

WORDLISTS, PHRASEBOOKS, LEARNERS' DICTIONARIES: THE LEXICOGRAPHICAL TOOLS FOR ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

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Writing in English for academic purposes is a challenge both native and non-native English speakers face as a natural course of action that it has to be faced sooner or later (Zhang, 2021: 157)

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the latter half of the 20th century, English has become increasingly dominant in both professional and educational environments. This trend extends beyond traditionally English-speaking countries, reaching a truly global scale. Writing in English has followed suit, becoming central to professional discourse and a primary vehicle for research and academic instruction. As a result, the ability to write effectively in English – now the primary language of international communication – is essential for academic and professional achievement (Breeze, 2012: 1). European universities adopt varied approaches to incorporating English into their education systems, which can be broadly categorized into three models: the traditional model, the language integration model, and *English Medium Instruction* (EMI).

The traditional model prioritizes the national language (L1) as the medium of instruction across all disciplines, excluding foreign language courses and their associated literature. Only language majors are expected to develop deep proficiency in their chosen foreign language, while others treat it as a supplementary skill. This model was widely used across Europe until around forty years ago when opportunities for foreign language learning were limited (Breeze, 2012: 3-4).

The language integration model incorporates English learning into degree programs in two primary ways:

- a) Course Integration, whereby universities offer compulsory or elective English courses tailored to specific fields, such as Legal English for law students or Scientific English for medical students;
- b) Language Proficiency Requirements, where universities require students to meet a minimum English proficiency level – often B1– to graduate.

Institutions support this with classes and online resources. However, long-term language development is often overlooked, and students may lack motivation to pursue advanced courses. This model gained traction in the 1980s amid growing globalization, student mobility (e.g., Erasmus), and demand for multilingual professionals (Breeze, 2012: 4-5).

Common in Northern Europe and growing in the Mediterranean is the EMI model that delivers most courses entirely in English. Initially seen in countries like the Netherlands in the 1950s and later adopted by Finland and other Scandinavian nations, this trend accelerated between 2002 and 2007, when over 2,400 degree programs were offered in English across Europe. This model aims not only to boost student language skills but also to attract international students and compete in the global education market. In some programs, international students make up more than half the cohort. Though

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initially limited to postgraduate programs, EMI is expanding into undergraduate education. However, challenges persist, such as inconsistent language entry requirements and limited academic English support. A study of 58 Scandinavian EMI programs found that most offered no English-language assistance, though many students expressed a need for help, especially in academic writing (Breeze, 2012: 5-8; Wächter, Maiworm, 2007; Hellekjaer, 2006).

Breeze (2012: 2) asserts that learning to write academically equates to developing critical thinking and intellectual maturity, the core goals of higher education. Similarly, Zhang (2021: 148) emphasizes that writing is among the most valuable skills students can acquire before entering university. According to Bourdieu *et al.* (1995: 4), academic language is not a native tongue for anyone: even native English speakers must learn the specific registers used in various academic fields (Golden, Kulbrandstad, 2021: 4) and must be mastered through mentorship and exposure to expert writing within academic communities (Zhang, 2021: 153).

For students whose first language is not English, the barriers are greater. They must adapt to both English linguistic norms and academic conventions specific to their discipline and institution. Indeed, EFL students face three main challenges: academic demands that include conducting research, paraphrasing, synthesizing information, and using referencing systems; linguistic challenges that involve mastering formal academic style, fluency, structure, complexity, and accuracy (Breeze, 2012: 8); and rhetorical differences that means acknowledging cultural variations in writing conventions, even among Western countries (Zhang, 2021: 155; Golden, Kulbrandstad, 2021: 4).

Although not all universities provide adequate support for writing, many offer helpful resources. Writing is often integrated into content courses through initiatives like CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where subject specialists work with language instructors. These collaborations help students learn discipline-specific writing conventions. Universities also support students through writing centres, where they can access materials, receive tutoring, and engage in peer feedback. While they have long been common in North America and Australia, they have only become widespread in Europe since the 1990s.

Despite being a central feature of academic life, academic writing is notoriously difficult to define. Molinari (2022: 18) highlights the confusion around what it is and what it does. She argues that academic writing cannot be reduced to a fixed set of features. Rather than a single, uniform style, it encompasses a variety of forms with different objectives. Similarly, scholars debate whether academic writing should be viewed as a skill (Hyland, 2006: 17) or a social practice (Lea, Street, 1998: 159). A skill refers to technical proficiency – like grammar or spelling – that can be transferred across contexts. In contrast, a social practice involves contextual knowledge, such as understanding when passive voice is inappropriate. Social practices are embedded in specific social settings and relate to what Hirst (1998: 152) calls «practical knowledge» that is acquired through real-world experience.

These contrasting views affect how academic writing is taught and understood. In the Anglo-American tradition, instruction often takes a skills-based approach, presenting writing as a set of rules and formulas to be memorized and applied, often devoid of disciplinary or contextual nuance. Students are taught to master vocabulary lists or fixed paragraph structures. On the other hand, proponents of the social practice approach see writing as a complex, reflective activity shaped by context, purpose, and interaction. Here, excellence involves understanding what “good” academic writing looks like in specific settings, knowing how to adjust tone for different audiences, and demonstrating subject matter expertise (Molinari, 2022: 22-27).

While both approaches aim to define academic writing, each has limitations. Skill-based pedagogy, with its focus on linguistic correctness, can foster a «culture of performativity» (Macfarlane, 2021b, in Molinari, 2022: 99) where form trumps content. It may ignore essential aspects like developing a unique academic voice or understanding the target audience (Molinari, 2022: 23). Conversely, while the social practice model embraces writing's diversity, it is sometimes critiqued for being overly permissive, potentially allowing too much variation and undermining the idea of an accepted academic standard (Molinari, 2022: 99). Central to this debate is the tension between agency – the writer's freedom to shape their work – and structure – the institutional expectations and norms governing academic communication. These conflicts often manifest in discussions about language use, such as the role of the passive voice or the appropriateness of first-person pronouns (Molinari, 2022: 99-100; 29-31).

In his work *Perspectives on Academic Writing in European Higher Education* (2013), Otto Kruse offers a more integrated approach. Rather than treating academic writing as a fixed skill or purely social process, he views it as a multifaceted activity composed of various interrelated competencies:

1. *Disciplinary Knowledge* – Writing is tied to specific subject knowledge. Students do not just report on what they have learned; they often generate new understanding through the act of writing (Kruse, 2013: 51).
2. *Process and Procedural Skills* – Writing involves planning, drafting, and revising, which are learned over time and shaped by practice and feedback (Kruse, 2013: 51).
3. *Communication and Discourse Knowledge* – Effective academic writing requires familiarity with the communication norms, citation styles, and rhetorical voice of a given academic community (Kruse, 2013: 51).
4. *Media Literacy* – Writers must now navigate digital tools and platforms for composing, sharing, and publishing texts in a globalised academic environment (Kruse, 2013: 51).
5. *Genre Awareness* – Understanding the conventions of various academic genres is essential. Writers must recognize what structural and stylistic features are expected in different contexts (Kruse, 2013: 52).
6. *Linguistic Proficiency* – This includes not only grammar and vocabulary but also the use of advanced rhetorical tools such as hedging, metadiscourse, and intertextuality (Kruse, 2013: 52).

Kruse's model illustrates that academic writing is an integrative process involving the development of multiple interdependent skills. It evolves in non-linear ways and depends on factors like student motivation and teaching practices. In his view, writing instruction should consider both the technical and contextual dimensions of writing, aligning pedagogical strategies with the broader aims of higher education (Kruse, 2013: 52).

And it is indeed on these principles that most textbooks centred on teaching English academic writing are now based. While most textbooks written for both native and non-native students were in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries principally focussed on the written product (form, structure, grammar, organization) (see a.o. Nava, Pedrazzini, 2019; Pinnavaia, Zanola, 2022), today they focus on the composing process too. Since the end of the twentieth century textbooks have in fact been concentrating on «learning the process of writing rather than learning the abstract concepts about writing, that liberate teachers to listen to their students rather than enslave them to an author's theories» (Connors, 1997: 111). By including aspects that concern brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, and revising, the cognitive and metacognitive demands that writing entails become a much more negotiable action between students and teachers.

Both as a process and as an end-product, writing must nonetheless rely on the sound knowledge of vocabulary.

No matter how well the student learns grammar, it is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way (McCarthy, 1990: viii).

As the quotation above shows, more than thirty years ago McCarthy underlined the importance of a good grasp of vocabulary for writing purposes. It is a belief that has been shared by many a scholar in the field of teaching English as a Foreign language especially (see a.o. Engber, 1995; Laufer, Nation, 1995; Lee, 2003; Meara, 1998; Morris, Cobb, 2004; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, McCarthy, 1997; Read, 1998; Singleton, 1999).

That lexical competence equates to quality of writing dates much farther back than 1990s, however. Already in the early twentieth century, A.S. Hornby, Harold E. Palmer, and Michael West had realised that without dedicated lexical tools, learners of English would never really master how to speak and, more importantly, how to write in English. Their intuition «that a high level of natural communication could be achieved by using a vocabulary of around 1,000 words» (Fontenelle, 2006: 418) in fact led Hornby and Palmer to compile their *Thousand-Word English* (1937) and West to draw up the 1,500 item *General Service List* (1953). In the meantime, Palmer's (1933) *Second Interim Report on English Collocations* also revealed the importance of learning words in combination. These works devoted to commonly used words and phrases, which it was believed all learners of English should know, not only paved the way for new pedagogical methods in English language teaching, such as the controlled vocabulary movement in the mid-twentieth century (Bongers, 1947) and the Lexical Approach in the 1990s (Lewis, 1993), but also contributed to establishing a new lexicographical genre: the learners' dictionary. To crown Michael West's and Harold E. Palmer's lexicological and lexicographical research (see Smith, 1999; Cowie, 2006) appeared Hornby's *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (ISED), published by Kaitakusha (Tokyo) in 1942, which was reissued as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* in 1948. Based on a restricted defining vocabulary, this new lexicographical tool aimed to help learners decode words much more easily. Indeed, since the 1980s, with the official introduction of a controlled defining vocabulary in the first edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978), learners of English have had the fortune of being provided with dictionaries whose «main objective is to expand their vocabularies» (Fontenelle, 2006: 418)².

Such tools came in response primarily to what is now a fully acclaimed fact that the «learning of vocabulary is best considered as a cumulative process where learners build up knowledge of a word through repeated encounters over a reasonable period of time» (Waring, Nation, 2004: 103). As experienced teachers of English, Hornby, Palmer, and West had already understood that learners needed tools to consolidate the learning of vocabulary, which up until then was thought could be done just through reading (see Stanovich, 1986). Hornby, Palmer, and West had clearly noticed that the so-called Matthew effect (that implicit learning does not necessarily increase the size of vocabulary) was not enough for learners to gain a good grasp of vocabulary. Indeed, in more recent years, Milton and Treffers-Daller (2013: 167) have confirmed that there «appears to be no

² Besides Oxford and Longman, Cambridge, Collins and Merriam-Webster publishing houses have been regularly issuing new editions of learners' dictionaries for over three decades, and whose latest editions are also available online.

correlation of vocabulary size with reading habits». They found in fact that a good grasp of Academic English vocabulary even among monolingual university students was actually the outcome of «explicit learning or even explicit teaching».

There is no doubt that Hornby, Palmer, and West's pioneering works gave impetus to the appearance of three important types of lexicographical tools devoted to teaching academic vocabulary. The first of these is the wordlist, of which three exemplars comprise Coxhead's (2000) *Academic Word List*, Pacquot's (2010) *Academic Keyword List*, and Gardner, Davies' *Academic Vocabulary List* (2014). The second tool consists in the phrasebook, two examples of which may be Howe's (2000) *Phrasebook for Writing Papers and Research in English* (2000) and Luiz Otávio Barros' (2016) *The Only Academic Phrasebook You'll Ever Need: 600 Examples of Academic Language*. The third tool is the monolingual learners' academic English dictionary, emblematic of which are the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English* (2014) and the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* (2017).

Clearly, these are not the only tools learners can turn to for Academic English writing instruction. Indeed, as hinted above, the market is replete with textbooks, guides, and manuals of this kind and the scope of this article is not to provide an overview of all the material available. We would instead like to feature the wordlist, the phrasebook, and the learners' dictionary as exemplars of the three major lexicographical tools on which English for Academic Purposes pedagogy and materials have been built starting from Hornby, Palmer, and West's studies. More precisely, since thinking and writing about a topic relies upon the strong synergy between lexical, collocational, and semantic knowledge, the perspective will be to examine them as three significant pillars of the writing process that involves: a) choosing the right word, b) collocating it correctly, and c) in its appropriate semantic and pragmatic environment. The aim of this essay will be to analyse how each of these tools can help learners to make an appropriate lexical, phraseological, and semantic/pragmatic choice when writing.

2. METHODS

To carry out this analysis we decided to focus on one product from each of the three categories of tools. As an example of the wordlist tool, we chose Coxhead's (2000) *Academic Word List* (from now on AWL). As an example of the phrasebook, we chose Howe's (2000) *Phrasebook for Writing Papers and Research in English* (2000) (from now on PWPRE), and as an example of the learners' dictionary, we chose the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English* (2014) (from now on OLDAE). In each we analysed the scope of lexical items included, the typology of phrases accounted for, and the defining information provided.

3. RESULTS

In the following subsections, the results concerning the analysis of the lexical items, the phrasemes, and the defining information in each tool will be provided.

3.1. *Lexical items*

It was mentioned earlier how a good grasp of vocabulary is fundamental in putting one's ideas together and in expressing them. This is what triggered Michael West to create the *General Service List* in 1953 and Coxhead in the year 2000 to create the AWL. Indeed,

as Coxhead (2000: 213) clearly recognised, academic vocabulary «causes a great deal of difficulty for learners (Cohen *et al.*, 1988) because students are generally not as familiar with it as they are with technical vocabulary in their own fields and because academic lexical items occur with lower frequency than general-service vocabulary items do (Worthington, Nation, 1996; Xue, Nation, 1984)». It is for this reason that she decided to collect the 570-word families she thought would be indispensable for students preparing to study in English-medium universities. Formed from a corpus of academic texts that cover a wide range of disciplines, the AWL accounts for about 10% of the words in academic written text and 1.4% of the words in non-academic text.

The word families are ranked according to their range and frequency and put into ten alphabetical sub-lists, with the most frequent words included in the first sub-list and the least frequent words in the tenth³. In table (1) below, we can see the 60 headwords that compose sub-list 1. All the derivative forms that also normally belong to it have been excluded for reasons of space.

Table 1. *Headwords in sub-list 1*

Analyse	Constitute	Establish	Indicate	Occur	Role
Approach	Context	Estimate	Individual	Percent	Section
Area	Contract	Evident	Interpret	Period	Sector
Assess	Create	Export	Involve	Policy	Significant
Assume	Data	Factor	Issue	Principle	Similar
Authority	Define	Finance	Labour	Proceed	Source
Available	Derive	Formula	Legal	Process	Specific
Benefit	Distribute	Function	Legislate	Require	Structure
Concept	Economy	Identify	Major	Research	Theory
Consist	Environment	Income	Method	Respond	Vary

Although for space constraints not all the headwords and derivative forms belonging to all the ten sub-lists can be reported here, one may gather that sub-list 1 not only comprises the most frequent but also the most “generic” words from an academic point of view. Indeed, Coxhead (2000: 228) specifies that each one occurs once in 4.3 pages of academic text (assuming that each page is 400 words long) and that all 60 account for more than one third of the total coverage of the list. The next most frequently occurring 60 words (sub-list 2), in fact, provide just half the coverage of the first 60 words, while sub-lists 5-10, instead, add little to the overall coverage of the AWL. That said, because they occur in a wide range of texts and are unlikely to be acquired incidentally through reading, Coxhead (2000: 228) retains them to be useful all the same.

Even though other wordlists have been issued in the meantime, which include more items and cover a wider range of academic disciplines, Coxhead’s AWL still remains an essential tool. In the last two decades it has provided the raw material needed, on the one hand, for «direct teaching through vocabulary exercises, teacher explanation, and awareness raising» (Coxhead, 2000: 228), on the other, for constructing the relevant teaching materials for academic writing, including the phrasebook and the dictionary.

In the preface to his PWPRE, Howe (2000: ix) states that his work «also includes the most frequent words in academic English, based on the Academic List by Averil

³ For all the AWL sub-lists see <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>.

Coxhead». Made up of over 5000 words and phrases, PWPRE is divided up into sections that are devoted to style, spelling, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, numbers, time, phrases, and a thesaurus. Particularly interesting is the latter section in which users have the opportunity to choose synonyms and/or antonyms for key words in academic writing. For example, under the key word *occur* – one of the words in AWL sub-list 1 – Howe (2000: 254) introduces the synonyms *take place, happen, result, appear, materialize/ise, exist, is found, is present, the occurrence of*. Providing users with lexical alternatives not only helps them to write with a richer vocabulary and greater variety thus avoiding the use of the same expressions over and over again, but more importantly allows them to gradually add more and more lexical items to their mental repertoire, which is so fundamental for the critical thinking stage of the writing process too.

Of course, there is no greater treasure house of words than the dictionary. This is why every native and/or non-native student involved in writing should have one on their desk or device. When writing for academic purposes, a dedicated dictionary is clearly even better. The OLDAE is such a dictionary. As a true repository of academic words, OLDAE is made up of 22.000 words, phrases, and meanings. Largely excluding technical English, it focusses essentially on a core of «general academic» words (Lea, 2014: 182-3), given that «typically, students will need to learn these words as part of their subject studies, whether or not they are also learners of English» (OLDAE, 2014: v). By being specifically intended to help learners of English with their academic writing, OLDAE is in fact informed by academic wordlists starting from Coxhead's AWL. Indeed, the compilers began with a core list that comprised words from the AWL that they had checked against the Oxford Corpus of Academic English (OCEA) (Lea, 2014: 184). OCEA is an 85-million word corpus composed of undergraduate textbooks, academic journals, and scholarly monographs and handbooks, taken from a range of disciplines across the four main subject areas of physical sciences, life sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities (OLDAE, 2014: v). That Coxhead's wordlist was still important 14 years after the appearance of other wordlists and after the compilation of enormous corpora, such as the OCEA, is shown by the fact that all the lemmas that belong to AWL are labelled as such in the OLDAE and that users can access the whole AWL wordlist by means of the accompanying Cd-Rom. Clearly, users can now also access the AWL via the internet (see footnote 3 above).

Although we have come along way since Coxhead compiled his academic wordlist, it would seem that the AWL still remains the bedrock of academic vocabulary learning and teaching. Thanks to the advancement of technology and the possibility of creating large corpora of English, students can now have access to all sorts of databases that include academic English words. Besides dedicated dictionaries, we now have dedicated corpora such as the British Academic Written English (BAWE), or even tools that rely on Artificial Intelligence such as Chatgpt that can go as far as write texts in academic English. Without the solid understanding and acquisition of the basic words, however, learners will never be able to use these more sophisticated tools successfully. That phrasebooks such as Howe's (that has reached its fourth edition) and dictionaries such as the OLDAE are still based on Coxhead's AWL underlines its contemporary relevance in English language teaching. By focussing on AWL, learners can get a firm hold of the essential elements of academic vocabulary. This is not only important from a linguistic but also from a psychological point of view. The sound knowledge of a determined and fundamental set of words in the domain of academia will ensure that learners have much more confidence and security in both the thinking and writing processes.

3.2. Typology of phrases

Once learners have in mind a word, they also need to know how to combine it with other words. Stemming from Palmer's studies (Palmer, 1933), compounded by J. R Firth's language theories (Firth, 1957) that inspired «phraseological research throughout Europe, thereby creating a phraseological tradition of collocation studies concerned by fixed or semi-fixed units» (Williams, Millon, 2011: 3), since the mid-twentieth century English language teaching programmes have focussed on raising awareness that discourse is created through the recurring combination of words. Based on the single wordlists, several multi-word lists have thus also been developed for academic purposes. One is the *Academic Formulas List*, devised by Simpson-Vlach and Ellis in 2009, which provides the most common recurring word sequences three to five words long. Another is the *Academic Collocation List*, developed by Ackermann and Chen in 2013, which contains 2469 of the most frequent and useful collocations which occur in written academic English. A third one is the *Academic Idioms List*, developed by Miller in 2019, which lists the 170 idioms that are commonly used in spoken and the 38 ones used in written academic English⁴.

That recurring patterns of words can be associated with specific moves in academic writing is promptly illustrated by Howe in his phrasebook. One hundred pages of the PWPRE are in fact devoted to presenting learners with common formulaic sequences typical of passages in academic papers, such as introducing a study, chapter or section, arguing for and against, reviewing other work, analysis and explanation, summary and conclusions. An example, taken from the section entitled «arguing your case and putting forward ideas» (pp. 179-181), includes a list shy of one hundred phrases from which users can choose in order to state their case (e.g. *this study argues the importance of*) and/or express their views (e.g. *my own view is that*). Thanks to this tool, learners are provided with a solid lexical framework upon which to lean when approaching each section of the writing task.

Possibly more difficult than choosing one framing phrase as opposed to another is combining headwords that may represent an idea or thought with the appropriate succession of words. At the intersection between syntax and semantics, collocations are among the most challenging phraseological issues that learners of a foreign language have to face. Not only are they massively present in languages (Hoey, 2005), but they are also (or at least appear to be) arbitrary and highly specific for any given language. This poses problems in second language acquisition, especially when the first language is likely to interfere with the production of natural-sounding word combinations in the second language that leads to incorrect translations (e.g. *make a photo** as a calque of *fare una foto*). The main obstacle for learners of English is, indeed, encountered in production tasks and especially when having to write in English. It is for this reason that learners' monolingual dictionaries of English have been tackling this problem since the outset (see Pinnavaia, 2023) and why the compilers of the OLDAE are very careful to give collocations as much space as possible.

In fact, OLDAE has three ways of providing collocational information: example sentences, bold type, and a collocations section. Indeed, the first manner sees collocational information provided in example sentences. For instance, the definition of the headword *research*, also drawn from the AWL sub-list 1, as «the careful study of a subject, especially in order to discover new facts or information about it», is illustrated by the example of use «*there is need for further qualitative research in this area*». This sentence that undoubtedly represents a frequently occurring expression in academic writing taken from

⁴ To access these wordlists, please refer to the EAP Foundation website available at <https://www.eapfoundation.com/>.

the OCEA highlights how the noun «research» is usually pre-modified by an adjective that points to quality.

Next to frequently occurring illustrative sentences, OLDAE also provides indications of the colligational or grammatical patterns that words entertain. For *research*, two patterns expressed in bold print are provided: «~ **on sth/sb**» and «~ **into sth/sb**», which are further supported by more example sentences («research **on** the effect of the Mediterranean-style diet on dementia is explored»; «this paper brings together 25 years of research **into** organizational buying behaviour»). Learners here can therefore see what prepositions need to be used with headwords in syntactic structures.

Lastly, for each lemma OLDAE also devotes an important section to listing the most frequent adjectives, nouns, and verbs that collocate with it. For *research*, OLDAE lists the adjectives that modify it (**future, further, previous, prior, recent, current, basic, extensive, qualitative, quantitative, comparative, empirical, scientific, academic, participatory, social, ethnographic, medical, clinical, geographic, geographical, historical**), the verbs that precede it (**conduct, undertake, carry out, do, need, require, focus on, draw on, review, describe, report, present, publish, be based on**), the verbs that follow it (**be based on, focus on, examine, explore, show, demonstrate, suggest, indicate, provide, reveal, identify**), the nouns that follow it (**question, interest, project, programme, study, process, strategy, method, design, group, team, assistant, participant**), and finally the nouns that precede it (**area, field, type, form, nature, subject, focus, aim, goal, purpose, line, piece, body**). Highlighted in bold, these parts of speech are an exhaustive example of all the types of lexical combinations possible for the word «research», and exemplary of the wealth of phraseological information that the OLDAE provides for each headword.

3.3. *Defining information*

Writing is not just about choosing words and expressions though. Writing is about choosing the *right* words and expressions. Writing means conveying one's ideas clearly and precisely and this can only be done if writers have in mind the most appropriate word(s) or multiword unit(s). Thanks to wordlists and phrasebooks, writers have access to many words and expressions that are commonly used in academic writing and from which they can choose. However, whilst choosing from lists of words or expressions may be a relatively easy task for native speakers, for learners it is not (see Chon, 2009; Murphy, 2013; Flinz, Pinnavaia, 2024; Storjohann, 2006). This is because equivalence is never pure in any language and terms that may look alike hardly ever are (Cruse, 2000; Cuyckens *et al.*, 2009; EunHee, 2022; Geeraerts, 2010; Goddard, Wierzbicke, 2014; L'Homme, 2020; Maiernborn *et al.*, 2019; Murphy, 2013; Wiegand *et al.*, 2020). To make an appropriate choice, learners need to be guided by disentangling definitions, which wordlists and phrasebooks rarely provide.

In fact, as we saw above, the AWL consists in a list of words and their derivative formations, while the PWPRE presents a variety of phrases in relation to specific writing sections and semiotic moves. Nowhere, however, are definitions included alongside the words and expressions presented that might help to distinguish near synonyms. For instance, in sub-list 1 of the AWL, where we can find the verbs *to consist* and *to constitute*, there is no information that points out the difference in syntactic usage between the two semantic equivalents. Similarly, the PWPRE (242) offers no insight into the denotational difference between the verbs *to conform to* and *to be consistent with* that are presented as equivalent options under the topic *to agree with*. To unveil such differences, it is necessary to consult a dictionary, and in this case the OLDAE.

Starting from the verbs *to consist* and *to constitute*, OLDAE shows how they cannot be used in the same way from a syntactic point of view. Even though in the example sentence expressed in italics the verb *to constitute* (*his message constituted a direct challenge* s.v. *constitute*) could certainly be replaced by *to consist* (e.g. *his message consisted in/of a direct challenge* (this is my own example)), the two verbs require different syntactic structures: *to constitute* needs to be directly followed by a noun, while *to consist* must be accompanied by the particles *in* or *of* and/or by the *-ing* form if a verb follows. This kind of grammatical information that is not included in the AWL is fundamental for writing purposes.

Fundamental is also being aware that what may look like a match is not. Thanks to the definitions provided in OLDAE, learners can see there is a slight difference in semantic meaning between words, as in the case of *to conform to* and *to be consistent with* mentioned above. *To conform to* is described as «to behave and think in the same way as most other people in a group or society» and is illustrated with the example sentence: *there is considerable pressure on teenagers to conform* (s.v. *conform*). Defined as «in agreement with something», and exemplified with the sentence: *these results are entirely consistent with the hypothesis* (s.v. *consistent*), *to be consistent with* does not have the same meaning as *to conform to*. Whereas the former points to agreement in the sense of avoiding contradiction, the latter points to it in the sense of respecting rules and standards. We can see, therefore, that even though the two verbs can be used in relation to agreement, they are not true equivalents, as may be erroneously deduced from PWPRE. In the OLDAE, nothing is left unmarked and, where needs be, equivalents are clearly distinguished one from the other. By consulting the semantic information that accompanies each word in this dictionary, learners are goaded into adding variety to their writing by choosing and using synonyms correctly.

Besides grammatical and semantic, OLDAE offers essential pragmatic information too. This helps learners make an appropriate choice especially when having to opt for words that may have one or more senses. Indeed, by means of the label «help» within the definition, OLDAE introduces fundamental information regarding usage.

Because of its many different senses, the lexical item *man* is a case in point. The OLDAE, in fact, lists nine different senses, the first four of which are 1. «an adult male human»; 2. «humans as a group»; 3. «humans from a particular period of history»; 4. «(literary or old-fashioned) a person, either male or female» (s.v. *man*). Next to the second sense only, OLDAE inserts the label «help» and explains by means of bold print for the key words that: «**man** and **mankind** have traditionally been used to mean 'all men and women'. Many people now prefer to use **humanity**, **the human race**, **human beings**, **people** or, especially in the field of life sciences, **humans**». That this is essential pragmatic information that complies with the norm that gender bias language is no longer acceptable in academic writing can be gained by the fact that also the PWPRE (28) warns readers not to use «terms such as *men* for general reference», suggesting that *everyone* is a better alternative. Unlike PWPRE, however, OLDAE does not eradicate the term *man/men* from academic writing. Depending on the temporal and stylistic contexts, *man/men* can still be found as shown by the citation under sense 3, illustrating past customs (*Early man made use of stone for millenia before discovering copper*) and under sense 4, illustrating a literary tone (*Later thinkers regarded it a self-evident truth that all men are born equal*). By consulting OLDAE and having at their disposal all the different senses of *man*, learners can make a more conscious lexical choice in accordance with the communicative purpose of their work.

The communicative purpose of any piece of writing not only impels the choice of the correct sense of a word that belongs to general academic vocabulary, but also to the one that belongs to a specific field. Although as stated earlier, OLDAE does not feature an enormous number of technical terms, it does point out differences between communicative settings when necessary, as the definition for the verb *to dissent* demonstrates. After describing the verb *to dissent* as «to have or express opinions that are

different from those that are officially accepted or given» (s.v. *dissent*), OLDAE inserts a «help» label in order to point out the second and more specific sense of the verb: «In law, judges **dissent** when they state formally that they disagree with a decision made by other judges in a legal case». Thanks to such a detail, we learn that in a legal setting the verb *to dissent* (incidentally, this is pointed out for the noun too) has a very precise meaning that goes beyond disagreement.

A similar distinction is found under the lemma *chemical* too. Labelled as belonging to the AWL and described as «involving atoms and molecules and how they cause substances to have different structures, properties and reactions», OLDAE clearly provides learners with its scientific definition. However, besides this and headed by the «help» tag, OLDAE also points out that «in non-scientific use **chemical** is often used for describing substances that are produced in industrial processes, rather than occurring naturally». By adding that in lay writing it would be better to use the terms *synthetic* and *artificial* instead, OLDAE points out that *chemical* can be used in different ways according to register and style.

Time and space constraints will not allow for a more thorough examination of OLDAE; however, as I hope to have shown, OLDAE is a complete tool for writing purposes. Starting from wordlists including the AWL and informed by studies carried out in the field of phraseology on which phrasebooks like PWPRE is inspired, OLDAE offers learners a wide and exhaustive amount of lexical information. By accompanying every word with precise syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic details, OLDAE is a useful resource for choosing and using words in the right way, which is essential for successful academic writing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Since the late 20th century, English has become the dominant global language of academia, making strong writing skills essential. However, as scholars such as Breeze (2012), Kruse (2013), Molinari (2022), Zhang (2021) along with many others have amply shown, academic writing is difficult to master because it combines linguistic, cognitive, and disciplinary demands. Indeed, students – especially those writing in English as a foreign language – face challenges in academic conventions, language accuracy, and rhetorical differences across cultures. Particularly challenging is not just grammar but also disciplinary knowledge, rhetorical awareness, and vocabulary. Writing in fact does not just imply drafting and revising the final product but of course planning it too, which means that at the core of the whole ideational and writing process lies vocabulary. Early pioneers like Hornby, Palmer, and West, indeed, recognised vocabulary as foundational to meaningful communication, and by developing controlled vocabularies and learners' dictionaries, they began to lay the groundwork for the modern branch of studies now called English for Academic Purposes. Thanks to their studies and research, the English language teaching community has at its disposal a series of tools that can help students and especially non-native speakers of English to gain a good grounding in academic vocabulary. Among these stand out dedicated wordlists, phrasebooks, and dictionaries.

Having examined one of each of these three major lexicographical tools – Coxhead's *Academic Word List* (AWL), Howe's *Phrasebook for Writing Papers and Research in English* (PWPRE), and the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English* (OLDAE) – by focussing on three lexicological aspects, and namely single and multiword items along with semantic and pragmatic information, the extent of their importance in academic writing pedagogy has been ascertained. There is no doubt that academic wordlists are fundamental when it comes to teaching students to write in an academic domain. It has been seen how next to

providing other tools such as phrasebooks and dictionaries with the essential lexemic material, as expressed by both PWPRE and the OLDAE in their prefaces, wordlists and especially AWL allow students and teachers to have a solid lexemic base to start working from. Because research has shown that vocabulary learning is a cumulative process that requires explicit teaching and not just reading exposure, it is important to concentrate on and feature the words that are required in academic writing. Teachers' awareness and students' knowledge of the core vocabulary needed for any type of academic writing is indeed an excellent starting point for the stages of planning and writing.

This is also true for recurring word combinations, which is why next to single item wordlists, multiword lists like the *Academic Formulas List* (Simpson-Vlach, Ellis, 2009), the *Academic Collocation List* (Ackermann, Chen, 2013), the *Academic Idioms List* (Miller, 2019) are also useful for bolstering vocabulary knowledge. Phrasebooks in particular offer this opportunity. Because they contain ready-made formulaic sequences, phrasebooks, such as Howe's PWPRE, are particularly useful for structuring arguments and sections of academic writing. This type of information is also held in dictionaries, but clearly in a more exhaustive manner.

It has been seen how the dedicated learner's dictionary OLDAE not only includes and points out the words that belong to AWL, accompanied by the collocational patterns they fall into, but also offers the semantic and pragmatic information that facilitates the production of natural and accurate academic language. By providing semantic distinctions and pragmatic guidance, OLDAE makes sure that users have, above all, the necessary information to choose the right word among near synonyms and polysemous words, helping them to avoid misuse and tailor word choice to the context, thus developing precision in communication.

However, in a world that is changing and in which Artificial Intelligence is fast taking over in all domains of human activity, it would seem that there is no place left for lexicographical tools such as these in academic writing. Research has shown that not only do writers now readily turn to AI products when communicating for academic purposes, but that the output is a truly positive one especially in «streamlining the editing process and minimiz[ing] time spent on tasks such as grammatical and structural editing» (Golan *et al.*, 2023: 327). Even and especially for non-native speakers of English, Artificial Intelligence «can be an effective tool to improve the clarity, style, and coherence of scientific writing, helping non-native English-speaking scientists to communicate their research more effectively» (Del Giglio, Pereira Costa, 2023: 4). The only negative aspect that recent research into using AI for academic writing has pointed out is the fact that «reliance on AI-based outputs could act to curb human innovation and critical thinking skills» (Golan *et al.*, 2023: 327). At the outset of this chapter it was firmly established that academic writing is a multifaceted activity composed of various interrelated competencies (Kruse, 2013), a major one of which is thinking and planning. Given that critical thinking leans heavily on the sound knowledge of vocabulary (Pratiwi, Widhiatama, 2023) and vice versa, teaching vocabulary at school and at university level might still make sense. In order to put together ideas and to communicate them effectively, knowing and choosing the right words is essential. Dedicated wordlists, phrasebooks, and especially dictionaries are undoubtedly the tools that can help learners to do so, and even though they might not be the resources students are directly accessing now, they are the bedrock of today's Artificial Intelligence, and will still be of tomorrow's more sophisticated instruments. Tools that allow users to profoundly understand lexical, semantic, and pragmatic differences among and between words not only lead to building more confident writers, but also and more importantly to more aware and empowered ones.

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WEBSITES

AWL Academic Word List: <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>.

EAP Foundation: <https://www.eapfoundation.com/>.

