

The use of corpora in EAP textbooks: an analysis of the treatment of academic verbs

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Despite the positive feedback corpus-based teaching methods (e.g. Data Driven Learning, Johns, 1991) have received in the context of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teaching, these methods had still not “crossed over into mainstream practice or been taken up by major publishers” some ten years ago (Boulton, 2008: 38). Harwood (2005), for example, showed that many EAP textbooks proved unsatisfactory and suggested that publishers make use of corpora and research findings to improve teaching material. Similarly, Boulton (2008: 40) suggested that publishers integrate corpus-based activities in their textbooks.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the use of corpora in relatively recent EAP textbooks by analyzing the treatment of academic verbs. More specifically, I examine how EAP textbooks use corpora to (1) describe the use and phraseology of academic verbs and (2) create exercises on verb use. To do so, this study focuses on three corpus-based textbooks (i.e. textbooks explicitly based on a particular corpus and a corpus-based academic vocabulary list): *Academic Vocabulary in Use* (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2008), *Focus on Vocabulary 2: Mastering the Academic Word List* (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2011) and *Inside Reading 4 (advanced): The Academic Word List in Context* (Richmond, 2012). For the purpose of this study, I examined 4 units in each textbook. This resulted in the analysis of 12 units and c. 500 exercise items. The analysis was carried out so as to create a database describing (1) the focus of the section/exercise (e.g. semantics and/or phraseology), (2) the task (e.g. read and observe, or fill in the gap) and (3), for the exercises, the type of item the students have to retrieve (e.g. a phrase, a collocation or a derivation).

The results reveal that, while there are some good practices in the textbooks under focus, there is also some room for improvement as regards the use of corpora and research findings. For example, the textbooks mainly use corpora to provide relevant examples and illustrations. There are no real corpus-based exercises aiming to help learners become independent learners and explore potential cross-disciplinary variation. As regards phraseology, little attention seems to be given to lexical bundles. These multi-word units have however been shown to be systematically functional in academic prose (Biber and Barbieri, 2006) and important for academic proficiency (Hyland, 2008). This presentation will end with a number of suggestions for improving the treatment of academic verbs in EAP textbooks.

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