THE ACADEMIC WORD LIST:
EXPLORING TEACHER PRACTICES, ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS THROUGH A WEB-BASED SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

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Abstract. *This study explored the extent of use of Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) by teachers of academic English. The attitudes and beliefs which inform teacher use were also investigated. The research comprised a self-administered online survey which gathered 193 responses from practitioners, supplemented by a small number of follow-up interviews. The survey found that the AWL is widely-used by teachers of academic English, both as a guide for course and materials design and as an instrument recommended for self-study use. English teachers adopt and adapt the list for use with their learners because they believe that it provides a principled basis to focus on general purposes academic vocabulary which is relevant to many learners. The survey confirms that the influence of the AWL as an inspiration for the creation of subject-specific lists is matched by a similar level of popularity amongst practitioners. However, teachers also expressed a number of important criticisms and misgivings with reference to the AWL, in particular concerns about misuse and misappropriation. This study can inform the production and design of future word lists, providing as it does a revealing snapshot of the ways teachers incorporate word lists into pedagogy. Moreover, the survey findings provide an example for researchers of the interplay of teacher beliefs, attitudes and pedagogic practice in the area of L2 vocabulary teaching.*

Key words: *The Academic Word List, teacher cognition, academic vocabulary, vocabulary teaching and learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents and discusses the results of research, conducted through a major online survey and subsequent interviews, exploring academic English teachers' practices, attitudes and beliefs with reference to Coxhead's (2000) *Academic Word List* (or AWL). Starting with an overview of the literature relating to second language vocabulary pedagogy with a specific focus on the AWL, list learning and teacher cognition, the paper then discusses the nature of teachers' engagement with the AWL and unpacks some of the beliefs and attitudes which underpin this use. Finally, this research considers some potential implications for teachers and compilers of future word lists.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Vocabulary in second language learning

Vocabulary has a vital role to play in second language learning. Indeed, Folse (2011: 366) considers it "perhaps the most crucial component in learning a foreign language." The reason for this, as Martinez (2014: 121) notes, is that "one needs to know the words in the target language in order to listen, read, speak and write - and the more the better." This need intensifies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts, where international students often face the challenge of getting their academic English 'up to scratch' whilst simultaneously attending lectures and undertaking their assignments in their chosen fields. English deploys a subset of words in academic contexts and control of this academic vocabulary, much of it 'Latinate' in origin, has long been recognised as playing a key role in ensuring overall academic success (Corson 1995). These 'academic words' are common to a range of texts and, correctly deployed, convey the inquiry and method of academe (Nation 2001); in other words, they discriminate and classify, describe and evaluate, and perform other important functions of research, dissemination and explication (Nation 2001). Nation's classic (2001) categorisation of vocabulary into 4 types describes these items as academic words (in contrast with high frequency, low frequency and technical items). This seemingly tidy taxonomy does not always reflect the complexity of use, however. Gardner (2013) reminds us that, for instance, low-frequency words in general English may attain high frequency status in a specific context (Gardner 2013).

2.2. The Academic Word List

2.2.1. Overview

The AWL consists of the 570 most frequent word families occurring widely in academic texts across the disciplines, making it a "general-purposes academic word list" (Lessard-Clouston 2012/13: 292) rather than a tool for discipline-specific items. Examples of AWL headwords on the first sublist include: 'assess' and 'evident' (Coxhead 2000). The AWL covers approximately 10% of tokens in the academic texts of its 3.5 million-word base-corpus (Coxhead 2011: 357). The AWL items are presented as 10 sublists of decreasing frequency and based on the lexical measure known as a word family, that is, a base word and all its inflections and derivatives (e.g. 'benefit', 'beneficial', 'beneficiary', 'beneficiaries', 'benefited', 'benefiting', 'benefits'). It is claimed learners can infer the meaning of each family 'member' relatively easily from the base (Bauer and Nation 1993). Coxhead (2000) claims that when knowledge of the AWL is combined with that of West's (1953) General Service List (GSL), the first frequency-informed list of words in the English language, 90% lexical coverage of academic texts can be achieved, helping learners towards the lexical threshold of 95-98% (Schmitt, Liang and Grabe 2011; Schmitt and Schmitt 2014) when knowledge of discipline specific items (worth 5%) is added. Thus, the AWL items represent an important target for vocabulary learning in EAP contexts to enhance texts comprehension, and this was the predominant aim of its creator (Coxhead 2011). The AWL has been cited in a huge number of research articles and projects in various sub-fields of EAP and even other languages (cf. Cobb 2004; Lessard-Clouston 2010; Li and Qian 2010; Martinez and Schmitt 2012; Minshall 2013), establishing a central presence and was recently described as "the main representative list of academic vocabulary" and one "which has revolutionised EAP learning" (Yang 2014: 29).

2.2.2. A Critical evaluation of the AWL

Despite, and maybe because of, its influence, the AWL has attracted its fair share of criticism. Firstly, although averaging 10% text coverage, the figure is uneven across the disciplines; the list is "skewed unfairly towards business-related disciplines according to Hyland and Tse (2007) whilst providing incomplete coverage in medicine (Wang, Liang and Ge 2008). A second challenge to the AWL relates to its use of word families. Gardner and Davies (2014) have developed a new list, the *Academic Vocabulary List* (AVL) based on lemmas. Gardner and Davies (2014) claim that word families include too many derived forms which may not share the same meaning, giving the headword 'react' and its possible derivatives, 'reactionary' and 'reactor' as an illustrative example of the potential semantic problems faced by L2 learners (Gardner and Davies 2014). The relationship of the AWL to the GSL is another focal point for critics who have cited the latter's age and outdatedness (Richards 1974; Brezina and Gablasova 2013) and, indeed, Coxhead accepts that "a more up-to-date list of the first 2,000 words is needed" (2010: 6). Moreover, detractors criticise the way that the AWL was constructed 'on top of' the GSL, making separation of the two lists difficult (Gardner and Davies 2014). Also, the GSL's inclusion of many words that are actually high-frequency *academic* words (e.g. company, exchange) plus the GSL's relatively small corpus base (by modern standards) has been noted (Browne, Culligan and Phillips 2014). Meanwhile, Hyland and Tse (2007) make a far deeper criticism of the AWL, questioning the multi-disciplinary nature of academic vocabulary. Challenging the viability of the whole notion of a 'general-purposes' academic word list, the authors contend that words frequently change meanings as they cross disciplinary boundaries, characterising academic vocabulary as chimerical. However, Paquot (2010) argues that a 'general purposes' vocabulary does exist and concurs with Wang Ming-Tzu and Nation (2004) that pedagogy should help EAP learners establish similarities and highlight centralities of meaning. A final limitation relates to the very notion of a 'word' list, that is, a list of single items of lexis rather than *collocations* and *phrases*, represents lexis stripped of its textual partners.

2.2.3. Alternatives to the AWL

Recently, a number of alternative academic vocabulary lists for English have been produced which claim to improve on the AWL in one way or another. Paquot's (2010) *Academic Keyword List* (AKL) includes the high-frequency words absent from the AWL because of their inclusion in the GSL. Her list is based primarily on 'keyness' rather than frequency. Keyness refers to a quality of prominence or distinctness a word may have in a particular corpus suggesting the word is important when compared to its occurrences in a reference corpus (Paquot 2010). It is important to note that her list aims to help learners with their productive skills rather than reading comprehension, the aim of the AWL. Meanwhile, the Academic Vocabulary List, or AVL (Gardner and Davies 2014), purports to be more current, accurate in identifying core academic vocabulary and is provided primarily in a lemmatised format. Finally, when combined with their *New General Service List or* NGSL (Browne, Culligan and Phillips 2013), Browne et al.'s (2014) *New Academic Word List* (NAWL) claims to provide 5% greater text coverage.

2.2.4. Pedagogic options with the AWL

As this study investigated teacher use of the AWL, it seems appropriate to start by discussing the pedagogic applications envisaged by its creator, Averil Coxhead (Coxhead 2000). It is important to note that in her original research article (Coxhead 2000), she warns against decontextualised methods of vocabulary learning and teaching that the AWL might, initially, appear to encourage; she proposes a principled combination of *message-focused* and *language-focused* learning as the ideal way forward for vocabulary pedagogy, with the AWL helping achieve the latter (Coxhead 2000). The AWL is seen as being an important reference point for preparing EAP vocabulary objectives and for the development of specialised academic vocabulary publications (Coxhead 2000). By 2011 there were an array of paper-based publications based partly or solely on the words of the AWL (cf. Zwier 2013; Schmitt and Schmitt 2011) demonstrating the AWL's popularity with publishers and ELT writers.

However, as well as these reference and research-focused applications, Coxhead also argues for direct teaching of the AWL items stating, "For direct study of the vocabulary, teachers and learners can work from the list itself." (2000: 228). When discussing explicit learning, she mentions teacher explanation, awareness-raising and the use of word cards as possible approaches, whilst consistently recognising the need to combine this with message-focused reading and listening encounters with words to improve overall vocabulary development (Coxhead 2000).

It may be in many ways more appropriate that word lists, themselves products of the corpus linguistics revolution, are approached via the many custom-designed websites and digital tools, a number of which are listed on a 'useful links' webpage of Coxhead's institution (Victoria University 2013). Availability of these tools does not necessarily equate to use of the AWL, however, and the extent of teachers' awareness and consequent use of the AWL depends, in part, on whether they believe that it is a useful tool for their students.

2.3. Teacher cognition

2.3.1. Beliefs and attitudes

Beliefs and *attitudes* are complex constructs and contested terms (Borg 2003; Barcelos 2006). However, Woods (1996) helpfully distinguishes beliefs from *knowledge* (with the latter seen as synonymous with 'facts' or 'information') and explains how beliefs represent what is used as guidance in the absence of the knowledge. *Teacher beliefs* constitute part of what Borg (2003) refers to as *teacher cognition* and any understanding of teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices vis a vis the AWL will require a grasp of cognition: "what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg 2003: 81). This tripartite concept represents a "tacit, personally-held practical system of mental constructs" (Borg 2006: 35) emerging from teachers' schooling, professional coursework, classroom experience and contextual factors and possibly impacting on teacher behaviour (Borg 2001). Much of this terminological diversity is unsurprising for Oppenheim (1992: 143), who contends that "an attitude, percept or belief is … likely to be more complex and multi-faceted and so it has to be approached from a number of angles." He characterises attitudes as intense, layered, inter-linked and part of an underlying value system (Oppenheim 1992). His basic definition of attitudes as "states of readiness" (Oppenheim 1992: 174) was adopted for my research alongside Borg's definition of beliefs as constituting mental states containing a proposition seen by the holder as true, but not a fact (Borg 2001).

2.3.2. Related to list learning and English Language Teaching

Folse (2011) is a strong proponent of explicit vocabulary instruction and within this sees a role for lists. However, he believes that many teachers do subscribe to what he calls the 'myth' that vocabulary lists are both counterproductive and unproductive. Nation sees word lists as useful "shortcuts" (Nation 2013) as part of the language-focused strand of an effective vocabulary course (the other three strands being message-focused input, message-focused output and fluency (Nation 2011), but describes how sometimes the principles followed by teachers are at odds with recent research findings in second language acquisition Nation 2011). One of these, the belief that "All vocabulary learning should occur in context" (Nation 2001: 384) suggests a decontextualised list might be spurned by some teachers and similarly, Thornbury (2002: 3) concurs that "the value of list-learning may have been underestimated." It is this type of discussion in the literature which leaves room for a certain scepticism over the extent of teacher use, beliefs and attitudes vis-à-vis the AWL and which the current research aims to explore.

2.4. Research Questions

The survey and follow-up interviews explored the following questions:
1. *What, if any, are academic English teachers' practices with reference to the AWL?*
2. *What beliefs do teachers of academic English hold regarding the pedagogic value of the AWL for vocabulary teaching?*
3. *What attitudes do teachers of academic English exhibit towards the use of Coxhead's (2000) AWL as an explicit vocabulary learning tool?*

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Research participants (teachers of academic English) were accessed via the e-mail list and Facebook pages of relevant professional bodies and research groups (the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes (or BALEAP), the International Association of Teachers of English Foreign Language: Research Special Interest Group (IATEFL Research SIG) and TESOL France. Two Facebook groups of professional contacts and other potential respondents were also e-mailed the link, constituting a non-probability (or non-random) sample or convenience sample where individuals could choose whether or not to participate (Fricker 2008).

3.2. Methods

This study adopted a *mixed methods* approach, which took the form of a self-administered online survey comprising items classified by Dörnyei (2007) as *factual, behavioural* and *attitudinal,* supplemented by a limited number of semi-structured follow-up interviews. I used the popular survey site, Survey Monkey, to construct my survey and participants (teachers of academic English) were contacted via a number of professional bodies and research groups. I closed the survey on June 28th, 2015, and contacted a subsample for interviews to further interrogate the research questions and delve deeper into each respondent's "lived world" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015:1).

3.2.1. Research design

The survey design comprised largely closed questions to facilitate coding and effectively manage researcher and respondent engagement time (Dörnyei 2010). Online surveys allow built-in branching questions, where respondents' answers automatically route them to the next relevant question, avoiding the need for complicated instructions (Fink 2013). Likert scales allowed a more detailed breakdown of data, having proved a reliable way for researchers to "uncover degrees of opinion" (Survey Monkey n.d.). Finally, the option of 'Other' was included when appropriate to offer respondents the maximum possible freedom of expression and opportunity to have their voice heard in what Rea and Parker (2014) term venting.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of a number of questions designed to investigate survey responses. Both probes and prompts were deployed with this aim in mind. Drever (2003) defines the former as more closed, seeking to obtain clarification and expansion and the latter aims to encourage the fullest possible response (Gillham 2000). Interviews were conducted face-to-face at central London locations convenient for the interviewee. Custom-designed interview guides were created for each interviewee to act as a jumping-off point for the discussion and a simulated interview was conducted to estimate completion time.

3.2.3. Piloting and pretesting

As Oppenheim reminds us, "Questions do not emerge fully-fledged" (1992: 47). Therefore, after developing the survey items, I piloted individual items with a non-expert and then the survey as a whole with individuals broadly similar to the target population using cognitive interviewing alongside standard piloting to ensure that the items were clear, unambiguous and straightforward to comprehend (Punch 2003).

3.2.4. Data analysis

As many of the survey items were closed type, the numeric data, both figures and percentages, lent itself to descriptive statistics (Fink 2013). Responses to questions 1-7 demystified teacher use of the AWL. Survey questions 8-14 and 17-19 focused on the attitudes and beliefs held by teachers with reference to the AWL. Meanwhile, for the open-ended, qualitative items, content analysis identified significant expressions and initial codes (Dolowitz, Buckler and Sweeney 2008) using paper-based methods to maintain close contact with the data (Gibbs 2007). A subsample of the survey data was independently coded to provide a point of comparison. Emerging themes formed a basis for further discussion in the interviews and the interview data was given what Revesz (2012) describes as a broad transcription.

3.2.5. Ethics

This research was conducted as part of a postgraduate dissertation module at a UK higher education institution and as such, rigorous ethical procedures were followed to protect the participants. The research ethics committee of the institution was consulted to obtain permission to initiate and carry out the research and permission granted.

4. FINDINGS

Engagement with the online survey was encouraging and 193 responses were collected. Of the 141 respondents providing biodata, 62 (44%) were male and 79 female (56%), and approximately two-thirds (n= 95) were aged between 35 and 54. The vast majority of those who responded to questions about their place of employment (n= 135) worked at universities or tertiary institutions (n=118, 87%) and the majority were UK-based (n=97, 70%). Nearly two-thirds of this subsample (n=76) were EAP Lecturers/Teachers, with EFL teachers representing an additional quarter of the sample (n=28) (The complete survey questions, survey responses and interview transcripts can be accessed at http://www.slideshare.net/ChrisBanister1/jtesap-appendix).

4.1. Teacher practices with reference to the AWL

My first research question was about teachers' use of the AWL: *RQ1. What, if any, are academic English teachers' practices with reference to the AWL?* The participants displayed high levels of awareness of the AWL with 73% (n=140) affirming recognition. This figure rose to over 96% (n=73) amongst EAP lecturers, whilst awareness levels were markedly lower amongst those working in EFL, EAL and ESOL contexts (50%, n=18). Respondents correctly identified *specialised occurrence*, *frequency* and *range* as founding principles of the AWL.

As Figure 1 below reveals, 83 out of 116 (or 72%) respondents aware of the AWL reported using the AWL directly with their students in Q3 of the survey.
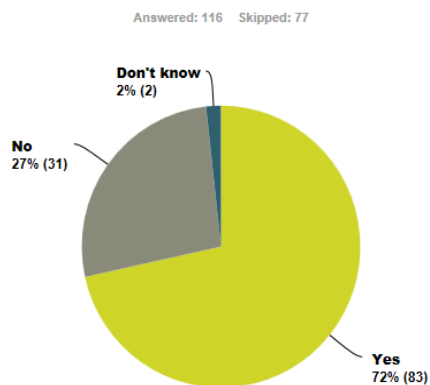

Fig. 1 Direct use of the AWL amongst the
subsample confirming AWL awareness
(in percentages with absolute figures in brackets)

There was a slight tendency towards repeated rather than one-off use (31 respondents to 23). Just over half (n=41, 55%) of the respondents use the AWL in relatively short slots of up to 15 minutes and, similarly, over half (n=46, 57%) embrace both electronic and paper versions of the list. Asked about the use of online tools and websites designed wholly or partly to work with the words of the AWL (Q17, 141 responses), the most-used AWL-related online resource (n=55, nearly 40% of those who answered) is the *Using English for Academic purposes* (UEFAP) website (Gillett 2009), which contains exercises designed to encourage student interaction with AWL items. Sandra Hayward's (n.d.) custom-made AWL Highlighter and Gapmaker tools also seem to be popular with the sample (45 respondents or 32%).

4.2. Teacher attitudes and beliefs

4.2.1. Positive attitudes and related beliefs

My second and third research questions focused on the attitudes and beliefs which underlie teachers' decisions to work with the AWL: *RQ2. What attitudes do teachers of academic English exhibit towards the use of Coxhead's (2000) AWL as an explicit vocabulary learning tool?* and *RQ3. What beliefs do teachers of academic English hold regarding the pedagogic value of the AWL for vocabulary teaching?* Almost 90% (n=71/81) of those using the AWL expressed an overall positive attitude towards it, agreeing that the AWL was either extremely or quite useful (Fig. 2 below). A similar percentage (n=42/48) of those who only became aware of the AWL through survey participation were also positively predisposed.
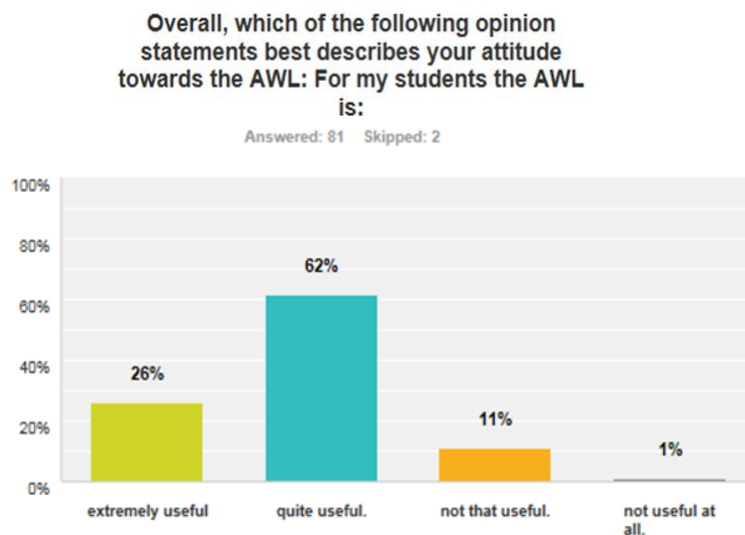

Fig. 2 AWL users' attitudes towards it

When AWL users were asked about the reasons for their positive attitude, 66 out of 70 respondents (96%) either agreed or strongly agreed that its content was relevant and that the general purposes academic vocabulary represented by the AWL was likely to be useful for a range of students (n-=64, 93%). In addition, 60 (86%) cited the importance of the AWL's corpus research base. AWL users also agreed or strongly agreed that it set a clear goal, could boost learners' vocabulary and was easy to incorporate into lessons (approximately two-thirds in each case). Table 1 provides the full breakdown of results.

Interestingly, when Q11 invited respondents to mention any reservations they had, 40 members of the positively predisposed subsample raised at least one concern about the AWL. The most frequently expressed reservation was the potential decontextualised presentation of words (mentioned by a third, n=12). In addition to this, a range of other concerns were raised: corpus base and age, lack of discipline and genre specificity, problems related to size and appearance, user-friendliness, absence of multi-word items and the recurring belief that without appropriate guidance the list represented a pitfall for teachers and learners alike.

Those who used the AWL but expressed a negative attitude towards it constituted a relatively small subsample (n=25), as did the group of those unaware or unsure of the AWL and then expressing a negative attitude towards it (n=5). When asked why they expressed a negative attitude, over 70% of this subsample agreed or strongly agreed that a list was not communicative and that there were better ways to teach vocabulary than using a list of words. Other objections included the dullness of list learning (52%) and concerns about the content of the list (55%). Of those negatively predisposed towards the AWL, approximately a third (n=11) conceded that there was at least something positive to be said for it with the most-cited point (mentioned by n=9) being its potential as a reference or standardising tool for teachers and students.

Table 1 Reasons for holding a positive attitude towards the AWL cited by respondents' using the AWL with their students.

Survey Statement (Q9)	Strongly agree (5) N %	Agree (4) N %	Neither agree or disagree (3) N %	Disagree (2) N %	Strongly disagree (1) N %	Total N	Mean
The AWL contains relevant vocabulary.	29(42%)	37(54%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	69	4.4
This type of 'general' academic vocabulary will be useful for students.	22(32%)	42(61%)	4 (6%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	69	4.2
The AWL is based on corpus research not teacher judgement.	21(30%)	39(56%)	8 (12%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	70	4.1
The AWL sets a clear vocabulary learning goal.	16(24%)	30(44%)	16 (24%)	2 (3%)	4 (6%)	68	3.8
The AWL is easy to incorporate into my lessons.	15(22%)	29(42%)	19 (28%)	6 (9%)	0 (0%)	69	3.8
Using the AWL can provide a quick boost to my learners' vocabulary knowledge.	10(15%)	35(51%)	11 (16%)	12 (18%)	0 (0%)	68	3.6
Lists like the AWL 'bring order to chaos'.	9 (13%)	27(39%)	24 (34%)	7 (10%)	3 (4%)	70	3.5
The AWL sets an achievable vocabulary learning goal.	8 (12%)	31(45%)	18 (26%)	8 (12%)	4 (6%)	69	3.5
The AWL will appear suitably 'scientific' and therefore attractive to my learners.	7 (10%)	27(40%)	26 (38%)	7 (10%)	2 (3%)	69	3.4
Learning from a list suits my students' learning style.	6 (9%)	12(18%)	37 (54%)	11 (16%)	3 (5%)	69	3.1
The AWL is the most efficient way to learn new vocabulary.	0 (0%)	7 (10%)	30 (44%)	24 (35%)	7 (10%)	68	2.5

Three-quarters of AWL users in the sample (55) used none of the alternative lists (Q19). Responses to Q18 highlighted the plethora of lists and corpora available to teachers, the Oxford 3000 list and subject-specific (often in-house) lists or corpora were amongst those most-cited.

Two of the interviewees, henceforth referred to by their pseudonyms, Richard and Larissa, expressed positive attitudes towards the AWL and recounted how they systematically used the AWL in their EAP courses or elements of them. Both used the AWL Highlighter tool to focus students on the words worth learning in texts they had selected for them (Richard: lines 27-30 and Larissa: lines 113-115). Richard promoted further interaction with AWL items through gap fills, word building activities, pronunciation tasks and collocation exercises that he created (Richard: lines 25-43). Larissa focused her learners on AWL items occurring in discipline-specific texts she had selected for them and encouraged her education postgraduate students to critically evaluate the AWL as a pedagogical tool (Larissa: lines 122-133). Richard informed his undergraduates of the percentage of AWL items occurring in texts they had read to help justify the selection of the text (Richard: lines 47-49) Whilst emphasising the importance of contextualisation of academic vocabulary, both felt the AWL was useful suggesting or recommending it to colleagues (Larissa: line 98, Richard: lines 177-185).

Patricia, another of the interviewees, did not use the AWL but was receptive to the notion of a frequency-based list of academic vocabulary. Working in an EFL context, she had taught academic English at lower proficiency levels and felt that the AWL could help her respond in a principled way to students who asked whether particular words were academic (Patricia: lines 60-71). Owen offered a different perspective from the others. As a subject lecturer with an ELT background, he was concerned that academic vocabulary be demystified for students and drew on personal experience to suggest that mimicry based on reading might be the best way to learn the vocabulary of academic English (Owen: lines 75-77).

The survey revealed that EAP lecturers are familiar with the AWL but other English language teachers less so. A majority of practitioners aware of the AWL use it with their students, although this use varies in extent and is characterised by its diversity. Attitudes towards the AWL are largely positive and respondents cited the relevance of the list's content along with its 'general purposes' academic vocabulary, the principled corpus-base of its construction, its representation of a clear goal for learners and the boost it can provide their lexical knowledge as underpinning beliefs about its pedagogical value. However, even those positively predisposed towards the AWL believe that there is a 'right way' to use the AWL and that not all potential use aligns with best practice for second language vocabulary teaching. In other words, the survey results and interviews indicate that the AWL is seen as a useful yet imperfect tool. Even participants like Richard, who expressed a positive attitude towards the AWL, took a considered stance: "...it's a reference point…" (Richard: lines 207-208).

4.2.2. Negative attitudes and related beliefs

A minority view the AWL unfavourably, but even this subsample concedes potentially positive aspects. All in all, this contributed to the emergence of a nuanced dataset which confirmed widespread, diverse and yet not uncritical use of the AWL amongst teachers of academic English. When asked why they expressed a negative attitude, over 70% of this

subsample agreed or strongly agreed that a list was not communicative and that there were better ways to teach vocabulary than using a list of words. Other objections included the dullness of list learning (52%) and concerns about the content of the list (55%). Of those negatively predisposed towards the AWL, approximately a third (n=11) conceded that there was at least something positive to be said for it with the most-cited point (mentioned by n=9) being its potential as a reference or standardising tool for teachers and students.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Positive teacher attitudes towards use of the AWL and underpinning beliefs

My survey reveals that Coxhead's (2000) call for practitioners to adopt the AWL in EAP contexts as a reference tool for EAP course or materials design has been heeded. As one participant noted, "... it has provided a strong foundation for the principled teaching of academic vocabulary" (Q10 #16). The survey results indicate that teachers who like and use the AWL value it in this role. Richard, Larissa and Pam all felt that a systematic approach to teaching and learning academic lexis was desirable and that the AWL suited their requirements. They sought a tool which was grounded in a scientific research-base, adaptable for use across the disciplines and which would help justify the vocabulary focus of lessons and selection of reading texts to learners. Once aware of the existence of the AWL, teachers of academic English felt naturally drawn to utilise it, adoption being "fairly logical" (Richard: line 26) and reflecting a realisation that "you've got to choose something" (Larissa: line 99). Such an acceptance is perhaps driven by the trend in many EAP contexts to eschew course books in favour of a needs-driven approach using discipline-specific resources, something Hyland (2006) considers a defining characteristic of EAP. Whilst this is in many ways admirable, it may leave EAP teachers feeling a lack of structure that published materials can provide. The AWL is thus an effective tool to focus learners on the words worth learning in discipline-specific texts and the AWL-related websites then allow interaction with these items on a deeper level in what one respondent calls "meaningful iteration" (Q20 #15).

Using a word list in this way aligns with much expert opinion in the literature (e.g. Schmitt 2000, Nation 2013) which suggests that as well as a message-focused element a vocabulary course should include a language-focused strand, some of which should consist of an explicit approach to vocabulary teaching. This systematic use of the AWL with texts recounted by Larissa, Richard and a number of other respondents (Q7 #8) was a popular way of working with the AWL. However, two-thirds of all respondents reported that they briefly introduced learners to the AWL and then left it up to students to use it as a self-study tool (Appendix Q7), an area which the discussion in this paper now turns. Referring learners to the AWL could reflect teachers' genuinely-held beliefs about its self-study potential. Some teachers provide access via a link on an online learning space so learners could explore it independently outside class. Richard related how he encouraged his learners to used a smartphone to scan a code to direct students from hard copies of the sublists given out in class to online versions, illustrating how combined mode use of the AWL could play out (Richard: lines 72-78). Referring students to the various tools and activities based on the AWL may at first seem unproblematic. As noted earlier, a wide range of such tools are available, many of high quality. Yet, as a number of respondents in the survey noted, it is vital to ensure learners are provided with learning strategies for

independent study. However, the extent to which teachers can influence the study methods applied by their learners outside of the teacher's view is a grey area. Realistically, the teacher can aim to encourage best practice in class and explain their methods directly to their learners, hoping to convince learners to adopt similar techniques. For the AWL, this could mean showing how tools such as the AWL Highlighter could be used to mine texts for words worth learning and then using the accompanying exercises on concordances and word families to add further dimensions of word knowledge. However, when learners are left to their own devices there remains the possibility they will apply methods such as rote memorisation that may be at odds with the teachers' beliefs about appropriate methods.

5.1.1. Teachers' beliefs about a core academic vocabulary

The notion that a core academic vocabulary can be isolated, learnt or taught is still a controversial one (de Chazal 2014). The survey results suggest that the main reason that proponents of the AWL liked it was its perceived ability to help learners across the disciplines, evidencing disagreement with the likes of Hyland and Tse (2007) who characterise general academic purposes vocabulary as chimerical. Instead, respondents appear to agree with Paquot (2012) that general purposes vocabulary can be taught across subject areas. It may be that teachers are adopting a common-sense stance when confronted with the reality of much academic English teaching which often, through necessity, takes place in multi-disciplinary groups (de Chazal 2014). For example, Richard was keen to identify discipline-specific lexis where possible for his groups but also maintained a pragmatic outlook, "…you have to work with what you have" (Richard: line 90).

5.1.2. The AWL and demystifying academic vocabulary

Other participants maintained that using the AWL could be beneficial from a motivational perspective, reassuring students and helping to reassure learners and demystify academic vocabulary. Owen agreed that demystification of academic language was required but felt that students with lower levels of English language proficiency were intimidated by academic language, including the words that they were exposed to in research papers and exemplars; he saw an attempt to use these academic words as part of some students' problems when it came to academic writing (Owen: lines 72-77 and lines 105-109). Owen makes an interesting point about the changing nature of some university written assignments, noting that business assignments now often require students to write in a more reflective, often less formal style (Owen: lines 152-154). The implication of this trend could be that the academic vocabulary of the AWL is utilised less in written genres at university. This is an interesting notion and undoubtedly, academic language, like all language, is changing. However, any lexical changes in academic English seem unlikely to be applicable to all disciplines and genres equally. Any idea that the influence of general purposes vocabulary may be lessened in the future due to an emphasis on alternative written genres fails to account for the prestige and linguistic capital which as Corson (1995), amongst others, notes is so closely entwined with use of this Latinate lexis.

5.2. Negative teacher attitudes towards the AWL and underpinning beliefs

Whilst the majority of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards the AWL, a minority of participants expressed more negative views, highlighting what they see as

negative aspects of the AWL and list-learning in general. As many of these issues were worded robustly expressed and were also touched upon by respondents who were overall positively predisposed towards the AWL, they merit further discussion. The concerns centred around two main areas.

5.2.1. Misuse and misappropriation

As well as the belief that AWL use could promote inappropriate learning methods, some practitioners believe that the AWL might have other negative impacts on students. They warn the AWL "beguiles students" (Appendix Q14 #15) and is "misleading" (Appendix Q13 #19) for learners, worrying they may mistakenly conclude that mastery of the items on the list was enough on its own to prepare them for tertiary study. In other words, Larissa (lines 316-7) warns, the AWL might "lull them into … a false sense of security". The teacher clearly has a responsibility to ensure that learners are not given this impression and must clarify this to learners whether the AWL is used systematically in class or recommended as an independent learning tool. The teacher's voice must come through to clarify the message. Furthermore, some participants considered the AWL dangerously compelling not just for students but for teachers, as well, subscribing to the belief that a list could be misused not just by learners but also by teachers. One claimed that the AWL had been "misappropriated" by ill-informed teachers (Q11 #44). Such concerns centred around the problems of polysemy and concerns that some teachers might ignore academic meanings of words not on the AWL due to their inclusion on the GSL (e.g. 'cause' or 'allow'); conversely, teachers might focus on the non-academic meanings of words on the AWL (e.g. 'approach', 'issue'). Teachers of academic English often experience a learning curve themselves having moved from teaching more general English into the more technical realm of academic English and the more specialised vocabulary requirements of their learners. Given such scenarios, concerns like this may be valid.

5.2.2. Concerns about rote-memorisation

Teachers were keen to distance themselves from any notion that the AWL or its sublists should be given to learners with instructions to memorise items. In fact, the very act of list distribution caused misgivings for some teachers. For example, Patricia was at pains to clarify that she "never gave a list to students" (Patricia: line 132). Rote-memorisation was dismissed by respondents as an appropriate way of working with the AWL or lists more generally. This view was supported by another participant; broadly positive about the AWL, he noted that there was a danger of students receiving the list with one-to-one translations at which point they might "think they are done" (Q11 #9). Learners may mistakenly conclude that mastery of the items on the list was enough on its own to prepare them for tertiary study. The teacher clearly has a responsibility to ensure that learners are not given this impression and must clarify this to learners whether the AWL is used systematically in class or recommended as an independent learning tool. The teacher's voice must come through to clarify the message. Richard (Richard: lines 164-165) stated that he believed there was no value in giving the students a list and asking them to memorise it (although he accepted memory work was an aspect of all vocabulary instruction). This distancing from what is perceived as 'old-school' list-learning methodology was not entirely surprising, aligning as it does with the suggestion made by Lessard-Clouston (2012/13: 297) that, because of these associations, teachers inducted in the communicative approach

"might hesitate to use word lists or sections of them". Interestingly though, many teachers were clear that despite the dangers they associated with aspects of list-learning (decontextualisation, one-to-one translation of items, rote memorisation), lists could be useful tools in 'the right hands', thus confirming the complex relationship between attitudes and their underpinning beliefs as constructs (Oppenheim 1992).

6. LIMITATIONS

Despite the contributions to the understanding of practice vis-a-vis the AWL that this study makes, a number of limitations in the research are evident. Non-response error (Groves 2006) caused by the self-selection aspect of the design had the potential to introduce a non-response bias. Secondly, it is important to note that the number of interviews conducted was limited and that my privileged role in interpreting responses leaves room for debate surrounding some of the conclusions reached. Thirdly, when discussing use of any pedagogic tool, it is worth remembering that surveys as tools capture teachers recounting their practice; they are not observations of practice and therefore the effects of memory can affect the accuracy of data obtained. Finally, this project necessarily restricted its scope to gauging teacher use, attitudes and beliefs with reference to the AWL. The learner's viewpoint was not a focus. Although a number of respondents mentioned how they thought learners might use and feel about the AWL, this was ultimately their interpretation and projected onto their learners.

7. CONCLUSION

For effective vocabulary learning, students must be directed to suitable resources to promote meaningful engagement and this is an area where teachers have an important role to play. Encouragingly, many teachers and lecturers do seem to use the online tools such as the AWL Gapmaker, Highlighter and UEFAP website to deepen knowledge of target lexis. My survey did reveal, however, that awareness of these tools was far from universal. This is unfortunate as these tools could allay some of the concerns respondents had about the AWL, for example, that decontextualized learning is dull and incompatible with a communicative approach.

Ultimately, there is a difference between using the list as a springboard for learning more about the word, increasing depth of knowledge and merely using the list as an organisational tool for recall. As one respondent aptly puts it: "lists are a great starting point for learning vocabulary, but a really bad place to stop" (Q20 #39), and many respondents concur that it is vital that teachers encourage learners to engage to the maximum possible extent with AWL items to gain a deeper and necessary understanding of collocations, parts of speech, connotation and pronunciation. This is not something that all learners can do unassisted and as Patricia notes, "Unless you show them how to engage with the list and do something with the list, it's just a list of words" (Patricia: line 119).

Misgivings about some aspects of list-learning do not appear to preclude AWL classroom use for the majority of research respondents and there is evidence that many academic English teachers have adopted and adapted the list for use with their learners because they believe that it provides a principled basis to focus on general purposes academic vocabulary which is relevant to many learners. Proponents of the AWL praise it

for the way it sets a clear and achievable goal and can boost the lexical resources of their students. The survey results confirm that the influence of the AWL as an inspiration for the creation of subject-specific lists, already well-documented in the literature, is matched by a similar level of popularity amongst practitioners. The above findings also provide an example for researchers of the interplay of teacher beliefs, attitudes and pedagogic practice in the area of L2 vocabulary teaching.

8. IMPLICATIONS

By exploring and highlighting some of the issues concerned with pedagogical use of the AWL, this study has potential to inform the production and design of future word lists, providing as it does a useful snapshot of the ways teachers incorporate word lists into pedagogy. Knowledge of this practice could help make the vocabulary lists of the future more user-friendly, boosting the likelihood of their adoption by teachers. One way to do this is to ensure that any new list is accompanied by tools developed to encourage learners to meaningfully interact with the items on it to deepen and enhance their knowledge.

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