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ACADEMIC STUDY SKILLS AND ENRICHMENT OF VOCABULARY IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Over a period of time, it has become apparent that students in higher education need a variety of study skills for academic success. Writers who have focused on academic studies have tried to use different approaches while trying to prepare students for higher education. However, most faculty in higher education would admit that it is a challenge to assist students in adapting to an ever changing, technology driven, academic landscape. The current study has focused on fine tuning the study skills of adult learners in higher education through vocabulary enhancing topics that were based on humanities but interdisciplinary in terms of being relevant to their field of specialization. Simultaneously, the researcher has tried to use some team activities to develop the vocabulary and writing skills of undergraduate learners. The findings of this small scale study reveal that vocabulary development mechanisms strengthened through study skill techniques can have a positive effect on the academic performance of students. This small scale study is expected to be beneficial to educators who could consider emulating some of these methods.

**Key words:** Academic achievement, Vocabulary development, Study Skills , Problem Solving , Team Activities , Higher Education

Introduction

While English as a foreign language has evolved over a period of time , it has become necessary for students in higher education to have a varied vocabulary and develop good study skills . This is expected to enable them to perform better in their undergraduate studies. Al Saif ( 2011) discovered that EFL learners who are trying to major using English as the medium of instruction struggle due to certain limitations . According to him, students are unable to use the right academic vocabulary when it is required for their reports or assignments. In addition, Martinez ( 2014) strongly advocates the usage of vocabulary learning as it is a central force in strengthening academic reading skills and can improve comprehension of academic passages.

In this particular context, it must be understood that vocabulary is an essential component for student success. It assists students in higher education to express themselves in a fluid manner in any academic situation. This research based study illustrates the fact that competitive team activities based on English language learning and vocabulary development can be highly beneficial for adult learners in higher education.

**Research questions and Hypotheses:**

**RQ1:** Can there be significant improvement in the vocabulary and critical thinking skills of undergraduate learners through the usage of competitive team activities?

**RQ2:** Is it possible for undergraduates to develop their time management and problem solving skills through competitive activities?

**Hypothesis 1:** There can be a substantial improvement in the vocabulary and critical thinking skills of undergraduates with the usage of competitive team activities.

**Hypothesis 2:** It is possible for undergraduates to develop time management and problem solving skills with a reasonable usage of competitive team activities.

**Hypothesis 3:** There can be no significant difference in vocabulary development and the study habits of students when they are exposed to a variety of activities.

**Rationale:** Robinson ( 2006 ) states that an educational crisis related to student population may occur due to a number of reasons. It could be underachievement, irregular attendance, academic probation or drop outs. In most of these cases, he explains that underutilization or an improper usage of study time would have an adverse effect on student performance. In addition, he says that careless study habits could retard progress (pp350 – 365). On the whole, it is true that poor study habits may give rise to frustration and destroy the ability to be proactive. In order to acquire knowledge that can be termed as meaningful and desirable, it is important for students in higher education to develop positive study habits that will influence them to use it as a weapon to reach the pinnacle of success in their chosen academic disciplines. The rationale behind this small scale study was to boost academic achievement through a constant usage of timed, vocabulary enhancing activities.

**Literature Review**

The role of study skills and vocabulary development in shaping the academic achievement of undergraduate learners has been examined as separate components by some researchers. High frequency academic vocabulary is necessary for several purposes in an academic setting and students may fall short of expectations at certain times.

It is worth analyzing the word 'achievement' which generally can be used to refer to the degree of success obtained in specific tasks; this could be particularly relevant to scholastic or academic performance. According to Mutsotso, & E.S.B. Abenga (2010) the term can be considered as "self perception and self evaluation of one's academic success" These researchers emphasize the fact that study skills can positively enhance the academic achievement of students. They have observed that a dearth of study skills have contributed to abysmal student performance ( pp 808 – 813).

Meanwhile, the researcher Trimble ( 1985) has cautioned that vocabulary meant for academic essays may have extended, separate meanings in contexts which are technical in nature . Also, academic words may have a variety of connotations in environments which focus on other disciplines. He says it is relevant for student writers to encode some of their ideas wherein they frame their arguments in such a way that it caters to a specific category of audience. It has to be convincing and draw on a variety of conventional methods to bring in some consensus amongst the reading fraternity. Hyland (2000) also says vocabulary should be embedded in such a way that it brings in some distinctive meaning to the discipline pursued by a student.

Hyland and another researcher Tse (2007) have declared that academic vocabulary should be regarded as a set of "technically loaded" words which range from certain terms that could be used in a particular discipline and share features , meaning and usage with some types of vocabulary used in other disciplines. These specialized words could be helpful but it is necessary to identify the type of vocabulary that would be highly beneficial to students coming from one particular discipline. Moreover, it is necessary to address the needs of that particular category of students. This is quite a challenging task in a general education course where we have students from a variety of disciplines. However, it is possible to build practice tasks which are subject specific and provide some practice sessions in an unobtrusive, engaging manner. Researchers who have focused on the acquisition of second language have made it clear that students usually acquire vocabulary items based on their needs rather than taught items. In addition, it is true that students will come across some of these academic words in their subject specific discipline before they gain some control

over vocabulary which is relevant to their daily lives. These can also be considered as general service type of vocabulary and it has been noticed that students pick up technical vocabulary much faster as they come across these words more often. Meanwhile, Folse (2011, p. 366) has clearly indicated that vocabulary is a very “crucial component” while learning a new, foreign language. The significance of vocabulary has been emphasized a lot more by Martinez (2014) who has claimed that complete knowledge and possession of vocabulary in a foreign language accommodates the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing.

### Methodology

The current study involved two groups of students that were enrolled on a course entitled *Research and Learning Skills*. This course has beneficial learning outcomes which seek to enhance the academic learning skills of undergraduate learners while teaching them referencing techniques. These undergraduates needed to enroll for this particular course as it is a mandatory requirement that comes under the purview of general education.

It must be noted that the course attracts students from various disciplines such as Engineering, Computing, Business, Interior Design and Architecture. As a first step in this study, a needs analysis was conducted at the beginning of the semester to find out what kind of skills the students lacked. It was obvious that students were struggling with time management issues and did not possess good organizational skills. In addition, they lacked problem solving skills and did not know much about team work. Therefore, this study was expected to yield positive outcomes as the planned competitive activities were meant to boost student motivation, improve vocabulary and remedy the problems in relation to student performance. The study was considered feasible as the researcher had an opportunity during the fall semester to teach two groups of students that came from a similar academic background. While the first group of students were enrolled on a general education credit course entitled *Research and Learning Skills*, the second group of students were enrolled in another section of the same course. Both the groups were informed at the beginning of the semester that they would be part of research study. However, the respondents were a targeted set of 20 students from each group to maintain uniformity. The students who were subjected to this research study were regular attendees who did not miss classes. Students who missed classes were considered as outliers and were not included in the study.

It must be noted that the researcher did not have any specific intention of depriving the control group of their share of interesting activities. However, the control group did not want to involve themselves in participatory, competitive activities as it was an early morning session. They resisted the idea of competitive activities due to the early hours and had to be excused. As a result, it was feasible to consider this particular group as the control group. Both groups were informed that they would be a part of a research study and would be subjected to a pre test and post test.

### Findings

In consensus with a study that was carried out by the researchers Brun-Mercer and Boyd Zimmerman’s (2016) highlighting the importance of the AWL in academic writing both the study groups in the current study were exposed to the AWL. The study conducted by Kaur and Ganapathy (2017) regarding the significance of using the AWL was also taken into consideration. The pre test involved a problem solving activity and a simple group writing task that was carried out at the beginning of the semester.

#### Results of the Pre test

Groups		Average time taken for cumulative task completion	Aggregate scores for the writing task / 10 %	Aggregate scores for problem solving / 10%	Total Scores /20%
1 <sup>st</sup> group	Control group ( n = 20)	34 minutes	3%	5%	8%
2 <sup>nd</sup> group	Treatment group (n=20)	37 minutes	4%	4%	8%

The outcome of the pre test for both the groups was almost similar. While the first group took up 34 minutes to solve a problem, the second group completed it within 37 minutes as they initially took around two minutes to settle down. In addition, both the groups were given a writing task that they needed to complete in small groups. Each one of these sub groups had 6 students and the cumulative scores were taken to calculate the total percentage. On the whole, the evaluation revealed that there was only a minor difference between the performances of the two groups. It appeared that the second group took a slightly longer period of time to settle down which means they were hyper active to some extent. It was also apparent that the control group was better at problem solving activities by a very slight margin. However, the overall evaluated scores reveal that their performance was almost similar in terms of writing and problem solving.

#### Results of the Post Test

Groups		Average time taken for task completion	Aggregate scores for the writing task / 10%	Aggregate scores for problem solving /10%	Total Scores /20%
1 <sup>st</sup> group	Control group (n = 20)	27 minutes	6%	6%	13 %
2 <sup>nd</sup> group	Treatment group (n=20)	16 minutes	8 %	9%	17%

The post test was a problem solving team activity and a group writing task that was expected to take up the same time. Both the groups were given a team activity at the end of the semester. In addition, they were asked to write an argumentative essay in small groups.

While most of the students in the control group (the first group) took up approximately 27 minutes to solve the problem and write an argumentative essay, the second group solved the problem and completed the essay within a range of 16 minutes. Their vocabulary was minutely analysed and it was evident that there was a great deal of improvement. Furthermore, a survey was carried out to understand the full impact of these activities. Undergraduate students answered a set of questions on the importance of team building activities and vocabulary training activities. Most of them responded very positively and mentioned that the competitive activities on this particular course had improved their problem solving, critical thinking and time management skills. However, almost all of them agreed that these activities were very successful in developing their vocabulary.

#### Discussion

Coxhead (2000) has suggested the Academic Word List (AWL) and stated that it can be an advantage while trying to improve the vocabulary of tertiary students. It has to be acknowledged that it can be immensely beneficial in enhancing their academic performance.

Meanwhile, Banister (2016) has recommended the AWL as a valuable tool in assisting learners to focus on vocabulary terms that are actually worth learning in contexts that are discipline specific in nature. In addition, he has stated that AWL related online content will allow students to interact with these items at a much deeper level. Furthermore, the AWL has been appreciated by many faculty and researchers alike as it is able to enrich the lexical output of tertiary students through its clear goals which are completely achievable.

It is imperative to note that both the targeted groups of the current study were given tasks based on the Academic Word List (AWL). However, the treatment group was involved in two major activities apart from the minor problem solving timed activities that were practiced during the course of several sessions throughout the semester. The treatment group prepared for an English language quiz which was held as an intercollegiate event. As it was a general education course with students from various colleges, students trained in groups of four to fine tune their vocabulary and quiz taking skills. They developed a strong sense of responsibility and time management skills through a continuous usage of team building activities. The numerous team building activities actually gave the students a chance to enhance their vocabulary through the art of conversation in the target language while using electronic aids to carry out research and unearth additional words. The effect

of these team building activities were clearly visible at the end of the semester when the respondents completed a group problem solving activity and a group writing task within the given time.

In addition, the treatment group was given an opportunity to take part in seminar activities on a number of themes such as “Multiculturalism” and “Globalization”. This made it mandatory for them to use a wide range of vocabulary. They had a chance to formulate ideas and express these ideas using suitable vocabulary. Although they learnt how to use logical appeals, something that really excited them was the fact that they could sharpen their vocabulary further. In addition, they learnt how to use ethical appeals and strengthen their argument. This was apparent at the end of the semester when they were required to complete a research based, argumentative essay. Most of the students within the treatment group were able to perform much better in an argumentative essay and use advanced vocabulary. In addition, they were able to manage their time and complete their essay within the given time limit.

Therefore, hypothesis 1 which claims that substantial improvement in vocabulary and critical thinking skills can be acquired by undergraduate students through competitive team activities has been proved. It has been validated that there is a significant difference as the treatment group was able to write a superior argumentative essay in sub groups employing logical reasoning along with sophisticated vocabulary within 16 minutes in the post test. In addition, hypothesis 2 which states that it is possible for undergraduates to develop time management and problem solving skills with a reasonable usage of competitive team activities has been proven to be accurate. There has been a significant improvement as seen through the collective post tasks. The timed post test activities conducted in the form of a problem solving activity and a group writing task at the end of the semester clearly shows that the time management skills of the treatment group improved to a considerable extent.

### Conclusion

Bhatia (2002) had observed that students who interact and involve themselves in a variety of technical and marketing activities at the workplace do need to develop communication skills which may not merely be an extension of their literacy to tackle academic discourse. He says that these written communication skills will have to include a “range of literacies” that will enable students to handle variations in their respective academic disciplines (p. 27). The current study used the academic word list, carried out competitive activities as well as seminars to augment the vocabulary range and study habits of undergraduate students. The AWL was beneficial to both the targeted groups of learners. However, the second group displayed remarkable improvement due to the interaction and the team activities which reinforced the vocabulary words that they had gathered while enhancing their study skills.

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