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Making academic vocabulary count through strategic deployment in oral presentations by Chinese students of English

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Abstract

When students of English deliver oral presentations at university on academic topics, there is often a dilemma as to whether to incorporate academic vocabulary into their monologues or not. Academic vocabulary can help students to concisely present their ideas and be a 'badge of identity' to the academic community. However, acquiring a productive use in these words is problematic due to their abstract nature and low frequency of occurrence in the language. This paper reports on the strategies of Chinese students of English in deploying academic vocabulary while delivery an oral presentation in a third-year undergraduate module. The paper demonstrates how some students succeed by using academic vocabulary in relatively circumscribed ways while some avoid the vocabulary. Less successful strategies are observed if students rely too heavily on academic vocabulary when they do not have a productive knowledge of the words. The paper suggests that language idiosyncrasies may operate which compound the dilemma for teachers and students of English.

Key words

oral presentation; monologue; academic vocabulary; coherence; idiosyncrasy

1. Introduction

Most teachers believe that proficiency in a second language (L2) is enhanced through a broad and deep understanding of the lexicon of that language. Students who have an intimate and rich knowledge of the vocabulary of the L2, and who are able to make use of this productively, are able to deliver more coherent output whether this be in spoken or written form. Knowledge here refers not only to the meaning of the word but also to the relevant phonological, grammatical and pragmatic information such as pronunciation, stress pattern,

meaning(s), collocations, and so forth (Schmitt 2008). Developing and retaining this knowledge is not an easy task however and after the initial detection of new vocabulary students need to consolidate and enhance their knowledge of the word through efficient learning strategies such as rehearsal (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995) and imaging (Thornbury 2002).

Nation (2001) has classified vocabulary into four levels: general vocabulary, academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary and low frequency words. Academic vocabulary typically accounts for 8% to 10% of academic texts with technical vocabulary covering up to 5% (Hyland & Tse 2007: 236). This lexis is one aspect of the 'constellation of lexical and grammatical features' (Schleppegrell 2001: 431) that characterise the academic register(s); other features include the use of nominalization, passive voice and syntactic incorporation. Since a large part of the meaning of academic texts comes through the lexis, effective knowledge of this vocabulary can provide an entry point for students allowing them to eventually succeed in the high-stakes learning and assessment of education, and to gain acceptance by the academic community. Thus there is pressure on students to go beyond the general vocabulary set to develop a knowledge of, and use in, the academic and technical vocabulary for their discipline.

Studying and learning this vocabulary is a long-term endeavour which starts at school and continues throughout university education, and often beyond. Some scholars have argued that the use of academic vocabulary and academic language in general allows students to gain entry to the academic discourse community. Ivanič for example found that mature students felt that 'belonging to the academic community was a question of using particular words' and 'dressing their ideas up' in words which they were unfamiliar with. In some cases, however they were unsure whether these words were 'tools for intellectual activity' or an 'exclusive veneer to make ideas seem grand' (Ivanič 1998, 270). Wray (2006, 593) also sees the use of vocabulary as a 'badge of identity' and a 'way to show membership of a particular group' but through lexical bundles rather than individual words. Without this vocabulary students' access to 'academic meaning systems' may be barred (Corson 1995: 183).

Tutors and course designers in academia can also, implicitly and explicitly, influence students' choice of lexis in their texts. Marking criteria for assessments often specify vocabulary range and accuracy as key criteria, and students are given research papers and texts which further reinforce the value of academic terms and vocabulary. Lexical errors are often rated as the most serious type of errors in students' writing, particularly among younger professors who find these the most irritating (Santos 1988). Yet, paradoxically, the feedback given to students when their language is unclear is often a terse comment such as 'use simpler language' or 'go back to basics'. Help can be given to students in the form of discipline-specific word lists and definitions, although these decontextualised lists can sometimes be more of a hindrance

than a help by encouraging students to build their discourse around the lexis rather than vice versa. Moreover, these lists are derived from large corpora-based studies which often fail to consider the syntagmatic demands of incorporating abstract vocabulary into sentence structures or the idiosyncratic nature of L2 learning. Hyland and Tse (2007) have noted how this decontextualisation of vocabulary undermines the validity of items across the disciplines, although Worthington and Nation (1996) do not wholly discount the usefulness of lists to expedite learning. While recommendations abound for effective vocabulary instruction drawing on authentic texts and contextualised presentation (e.g. Townsend, Bear, Templeton & Burton 2016), time and number of items often precludes the use of these techniques except for the specific technical vocabulary of the discipline. More general academic vocabulary, in other words, is 'not likely to be glossed by the content teacher' (Flowerdew 1993: 236).

It is no surprise given the desire to align with the academic discourse community and to meet the demands of their tutors and course designers, students at university will attempt to incorporate academic vocabulary into their own texts as the needs arise. To date, most of the research around the use of academic vocabulary at tertiary level by students has been with the receptive needs for reading or with the productive demands of writing. Yet producing coherent spoken discourse is a key academic skill for students for participation in several significant areas of academic life including oral presentations, seminars and tutorials. Oral presentations, in particular, have value and significance for students at university since they are often part of the assessment battery of a course with which tutors evaluate critical argumentative skills. The monologues produced during these presentations need to be coherent and informative, often without the support of scripts or notes. Not only is the student pressured to speak extemporaneously without the facility to revise or edit, as with say a written assignment, students may be only too keen to incorporate academic vocabulary into their monologues. For many students, however, this may be the first time they have had oral contact with these lexical items which hitherto have been receptive items or limited to writing tasks.

The acquisition and productive use of this vocabulary does, however, present particular difficulties to students which are not observed so much with general vocabulary. One issue is the low frequency of the academic words which may inhibit noticing and prevent incidental learning (Schmidt 2010). A second problem is the abstract nature of the vocabulary which often leads to several subtle shades of meaning that are difficult and time consuming to teach. Words can take on extended meanings or collocations across subjects and in some disciplines may have vastly different meanings. For example, Hyland and Tse note how the word 'analysis' can be associated with an approach in some subjects (e.g. 'genre analysis'), a method of determining the composition of something in engineering subjects, and simply a way to consider something carefully in the social sciences (Hyland & Tse 2007). A third issue with the acquisition of academic vocabulary is the polysyllabic nature of the items which

means that students often have difficulty pronouncing the words or conveying the stress patterns correctly. These three obstacles present a 'lexical bar' (Corson 1995) to students which they need to overcome if they are to negotiate their way through academic life successfully. In some cases, however, the troublesome nature of this lexis may lead to avoidance of the vocabulary, particularly for students of English, which in itself is problematic since avoidance removes the lexical armory needed to express the ideas of the discipline being studied. There is thus a dilemma for students.

This paper reports on a study designed to investigate students' use of academic vocabulary as they make oral presentations in a tertiary educational context. It asks whether an increased use of academic words can lead to a more coherent delivery of the monologue or whether this can in some instances hinder coherence. One hypothesis is that a greater use of academic vocabulary will lead to greater levels of coherence in the academic monologue since this will enable complex ideas and relationships underlying the academic ideas to be specified. However, if the academic vocabulary is misused by the L2 speaker due to inadequate control over the lexical item, coherence could actually be weakened. In this case, students who deploy vocabulary at the general level and avoid academic words paradoxically may be more successful in conveying their message to the audience than students who attempt to use more academic vocabulary. The study here is designed to test these hypotheses.

2. The Present Study

The present study considers a set of academic monologues by Chinese students of English produced while delivering oral presentations as part of the assessment for a module in a university study environment. Students are often called on to make academic presentations in front of class at university, and these presentations can form part of the assessment for the course. As Thompson (2008, 242) reminds us, the 'ability to speak at length can often be personally, socially and professionally empowering'. Hence, they carry significance and value for the students due to their credit-bearing nature. In addition, oral presentations can more easily be used to assess students' speaking proficiency, as opposed to say casual dialogic conversation, since students must work by themselves to package language into a more coherent and 'tighter' discourse. Monologues by their nature involve less collaboration and negotiation with the interlocutor and thus push the speaker to develop more structured and hierarchical discourse (Tyler 1992, 1994) – hence their value in academia.

For students of English in academic study, there is often a dilemma as to whether to include more or less academic vocabulary when planning and delivering a speech. More academic content can signal a more refined and complex monologue which may gain a higher grade. The use of academic vocabulary can also enable students to express more complex and

abstract ideas in more concise terms. On the other hand, if students don't have effective productive control over the vocabulary, attempting to use it may actually weaken the coherence of the talk and lead to misunderstandings. This includes not only control of the meaning of the word, but also its phonology, collocations, grammatical class, etc. In some cases, students may strategically choose (or be told) to use more general, prosaic vocabulary terms and circumlocute (Rossiter *et al.* 2010) around complex ideas with simpler statements. There may even be a strategic choice to avoid some academically challenging ideas altogether.

Emerging from this argument are two initial questions for the present study:

RQ1: Does the increased use of academic vocabulary correlate with increased complexity of utterance?

RQ2: Does the increased use of academic vocabulary correlate with more coherent monologues during university oral presentations?

One possibility is that to communicate a meaningful message to the audience in a tertiary environment, a speaker needs to select a greater proportion of academic vocabulary to support the complex and abstract nature of the ideas they are proposing. However, it may be that a speaker can actually communicate more effectively and coherently with fewer academic lexical items and that appropriate use and contextualization of items is the key to success. Speakers thus have a strategic choice to make when planning and delivering a presentation. Another possibility is that as the register becomes more academic in nature, the length of grammatical unit will increase. More syntactically complex units are a result of subordination and embedding which are characteristics of an academic style.

These two initial research questions thus lead into a third research question:

RQ3: Does the use of academic vocabulary in some cases hinder the production of coherent monologues?

It may be that, in some cases, the use of academic vocabulary actually hinders the production of coherence in a monologue. Simply utilising academic words does not guarantee success for students since knowing a word as we have seen can be quite different to being able to utilise it effectively in all contexts. The first two research questions require a quantitative investigation while the third question demands a qualitative investigation into the use of academic vocabulary to see why for some students its deployment is beneficial while for others it is a hindrance.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 10 Chinese students of English who were studying on the final year of their undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom after completing their first two years in their home country. The students were all registered on an 'English for business and management' module which was designed to improve the students use of academic English and to support the content modules they were taking at the same time. The students all had a minimum English level of IELTS 6. Students were recruited on a voluntary basis from the large cohort of students on the module.

2.2. Presentation Task

The presentation task that the students undertook was assigned as one of the four credit-bearing assignments for the module and counted 25% towards the final grade. The task thus carried significance for the students. (The other assignments were two in-class tests and a written report.) The task instructed students to deliver a presentation in a group of 2 to 5 students (most groups were 4 to 5 students) in front of their teacher and peers on a single academic topic related to their discipline. The group was allowed to choose their own topic but with the approval of the class tutor. Each student was expected to speak for approximately 5 minutes on this topic. PowerPoint slides were used in all cases but scripts were not permitted. The assessment further instructed students to 'express quite complex ideas with some success, commanding a fairly extensive range of vocabulary and grammar'.

Figure 1: Instructions to students

- Task: A group presentation followed by approx. 5 minutes responding to questions. A group must consist of 2 – 5 students.

 - Agree on a topic which the whole group feels confident about, and on which each one of you can speak comfortably for about 5 minutes.
 - The topic must be approved by the class teacher.
 - Remember to structure your presentation carefully
 - The talk must include use of supporting information of some kind, for example using PowerPoint or overhead projector
 - You may refer to notes during your presentation, but you must not read from a script.
 - Please remember that the purpose of the oral is to assess your English and your ability to use visual information effectively.

Of the ten students who took part in the research all were in different groups and different classes except participants P1 and P2 who were on the same team.

2.3. Data recording and transcription

The participants were recorded while making their presentations using an Olympus digital voice recorder (VN-8500PC) and a clip-on microphone attached to the lapel. The audio files

generated were then transcribed orthographically. Each transcription was divided into Analysis of Speech Units (ASUs) as defined by Foster, Tonkyn, and Wigglesworth (2000, 365). This is a unit similar to a T-Unit (Hunt 1965) but is considered to be more suited to spoken language. Table 1 shows the number of words and ASUs for each participant and the length of monologue. Hesitation phenomena such as 'um' and 'ah' were excluded from the word count but lexical items that were classified as false starts or repetitions were included.

Table 1: Summary of data samples for each participant

Participant No.	Gender	No. words	No. of ASUs	Length of sample (mins:secs)
P1*	F	716	63	7:48
P2*	F	704	70	6:03
P3	M	640	66	4:57
P4	F	663	63	6:21
P5	F	475	36	4:30
P6	F	695	50	4:56
P7	F	548	55	4:08
P8	F	619	48	5:04
P9	M	1,024	106	9:16
P10	F	410	36	4:41
Totals	8:2 (F:M)	6,494	593	57:44

(* same group)

2.4. Academic word identification

For the purposes of this study, Coxhead's (2000) academic word list (AWL) was used to identify those vocabulary items in the transcribed speech that are classified as academic words. The AWL has been used extensively in research and pedagogic inquiry since its inception in 2000 and has become the *de facto* corpus for academic word identification although Gardner and Davies's (2014) Academic Vocabulary List, which is based on lemmas rather than word families, is beginning to receive attention. The study here did not include technical vocabulary as defined by Nation (2001). After the academic words had been identified, the number (nAW) for each participant was divided by the total number of words to produce the percentage of academic words used (%AW). As an example, in the following ASU, there are 11 words (excluding hesitation phenomena but including repetitions) and 2 academic words from Coxhead's list (underlined). The %AW is therefore 18%.

Ex. 1. so erm I have to analyse the the strategy of er MacDonald's advertising
(nAW=11 words; %AW=18%; ASU length = 11 words)

2.5. Coherence rating exercise

Coherence can be glossed as how the units in a monologue 'hang together' (Dijk, 1997, 9). Cribb (2012) has operationalised this construct based on three criteria: specificity, consistency, and pragmatic relevance. In order to rate each participant for coherence, a rating

exercise was undertaken by three raters independently of each other. The raters were all experienced English language teachers who had extensive experience of teaching Chinese students. The benefit of using three raters is that any subjective interpretations of coherence are averaged out. Each rater was asked to judge the monologues, unit by unit, on a scale of 1 to 5 for coherence where a completely incoherent ASU was given a rating of 1 while a completely coherent ASU was given a rating of 5. Table 2 shows the rating levels.

Table 2: Coherence rating levels

-5- Completely coherent
-4- Moderately incoherent
-3- Quite incoherent
-2- Severely incoherent
-1- Completely incoherent

Because pronunciation and prosody can have such an effect on perceptions of coherence, it was vital that these features were removed from the rating exercise. Thus a procedure initially adopted by Tyler & Bro (1992) and subsequently by Cribb (2012) was utilised in which each ASU in the monologue was presented to the rater in written form rather than aurally. While it is accepted that this is not how we normally judge coherence, in this case the procedure is necessary if we are to focus on the lexico-grammatical aspects of the monologue and not the phonological aspects. This is especially the case with Chinese students of English who can exhibit varying levels of phonological accuracy when speaking. Each ASU in the monologue was presented to the rater one by one who then assigned a rating using the scale in Table 2. The rating was made spontaneously and rapidly without in-depth analysis before the rater moved on to the next ASU. The coherence ratings for each ASU was averaged across the three raters and then the average coherence rating (ACR) for the whole monologue for each participant was calculated. Interrater agreement between raters was 'fair' (Fleiss Kappa $\kappa=0.217$, $n=593$).

3. Results

Table 3 shows the percentage of academic words (%AW) for each participant in the study. The highest percentage of academic words 7.81% is for participant P9 while the lowest is 2.58% for participant P8. The table also shows the average ASU length in words in column 3 and the results of the coherence rating exercise as represented by the ACR in column 4. The maximum ACR of 4.19 is for participant P9 and the lowest value of 2.69 is for participant P4. The overall average ACR across all ten participants is 3.60.

Table 3: Number of AWs and ACR

Participant No.	%AW	Ave. ASU length (words)	ACR
P1	6.15%	11.4	3.94

P2	5.97%	10.1	3.95
P3	3.59%	9.7	3.11
P4	3.77%	10.5	3.65
P5	5.47%	13.2	2.69
P6	2.88%	13.9	3.93
P7	4.56%	10.0	3.87
P8	2.58%	12.9	3.65
P9	7.81%	9.7	4.19
P10	5.85%	11.4	3.01
AVE	5.01	11.3	3.60

Research questions 1 and 2 can be answered by correlating column 2 of table 3 with column 3 (ASU length) and then column 4 (ACR). Figure 2 shows the scatter diagram of percentage of academic vocabulary (%AW) versus ASU length. Pearson's correlation coefficient suggests a weak negative correlation between the two variables ($r = -0.4355$, $N = 10$).

Figure 2: Plot of average ASU length against %AW

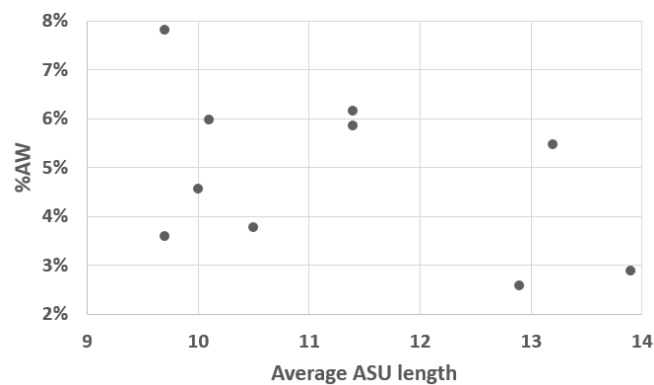
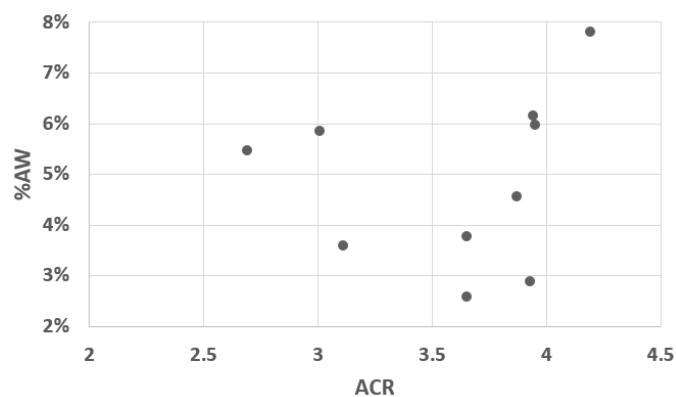


Figure 3 shows the scatter diagram of %AW against ACR. Pearson's correlation coefficient suggests that there is no correlation between the two variables, or at most a very weak one ($r = -0.2585$, $N = 10$).

Figure 3: Plot of Average Coherence Rating (ACR) against %AW



4. Discussion

The discussion will consider first research questions 1 and 2 which look at the correlation between academic vocabulary and complexity and coherence. It will then take a more qualitative view by comparing three participants for research question 3 to see if the use of academic vocabulary actually hinders coherence in some cases.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis (RQ1 & RQ2)

RQ1: Does the increased use of academic vocabulary correlate with increased complexity of utterance?

Research question 1 asks whether a greater use of academic vocabulary leads to a lengthier, more complex utterances. In other words, does a more sophisticated academic register employing a greater proportion of academic vocabulary result in longer utterance length? The results here suggest that this is not the case. Table 3 shows that participant P9 who had the highest percentage of academic vocabulary (7.81%), actually had the shortest length of unit (9.7 words). In contrast, P3, who had the same length of utterance, actually had one of the lowest %AW (3.59%). Participant P8, who had the lowest %AW at 2.58% had the third highest length of utterance (12.9 words). A contrary argument could be that the use of more academic vocabulary might enable a speaker to pack more meaning into fewer words and thus produce a shorter utterance length than a speaker who uses more general vocabulary and who is forced to circumlocute around gaps in their lexicon. Even this argument, however, is not supported by the results.

A comparison of two samples can illustrate why this might be the case. In example 2 below, the length of the unit is 34 words but there are no academic words. In example 3, the length is shorter at 23 words but there are 3 academic words.

Ex. 2. erm that's so it's in two two thousand and nine to two thousand and eleven the user of q-q zone has increased in very rapidly er from two hundred millions to four hundred and eighty millions (nAW=0, ASU length=34)

Ex. 3. but the situation has changed in recent years er as the implementation of open reform policy is for the purpose of boosting the economy (nAW=3, ASU length=23)

Thus we can suggest that while academic words are a key part of an academic register, a large part of a spoken monologue is still built up around non-academic, more 'mundane' vocabulary. The academic vocabulary is the 'icing on the cake' so to speak but the vast majority of spoken language has to be made up from the general vocabulary store. This suggests that simply looking at the proportion of academic words in a monologue from a quantitative perspective is a fruitless task. We cannot simply advise students to use more academic words in their output to generate an academic register. Rather the situation requires a more qualitative investigation in which the coherent deployment of academic vocabulary is considered together with the context in which it is used.

RQ2: Does the increased use of academic vocabulary correlate with more coherent monologues during university oral presentations?

Research question 2 asks whether an increased use of academic words will lead to a more coherent presentation – the argument being that the discussion and treatment of an academic topic, which requires complex and lengthy ideas and claims to be made, will benefit from the use of more academic terms. This assumption of course assumes that the person deploying the academic vocabulary has full control over their use which is not always the case with L2 speakers.

The results here suggest that there is no correlation between the use of academic vocabulary and the coherence of monologues. Increasing the use of academic vocabulary in a monologue will not necessary lead to an improvement in coherence and neither will a simpler, more prosaic use of vocabulary. For example, participant P9 was rated the most coherent and had the highest proportion of academic vocabulary. However P6, who had one of the highest coherence ratings, actually had the second lowest use of academic vocabulary. Participant P5 had the lowest coherence rating of all the participants but had an above average use of academic vocabulary. Overall, correlation between the two variables is very weak. This finding points to the nature of L2 academic vocabulary knowledge and use which we have outlined earlier. The ability to ‘use’ an academic term does not guarantee success since ‘knowledge’ of a word is much more than the ability to articulate it correctly.

The lack of statistical correlation between the variables in research questions 1 and 2 reveals the troublesome and complex relationship between the use and knowledge of academic vocabulary in the L2 mind. In an L1 situation, we might reasonably suggest that the delivery of a monologue will be enhanced through the appropriate deployment of academic vocabulary in an academic register with lengthy and coherent utterances. In the L2 context however, this relationship breaks down since by nature L2 speakers (save for very competent, proficient L2 speakers) have less control of the vocabulary. For L2 speakers, simply using a greater proportion of these words with longer utterances is not always beneficial. This highlights the problem of a register being built around a constellation of features determined by large-scale corpus linguistic analysis: it fails to account for coherence and local idiosyncrasies. In order to highlight and understand this in more detail we need to take a qualitative look at how the academic vocabulary is being deployed as these students make their oral presentations. This is the purpose of research question 3 which is discussed in the next section.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis (RQ3)

The lack of any significant correlation between the use of academic vocabulary and length of unit and coherence can provide us with an insight into the way different strategies are successful, or unsuccessful, for individual students. Research question 3 asked whether certain uses of academic vocabulary can actually hinder coherent monologues. In other words, is there a case for saying that for some students, using a simpler, more prosaic vocabulary set may be more successful in communicating meaning than a strategy which draws too heavily on academic words, especially if the students does not have full control of the use of these words?

RQ3: Does the use of academic vocabulary in some cases hinder the production of coherent monologues?

In order to shed light on this dilemma, the discussion here will look at the contrasting fortunes of three students who utilised different styles in their attempts to produce coherent monologues. This discussion will reveal how different strategic choices lead to different outcomes. The data for these three participants (P5, P6 and P9), extracted from table 3, is presented in table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of participants 5, 6 and 9

Participant No.	%AW	Ave. ASU length (words)	ACR
P5	5.47%	13.2	2.69
P6	2.88%	13.9	3.93
P9	7.81%	9.7	4.19

Participant P5 had relatively long ASU length and a high proportion of academic words, but was somewhat unsuccessful in their attempt to be coherent. P6, in contrast, used a lower percentage of academic words and was relatively successful in terms of coherence. P9 used a shorter length of utterance with a high academic vocabulary content and was successful. These three contrasting strategies and fortunes are glossed in table 5.

Table 5: Contrasting strategies and fortunes

Participant	Strategy	Coherence
P5	high %AW, lengthy ASU	'unsuccessful'
P6	low %AW, lengthy ASU	'successful'
P9	high %AW, shortish ASU	'successful'

The key question is how were participants P6 and P9 relatively successful in communicating their message when P5 was not. Some examples can illustrate the nature of the strategies that these three participants employed (although we should bear in mind that students were presenting on different topics). First, we will compare P5 and P9. In example 4, participant P5 uses three academic words 'impact', 'economy' and 'environment' (as defined by Coxhead's

2018 academic world list). Each line is one ASU and the length of the ASU in words is given afterward in brackets. (Hesitation phenomena such as 'er' have been retained in these examples even though they do not count in the ASU calculations.) Participant P9 example 5, in contrast, has a short ASU with two academic words: 'environmental' and 'impact'.

Ex. 4. (P5): okay well according to my group er member to say er some impact of the economy and the en- er environment in the tourist industry (22)

Ex. 5. (P9): and however the environmental impact is quite massive (8)

(Academic words as defined by Coxhead 2018 are underlined)

For P5, the length of the unit and the attempt to combine three academic words within the unit means that the student struggles to maintain coherence. Knowing a word is not just knowing its meaning and how it is pronounced. The speaker also has to have control over its grammatical information and how to combine it with other words in the sentence. The speaker seems to be saying that the 'economy' and 'environment' can 'impact' the 'tourist industry'. That is, X and Y impact on Z. This seems odd because it is usually the other way round - the tourist industry typically impacts on the environment and economy. The incorrect selection of the preposition 'in' adds to the confusion. We can never really know what the student meant but the attempt to pack three academic words into one utterance and the subtle misuse of these words and their relationship means that the unit lacks coherence.

Participant P9, in contrast, uses a much shorter utterance and is able to show the correct grammatical relationship between the academic lexis. The word 'environment' has the correct suffix '-al' to indicate it is acting as an adjective to modify the head noun 'impact', and the unit does not attempt to say too much. Together with the shorter ASU length, this aids in maintaining coherence and typifies the successful strategy used by P9 compared with the relatively unsuccessful strategy used by P5. The advice to P5 in this case might be to simplify the message and circumlocute around complex ideas using more prosaic vocabulary.

Participant P6 in example 6 had a similar strategy to P5 in the sense that she used long utterances but differed in that fewer academic words were used. This strategy seemed to be more successful in terms of communicating her message although it might not satisfy the task criteria of maintaining an academic register.

Ex. 6. (P6): er er according to the a comparison with the QQ zone and Sina Weibo er it seems that Sina Weibo is has more interesting than the QQ zone cos you can check it or update the er the message er from your smart phone (39)

(QQ zone and Sina Wibo are Chinese SNS sites)

In example 6, there are no academic words used. While the unit does have grammatical mistakes, the idea behind the utterance is conceptually simpler than example 4 above and there is no attempt to pack multiple meanings into one utterance.

4.2.1 Academic Word 'environment'

In addition to differing strategies discussed above, participant P5 seemed to have difficulties with particular academic words such as 'environment' and 'impact' throughout her monologue. The word 'environment' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the 'physical surroundings or conditions in which a person or other organism lives, develops, etc.' (OED 2018) and is one of the 570 headwords in Coxhead's (2018) academic word list. It is in sublist 1 and other members of this family are:

environmental, environmentalist, environmentalists, environmentally, environments

Participant P5 used this word on six occasions during her presentation. These occurrences are shown in examples 7 to 12.

P5

- Ex. 7. okay well according to my group er member to say er some impact of the economy and the en- er environment in the tourist industry
- Ex. 8. and er that and then another one is use the er bicycle for the green have some green impact in the environment
- Ex. 9. and apart from reduce the waste gas it can maintain the healthy environment for the for the er tourist
- Ex. 10. and the er er give some green impact in the environment
- Ex. 11. we not use er waste too much er gas or something bad things to influence the environment
- Ex. 12. give them some theme to er make the create the healthy and er comfortable environment in the tourist place

An analysis of the use of this word shows that the speaker has an understanding of the form-meaning link but there are subtle shifts in use and meaning which miscue the listener at times. Example 7 has already been discussed above where 'environment' impacts on something ('tourist industry'). But then in example 8, there is a subtle shift in meaning to suggest that something has an impact on 'environment'. In 7 the 'environment' is actor whereas in 8 it is goal in Hallidayan terms (Halliday 2014). Subtle shifts in meaning and use are also observed in the verbs used with the lexical item. In example 8, the verb 'have' is selected whereas in 10 the verb is 'give' which from a transitivity point of view contrasts a relational process with a material process (Halliday 2014). While the use of the lexical item 'environment' is not strictly incorrect in and of itself, the subtle shifts in use and meaning lead to miscues at the micro-level. As these miscues accumulate, the listener finds it difficult to integrate the utterances into the on-going discourse and they experience something like a 'garden-path effect' or vagueness (Tyler & Bro, 1992, 74-75). The importance of the term 'accumulate' is one that is often forgotten in L2 discourse analysis. Incoherence is rarely the result of one lexical error but more often the consequence of a series of micro miscues, at lexical and grammatical levels, that accumulate to weaken coherence over the length of the discourse. Hence the syntagmatic maxim that it is not just knowing a word but the company it keeps highlights how corpus-based approaches to L2 instruction, which are largely paradigmatic endeavours, are far from adequate.

Participant P9 used the word 'environment' three times as shown in examples 13 to 15. In all cases, in contrast to P5, the word appears to have been deployed more strategically and more coherently in stable domains. In example 13, the speaker combines 'environment' and 'impact' with the correct suffix on 'environment' in contrast to P5 above who seemed to have trouble relating these two words to each other. In example 14, the speaker initially includes an incorrect suffix but repairs this immediately. In example 15, an incorrect preposition 'about' is selected and the definite article is missing, but the deployment of the word is such that meaning can be recovered. This suggests that P9 is deploying the word in a controlled and circumscribed manner so as to maintain coherence in contrast to P9 above who is clearly overextending their use of the word.

P9

Ex. 13. and however the environmental impact is quite massive (8)

Ex. 14. it's the chartered institution of en- environmental er environment and health (10)

Ex. 15. so erm in conclusion er there are differences er about external environment such as religion erm Tom mentioned and erm erm the legis- legislation both Susan and Tom mentioned (23)

(Names are pseudonyms)

One possibility is that students have language idiosyncrasies (Awang, Maros & Ibrahim, 2015) that are unknown to themselves and their teacher. By 'idiosyncrasy' we mean individualised knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of specific bits of language that manifests themselves in usage which impacts negatively on communication. Idiosyncrasies are unique to the individual learner and arise due to a complex interaction of the acquisitional history and proficiency level. Since we can never fully know or control how a learner comes to acquire specific language knowledge, there is a potential for each learner to develop certain idiosyncrasies in their knowledge of L2 that are unique to themselves. The acquisition of academic vocabulary is one such area where idiosyncrasies could develop; P5's use of the word 'environment' above may be one such example. There are several problems with idiosyncrasies. First, they are hidden so difficult to detect. Second, tutors often do not have time to give one student the attention they need when this knowledge may not be useful to other students in the class. Finally, it is not always clear what the idiosyncrasies are, even if detected, nor how they can be rectified. This then feeds in to the dilemma that we discussed earlier of whether teachers should instruct students to avoid academic vocabulary in their monologues or not. Knowing a student's idiosyncrasies may give a teacher a way out of this dilemma. The notion of idiosyncrasy also runs against the grain of current corpus-based approaches to investigating academic vocabulary in that commonalities found in broad corpora studies cannot easily be adapted to the individual student of English.

The examples presented here have not been chosen to suggest that there is a right or a wrong way to approach a presentation task. Each student has strengths in different areas. However, it seems clear that students have different strategies available to them which they

can adopt more or less depending on their own needs and stage of development. Student P5 has patently tried to adopt an academic register with lengthy units and a high proportion of academic vocabulary which is beyond her ability to control at the current stage of development. The advice to this student might be to adopt a less academic tone and to reduce the quantity of academic words where possible. While this may contradict the demands of academic course designers and tutors, and may go against the students' desire to join the academic community (Ivanič 1998), if coherence is the defining criteria of an effective presentation, as we believe it should be, this may be the best advice at this stage of development. Adopting a more circumscribed academic register would free up cognitive resources and enable the speaker to focus on grammar and sentence structure during oral production until, and if, their proficiency level improves.

Student P6 was relatively successful in terms of coherence but does this mean their strategy should remain unchanged? At what point in their acquisition of the language does the student attempt to incorporate more academic vocabulary into their output, if at all? Would this hinder coherence, especially if the length of unit remained high? These are all questions for students and teachers and the answers are not obvious but if the use of academic vocabulary is seen as a 'badge of identity' (Wray 2006, 593) then there may be a case for encouraging students to incorporate more of these words into their output while trading off some of the length in the ASU. However, we would argue that the advice and instructional strategies from tutors to help the student make this step up need to be on an individual basis rather than just a course-wide, general piece of advice to employ an academic register.

The study presented here is not without limitations in its design. The first is the small number of participants in the project. Recording, transcribing and analyzing spoken discourse is inevitably a time consuming task and resources meant that a more in-depth study was not available. The data presented here was part of a larger corpus of data including students of other nationalities but the discussion has been limited to Chinese students due to the nationality of one of the authors and because of the specific issues that Chinese students experience with English. The study has also focused on semantic and grammatical considerations and has said very little about pronunciation although the authors recognise that this is a very important aspect of coherent monologue delivery.

4.3. Further Research

There has been little research carried out on academic vocabulary in spoken discourse. Most studies have focused on the corpus analysis of quantitative aspects of oral production such as lexical density or diversity (e.g. Lindqvist, Gudmundson & Bardel 2013). As we have argued here, however, these measures may not reveal the true extent of the problem for

students of English since they do not capture the syntagmatic relations between items. We therefore argue for a more qualitative approach which puts coherence (or comprehensibility/intelligibility) at the centre of studies in order to demonstrate the importance of acquiring and using vocabulary in a rich, contextualised and individualised manner.

Future research could also investigate other areas of production such as pronunciation which is known to be a key driver in comprehensibility. Since many academic terms are polysyllabic in nature of Graeco-Latin origin, these items present particular problems for students of English not only due to segmental pronunciation but also complex stress patterns. Vaddapalli (2012) for example found that all students in his sample could not pronounce the word 'engineering' correctly even though they were engineering students. We also feel that the notion of 'idiosyncrasy' could be investigated further. This presents a particular challenge to the wider TESOL community because the dominant paradigm has been that whole groups of students, whether based on classroom, proficiency or nationality, have the same or similar needs. This static approach does not capture the complexity and diversity of language learners.

Finally, more could be done to investigate the process of designing and preparing for oral presentations, and the beliefs of students as they go about these tasks. Many thousands of students across the UK undertake oral presentations each year on university courses and we still understand very little about the process of preparing for these. Do students strategically aim for academic lexical density in monologues even if they know they are likely to falter with this? What are the motivations for this outlook? Our research agendas are still very product driven in this sense.

5. Conclusion

The delivery of a monologue in front of an audience is not an easy task for anyone but is particularly challenging for students of English. This is even more so in academic contexts when students are expected to utilise academic words and concepts, and maintain academic registers. For students, the desire to do this can mean that they sometimes project beyond their proficiency level and utilise words which they do not have full control of. Some students may feel that utilising the academic words that they hear their tutor and peers using may be a 'badge of identity' and give them access to an academic community. However if this is at the expense of maintaining a meaningful and coherent monologue then clearly this assumption is misguided.

For teachers of English, giving advice to students of English who are preparing to make an oral presentation presents us with a dilemma. We want students to use academic words in order for them to gain knowledge of them and fully acquire a use in them; indeed the criteria

for a presentation task may explicitly encourage students to use an academic register. However, we also want our students to communicate coherently and meaningfully and we know that sometimes a plainer style can achieve that. The study here has shown that simply measuring the percentage of academic words in a monologue or the length of utterance is not a good predictor of success. Each student has their own particular style and while some may be successful with an academic register, others will not be. Teachers need to be aware of this and be ready to adjust according to the individual needs of their students.

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