monolingual or bilingualised) in their seven years of secondary education. It is intriguing to discover that many tertiary students turn to a search engine such as *Yahoo* for dictionary information. The proliferation of

websites that provide dictionary help and the multifunctions that most of these websites serve have blurred the meaning of the dictionary and the functions it serves in learning a foreign language. Moreover, English teachers and those involved in the field of pedagogic lexicography should be cautioned that although computing technology has offered these students quick access and convenience to dictionary information, it has not been able to guide them to choose a dictionary which is relevant to their levels and meets their needs; nor can it yet help students to be critical of the quality of dictionaries.

The teaching of vocabulary knowledge and dictionary use suggested in this study could be introduced in the foundation year of the new four-year Hong Kong university curriculum, as part of English language enhancement for first-year students. A strong vocabulary knowledge foundation coupled with sound reference skills are a boon to students' learning of the genre of academic English, which the designated English course being examined aims to teach.

Conclusion

This study does not intend to discredit the English course being examined. Indeed, it supports the course objective of teaching the genre of academic writing to first year university students to meet the imminent demands they face on entering university. The study also argues favourably for the introduction of the academic word list. However, the findings of generally poor performance in the sample students' written works examined in this study indicate that the teaching objective has not been successfully attained.

I suggest restructuring the course to allow academic words to play a more central role in the whole course. Through contextualizing these words and providing genuine occasions in class when students will need to use them, the course will enhance students' chance of acquiring these words.

This study also recommends strengthening tertiary students' general vocabulary knowledge and reference skills through explicit teaching and training. Free access to dictionary information has not enhanced students' ability in using dictionary information to assist their English learning. For students to fully reap the benefits of resources that both English dictionaries and computing technology offer, they need to return to basics—learn what it means to know a word and how to use a dictionary to assist learning of English. Such knowledge and training are parts of the scaffolding needed to support the ultimate teaching goal of the designated English course, that is, teaching the genre of academic writing.

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Appendix A

Proofreading Exercise

In each of the following sentences, there is one problem related to tone and style. Identify and underline the error. Then write your suggestion in the space provided. You may consult any reference books or websites for answers.

A short report on my creative device to be submitted to the Tomorrow Engineering Festival for publication

(1) Sport lovers spend lots of time outdoors. (2) If you are not careful, you may get skin cancer. (3) A newly invented gadget called Sunnil has protection against UV light. (4) Thanks to nanotechnology, the gadget is very small in size. (5) It's round in shape and its weight is just 10 grams. (6) It has a cover at the top and it must be kept on tightly. (7) The sensor inside the cover does all the functions. (8) When it senses that the UV light is too strong, it will come up with a magnetic layer to protect the user's skin. (9) Using Sunnil is as easy as ABC. (10) All sport lovers will put on a Sunnil when they go running.

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

(4) _____

(5) _____

(6) _____

(7) _____

(8) _____

(9) _____

(10) _____

Appendix B

Transcriptions of Discussions with Students Regarding References/Strategies Used in Searching Answers for Designated Areas in Second Drafts

	Draft 1 errors identified	Draft 2 changes made	References or strategies used with reference to changes made
S1	come from	Originate in	I looked up "come from" from <i>Google Dictionary</i> and "originate" was one of the synonyms listed. Randomly I chose this word and looked it up from the <i>Yahoo Dictionary</i> because I wanted to see its Chinese equivalents. Two of the Chinese equivalents shown on <i>Yahoo Dictionary</i> were 來自 and 引起. These two words carried the same meaning I had in mind. I then read the example sentences (in both English and Chinese) and decided to adopt this word. Since "originate" was used with the preposition "in" in some example sentences, I used this combination in my second draft.
	put in	plug	Looked up all the support on CMW but still didn't find a suitable word. Decided to use "nose plug", which I used earlier on in the sentence, as search words. Couldn't find "nose plug" in online dictionary, so I tried "plug", and found the entry "earplug". I also found that "plug" could be used as a verb, so I decided to use it to replace "put in"
	have a breath	take breath	Looked up "Example sentences" on CMW toolbar, didn't find anything. Tried "Word Neighbor" and learned that "breath" is a noun. Decided to look up V+Noun combination in "Word Neighbor". Found texts there illustrating how the combination worked in a sentence. Clicked opened the Chinese equivalents and decided to use "take"
	goes through	flow through	I thought of two words "flow" and "pass" and I checked them on "Example sentences". I found that "pass through" was not really what I had in mind so I accessed "Word Neighbor". I read the page with samples and felt that "flow" was good so I decided to use it.
	flow out	ooze from	I wanted to describe the movement of "drops" so I went to <i>Yahoo Dictionary</i> for Chinese equivalents and one of them was 露水 [same as "morning dew" in English which student didn't know]. From there I came across "condense" and that word pointed to other words and I found the word "ooze" which I decided to use.
	Hold sth. tight	Attract sth. tight	It was my guess.
	Have a protection	Phrase deleted in D2	The feedback received suggested that the sentence which contained the phrase was problematic. I deleted the whole sentence.
S2	have a good coach	engage a good coach	Cannot recall
	movement are not done	movements are accomplished	Asked a friend whose English is better for the word

Appendix B (continued)

	Draft 1 errors identified	Draft 2 changes made	References or strategies used with reference to changes made
S2	movement are not being done	movements are being accomplished	Ask a friend
	to cope with other possible usage	no change in D2	Couldn't think of a synonym for it so I didn't make any change
S6	gear would be put on	put gear on	Didn't consider changing this. Changed the form from passive to active only because I wanted to correct another mistake that appeared at the end of the sentence.
	give protection	no change in D2	Don't know how to
	get into the site	enter the site	My guess
	has clothes	includes garments	I looked at the sentence again and tried to think of a word with suitable meaning to replace "has" and decided to use "includes"
	put on clothes	put garments on	Since the word "clothes" was underlined as the wrong word several times in my paper, I changed it to the word "garment". I didn't do anything to the underlined phrase "put on"
	help a lot	no change in D2	I couldn't think of another word to replace "a lot", so I ignored it
	lots of situations	lots of variations	I don't understand what was wrong with "lots of" so I changed the word "situation" to "variations"