4 Providing feedback on the lexical use of ESP students' academic presentations: teacher training considerations

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Abstract

This chapter offers a description of a methodology for providing training to pre-service English for Academic and Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) teacher trainees in giving evidence-based feedback on the lexical composition of ESP students' academic presentations. It also discusses a study based on the analysis of the mock feedback provided by the EAP/ESP teacher trainees (*n*=20) to ESP students' presentations with a focus on the effects of training. The results revealed that the training was successful in areas such as raising the teacher trainees' awareness of how to evaluate various lexical categories in an ESP presentation, how to incorporate their evaluation into the feedback they give to the students, how to highlight relevant lexical deviations in an evidence-based manner, etc. There were, however, a couple of areas that needed to be emphasised more in the training process. The results confirmed that providing training on evidence-driven feedback to teacher trainees planning to teach in an EAP/ESP context is a necessary component of ESP teacher education.

Keywords: ESP teacher training, lexical composition, ESP presentation analysis, data-based feedback.

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1.   Introduction

Higher education has never been as internationalised as we know it today. The number of international students worldwide has increased by 99% in the 2000-2010 period with Europe being the preferred destination for 41% of international students (Immigration of international students to the EU, 2012). Similarly, the international enrollments at the highest levels of education – Master's (MA) and doctoral level programmes – have also significantly increased, and countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, etc. host the largest proportion of international students at those degree levels (Education at a glance, 2017). Thus, higher education, especially at a graduate level, has started to demand solid ESP knowledge more than ever before so that the international students attending English-based graduate programmes can successfully put their disciplinary expertise on display from the start.

At the same time, ESP teacher training as a focus of interest and research is lagging behind other areas, such as ESP material design, needs analysis, the role of specialised knowledge, classroom discourse, etc. (Basturkmen, 2014; Coxhead, 2013; Hall, 2013; Kennedy, 1983). More than 35 years ago, Kennedy (1983) rightfully pointed out what is still true today – i.e. that one area which has received little attention in language for specific purposes is the desirability of providing ESP training to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teachers. Few MA TESOL programmes offer ESP specialisation in some of their classes and even fewer offer courses on ESP (Belcher, 2013) which, consequently, leads to having underprepared teachers entering ESP classrooms. At the very least, MA TESOL programmes should include in their coursework discussions that examine different aspects of each of the components of the ESP acronym itself (Hall, 2013) – i.e. analysis of the *English* language, its *specificity* in various contexts of use, and the professional and disciplinary *purposes* it can be used for.

This chapter will offer a description of a methodology for providing training to graduate students preparing to be TESOL or EAP/ESP teachers on how to give evidence-based feedback on the lexical composition of ESP students'

academic presentations. In what follows, I will first discuss the notion of *Assessment for Learning* (AfL) with a focus on constructive lexical feedback that pre-experience and pre-service EAP/ESP teacher trainees need to learn how to provide so that they can be relevant to the discipline-specific language needs of their ESP students. Second, I will elaborate on the notions of lexical levels and lexical complexity as important features of the lexicon in use for subject-specific purposes. Finally, I will discuss the findings of a qualitative study which looked at the effects of training on developing EAP/ESP teachers' awareness of how to provide constructive evidence-driven lexical feedback on ESP students' academic presentations.

1.1. The central role of feedback in the assessment for learning approach

In recent years, there has been a worldwide movement in general education towards AfL as a form of assessment that integrates teaching, learning, and assessment holistically (Cheng, 2013; Mumm, Karm, & Remmik, 2016). Along the same lines, Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery (2013) have pointed out that AfL involves six main practices, i.e. (1) designing authentic assessment assignments linked to acquiring skills and knowledge that the professional field expects, (2) balancing AfL and summative assessment, (3) creating opportunities for practice before assessing summatively, (4) providing timely feedback to improve learning, (5) designing opportunities for feedback as part of the learning process, and (6) developing opportunities for students to assess their own progress.

Recently, various studies have confirmed that AfL should be seen as a broad approach in which all these practices contribute to learning; however, they also indicate that feedback can be considered the most impactful one (Cheng, 2013; Mumm et al., 2016; Sambell, et al., 2013). Equally importantly, central to the notion of AfL is that feedback should make students understand the learning task better so that they can effectively improve their own performance. Thus, it should be clear, encouraging, consistent with the assignment, and with a focus on key errors and areas for improvement (Cheng, 2013, p. 28). Fisher and Frey

(2009) further identified three distinct components of feedback that need to be fully implemented for the feedback to be effective: *feed up*, *feedback*, and *feed forward*. In *feed up*, the authors recommended that teachers should articulate clearly the learning goals for their students so that they know where to focus their learning efforts; in *feedback*, teachers should provide descriptive feedback that targets the learning goals; and *feed forward* goes back to teaching and should inform instructional modifications.

As much as these practices are relevant to general education, they are also equally relevant to EAP/ESP teacher preparation primarily because EAP/ESP teachers in training need to be able to address the general language learning needs of ESP students in addition to their language-specific growth. In this regard, it becomes particularly important to offer specific training to EAP/ESP teacher trainees in how to provide constructive feedback to ESP students that addresses both their use of discipline-specific language as well as general language areas. Needless to say, the first step in this endeavour should be to make the teacher trainees aware of what counts as language features that are specific to a field or discipline and what does not. In the context of this study, the focus of the training was on distinguishing the various levels of vocabulary description and features of lexical complexity and providing evidence-driven feedback on the ones that enhance the quality of ESP academic presentations.

1.2.   Aspects of the lexicon EAP/ESP teacher trainees need to be aware of

Discussions of various aspects of teaching, learning, and feedback on vocabulary knowledge in speaking and writing should be one of the central topics in EAP/ESP teacher training coursework. One of the well-established distinctions in the description of vocabulary for EAP/ESP purposes is Nation's (2001) distinction of four main lexical levels, i.e. (1) high frequency words, which include the first 2,000 most frequent words of English (e.g. *give, language, usually*), (2) academic vocabulary, which includes the 570 word family Academic Word List (AWL) identified by Coxhead (2000) (e.g. *research*, *academic*, *virtually*), (3) technical/specialised vocabulary, which is the bulk of vocabulary that is

discipline- or subject-area-specific (e.g. *vocabulary*, *morpheme*, *syntax*), and (4) low frequency words, which cover the vocabulary beyond the other three levels.

Recommendations concerning the importance of the lexicon for academic and specific purposes commonly highlight several points in relation to the four-level distinction of the lexicon. A point of unanimous agreement is that the 2,000 most frequent words of English provide the greatest coverage of vocabulary used in academic and non-academic texts (e.g. Morris & Cobb, 2004; Nation, 2001; Zareva, 2012, 2019, forthcoming). However, in academic and specialised contexts, the importance of the three levels beyond the 2,000 words (i.e. AWL, technical/specialised, and lower frequency vocabulary) greatly increases, as it is those lexical layers that allow proficient EAP/ESP users to put their academic and disciplinary knowledge on display in a relevant way (Nation, 2001; Zareva, forthcoming). There is also a growing realisation among teachers and ESP learners that those same layers bring lexical richness to students' disciplinary writing and/or speaking and enhance their ability to fare well in their disciplinary studies and, later on, in professional contexts.

The notion of lexical richness (Read, 2000) or lexical complexity (Bulté & Housen, 2012) is closely linked to the four-level description of the lexicon and fundamentally based on the distinction between what counts as simple and what counts as complex lexical use. For EAP/ESP teachers in training, the key to understanding this distinction is not only to become aware of what the basic words are (i.e. the first 2,000 most common English words) and what the sophisticated ones are (i.e. AWL, technical/specialised, and lower frequency vocabulary), but also to become cognisant of the fact that they contribute differently to the lexical complexity of ESP users' performances. That is, the first 2,000 words account for anywhere between 90% of the vocabulary in conversations to about 78% in written academic texts (Nation, 2001), which confirms their primary importance across the registers. However, what sets the EAP/ESP register apart from the less formal and specialised ones lexically is the increased use of vocabulary from the academic, technical/specialised, and lower frequency levels that, altogether, bring disciplinary precision and appropriateness to the discourse. As Coxhead (2013) pointed out, when such knowledge of vocabulary is put into use, it

enhances the impression of fluency and helps "second language speakers sound as though they belong to a community of language users who make meaning through using the same vocabulary in specific ways" (p. 2).

The models of lexical richness or complexity identify, at least, three dimensions of lexical complexity – i.e. lexical sophistication, lexical density, and lexical diversity. In this regard, EAP/ESP teachers in training need to understand that, on the one hand, the three dimensions (lexical sophistication, density, and diversity) are relatively independent, which means that teachers need to work with their students on each one of them separately. On the other hand, they also need to know that the dimensions can be captured by different measures, which can help them provide evidence-based feedback to EAP/ESP students' vocabulary use (for a detailed description of the dimensions, see Bulté & Housen, 2012; Read, 2000; Zareva, 2012, 2019, forthcoming). In brief, the lexically sophisticated texts will have a higher proportion of lower frequency words which, along with the uncommon lower frequency words, will also include the jargon, technical, and subject-specific vocabulary. The more lexically dense texts will have a higher ratio of content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) as they are linked to more informationally packed messages. Finally, the more lexically diverse texts will have a greater number of different words (vs. a limited number of words used repetitively) and the simplest (though not uncontroversial) way to capture lexical diversity is by the Type–Token Ratio (TTR).

1.3.   Main objectives of the study

A preliminary in-class discussion of the lexical features of academic ESP presentations in terms of what they are, how they can be included in the feedback, and how the feedback can move from impressionistic to evidence-based revealed that the participating EAP/ESP teacher trainees had a vague idea about how to address these questions and a little sense of how to approach the task of feedback. Thus, the training the students received (described in greater detail in the next section) had to provide them with the necessary background knowledge of the various lexical features (e.g. vocabulary description levels,

lexical complexity, etc.), their realisation in EAP/ESP speech, as well as how to approach the task at hand.

The study discussed below offers a description of a training methodology in this regard. It is qualitative and exploratory in nature and aimed at finding more about the effects of training on developing EAP/ESP teacher trainees' awareness of giving feedback on various aspects of vocabulary and lexical complexity. The discussion of the findings is based on the analysis of the participants' mock feedback given on ESP presentations, which was a graded assignment in a TESOL course the teacher trainees were taking at the time of the experiment. The findings will be discussed with respect to their implications for EAP/ESP teacher training coursework provided in many TESOL programmes.

2.   Method

2.1.   Participants and data

The participating EAP/ESP teacher trainees (N=20, n=17 females, and n=3 males) were English-speaking college students at a US university. At the time of data collection, they were taking courses in completion of their MA degrees either in applied linguistics or education with a concentration in TESOL. The participants reported they considered it important to have good presentation skills (M=5.4 on a six-point scale) and 65% of them (n=13) also self-reported to have had previous formal training in giving presentations as part of their required undergraduate coursework in public speaking and communication. However, none of them reported having had previous experience in teaching or giving feedback to ESP presentations.

The ESP presenters (N=20, n=9 females, and n=11 males), whose presentations were analysed and given feedback on, were also college students. They were enrolled in various programmes and disciplinary areas such as economics, environmental studies, journalism, computer sciences, health sciences, and applied linguistics. Their presentations were given to satisfy some course

requirement in their respective programme of study. They were native (L1) speakers of 13 languages (e.g. Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Polish, Russian, Spanish, etc.). The ESP presenters reported having studied English through formal instruction in their native countries and no instruction or training in giving a presentation before. Their proficiency scores placed them in the category of higher proficiency users.

The presentations were audio-recorded at the time of delivery, transcribed orthographically by the EAP/ESP teacher trainees, and then analysed by them in several ways. The training procedure is described in the next section.

2.2. Training procedure

At the time of data collection, the participating EAP/ESP teacher trainees were taking a course in TESOL Methods and Materials which included a component on EAP/ESP teaching, assessment, and evidence-based feedback on ESP academic presentations. Few of the course participants had prior experience in teaching EAP or ESP; however, most of them expected to teach in such contexts in the future. One of the graded course assignments in this class was for the teacher trainees to transcribe an ESP presentation, analyse it, and provide written mock feedback to the student-presenter with a focus on vocabulary. Below is a step-by-step description of the training the EAP/ESP teacher trainees received before they started working on the assignment.

First, the teacher trainees were assigned a reading on AfL and feedback (in this case, Cheng, 2013), which was discussed in class both in general terms and with respect to its relevance to ESP teaching.

Next, they read an article (in this case, Zareva, 2012) which looked at the lexical composition of effective student academic presentations and introduced a user-friendly procedure for determining their lexical features and complexity. Later on, they used the study as an aid in evaluating the ESP students' presentations they analysed and determining if they fell within the established baselines of the various categories. The article was discussed in class in terms of:

- the various levels of vocabulary description (e.g. the contribution of the first 2,000 most common English words, AWL, technical/specialised vocabulary, other lower frequency vocabulary, and various disfluencies that typically occur in student presentations);

- what a typical lexical distribution of a successful academic presentation looks like;

- the notion of lexical complexity with an emphasis on the role of academic, technical/specialised, and lower frequency vocabulary;

- the procedure and measurements that can be used to analyse the lexical composition of texts for the purpose of providing evidence-driven feedback;

- how to interpret the percentage distributions of the various lexical categories, especially the noticeable deviations from the baselines;

- how to incorporate the data interpretations into the presentations' feedback provided to the ESP students.

Following the discussion of the article, the EAP/ESP teacher trainees were given audio files of ESP presentations, accompanied by their PowerPoints, and were asked to transcribe them orthographically. The goal of this task was to give them the experience of working with ESP oral data and the opportunity to get to know the presentations they were going to analyse and give feedback on intimately. The transcription task was also aimed at raising the teacher trainees' awareness of various language features beyond the content of the presentation.

The next step was to introduce the teacher trainees to a free online vocabulary profiling programme called Compleat Lexical Tutor (Cobb, 2002: http://www. lextutor.ca/) by demonstrating how the programme works and providing an additional explanation of the categories included in the output (e.g. the TTR, lexical density, lexical diversity, etc.). The students were recommended to use

the classical version of the programme for this assignment. This step ensured that the teacher trainees could reliably interpret the quantitative output of the analysed presentations before writing up their feedback.

Finally, the teacher trainees were given some suggestions about writing up their analysis and mock feedback. Even though feedback to oral discourse is usually given orally, the goal of the task was to make the EAP/ESP teacher trainees consciously aware of how to shape their feedback so that it captured the quantified lexical composition of their analysis, highlighted the areas of success and the ones that needed improvement, and should become a stepping stone for learning. The suggestions included a greater variety of language features that could be given feedback on; however, the focus of this study will be only on the lexical features that the student trainees commented on in their mock feedback.

3.   Results and discussion

Giving an effective presentation of specialised material is one of the most daunting tasks for EAP/ESP students for a variety of reasons some of which may relate to anxiety, lack of previous experience in giving presentations, L2 insecurities, and lack of knowledge of the disciplinary conventions regarding the genre, etc. It also turned out to be an equally daunting task for the EAP/ESP teacher trainees in this study to give constructive feedback to such presentations without the specific training they received. Overall, the training resulted in noticeable gains in the quality of their feedback on the lexical features of the ESP presentations they analysed. In what follows, I am going to discuss briefly the patterns that could be determined in the teacher trainees' mock feedback as a result of the training with an eye on the areas of achievement and the ones that are in need of improvement.

Relating the lexical comments that the teacher trainees incorporated in their written mock feedback to Cheng's (2013) recommendations about high quality feedback, the analysis uncovered four main patterns that emerged as a result of the training, which are discussed below.

3.1. Discussion of the distribution of the various lexical levels provided by the vocabulary profiling programme (provided by 100% of the EAP/ESP teacher trainees)

The finding that all participating EAP/ESP teacher trainees included in their mock feedback a discussion of the distribution of the four levels of vocabulary in the presentations (basic, AWL, technical/specialised, and low frequency vocabulary) and the various dimensions of lexical complexity (lexical sophistication, diversity, and density) revealed that they all utilised the Vocab Profiler programme in their analysis. The Vocab Profiler output shows the numerical values of a number of lexical features, which the teacher trainees not only interpreted skillfully in relation to the baselines discussed in Zareva's (2012) article, but also explained to the ESP students their value and contribution to the effectiveness of a presentation. Thus, with their feedback, the teacher trainees were able to accomplish simultaneously several important tasks – i.e. educate the ESP students about the contribution of the different vocabulary levels, put their presentations in the broader context of what typically a good vocabulary profile in academic speaking looks like, and later on comment and/or give lexical recommendations for improvement. Thus, the training seemed to raise not only the teacher trainees' awareness of the value of the lexicon in ESP context, but also prompt them to raise their students' awareness of how the various lexical features work together in the presentation as a specific genre.

3.2. Evidence-based critical comments to the presenters' lexical use (provided by 95% of the EAP/ESP trainees)

As a result of transcribing the presentations and running them through the Vocab Profiler, the teacher trainees were able to identify specific instances and patterns of lexical misuses that otherwise could easily go unnoticed. In their lexical feedback, 95% of the trainees addressed and gave examples of lexical mispronunciations, lexical misuses (e.g. "Your vocabulary choices were good but there were some words that are not real English words such as the word 'credibilize'"), unstable collocations (e.g. "You consistently used the term *fossil energy* to refer to 'fossil fuels'"), the use of 'false friends' (e.g. "You rely heavily

on the strategy of substituting an unknown word with a false friend word; however, this backfires in the case of your using the word *cart*, for example, to refer to 'a map' (L1 German *Karte)*").

Some of the comments also pointed out instances of much higher rates than typical of truncated words, repetitions, false starts, and disfluencies (e.g. the use of too many inserts, 'uhms' and 'uhs', overuse of 'so' as a transition choice between slides, etc.) and added an explanation of the impression those may create in a listener. Some teacher trainees also commented on the deviations from the baseline in the lexical complexity of some presentations or when the use of academic, technical/specialised, and lower frequency vocabulary was markedly lower than the expected average. All in all, these comments seemed to confirm the positive effect the training had on the teacher trainees' ability to notice and highlight relevant lexical deviations in an evidence-based manner.

3.3. Positive comments about various aspects of vocabulary use in the presentations (provided by 40% of the EAP/ESP teachers)

A relatively small number (*n*=8) of the EAP/ESP teacher trainees included positive comments in their written feedback which shows that this is an area that needs to be addressed more consistently in teacher training, especially in relation to feedback. The value of feedback lies as much in the constructive criticism as it does in the acknowledgement of the accomplishments. The EAP/ESP teacher trainees who acknowledged the lexical accomplishments of the ESP presenters highlighted their "stable vocab choices across all categories", "the impressive use of specialised and academic vocab", the high incidence of content specific words that were beyond the AWL words, the infrequent use of phrasal verbs which revealed a "generally more formal presentation style", "the smooth and well managed transitions", "the small number of fillers", and praised the performances which showed similar lexical distributions to the baselines.

One plausible explanation of the relatively low incidence of positive comments in the teacher trainees' mock feedback is that it is highly possible that they saw

the main purpose of the feedback primarily in providing negative/corrective language feedback to the ESP students. However, while negative/corrective feedback is a necessary part of language learning, it is usually the positive feedback that keeps learners motivated (Cheng, 2013). In that sense, it seems that the training provided to the teacher trainees fell short of emphasising the importance of this aspect of the feedback strongly enough for the participants to incorporate it consistently in their feedback.

3.4.　Lexical recommendations (included by 30% of the EAP/ESP teachers)

Even a smaller number of teacher trainees attempted to give advice and recommendations for lexical improvements in their mock feedback. The majority of these recommendations (70%) were about the use of fillers and concerned strategies the ESP students could use to avoid their excessive use. Only a small number of recommendations were specifically directed to setting vocabulary improvement goals, which suggests that the link between the critical comments to the ESP presenters' lexical use and setting up vocabulary improvement goals in the feedback was not as obvious to the majority of the teacher trainees as assumed. In this regard, future training should, perhaps, clearly spell out the important connection that should be made in language feedback between critical remarks concerning areas of errors and recommendations about how to improve those areas.

4.　Conclusions

The study was an attempt to find out more about the effects of training on developing pre-experience TESOL teachers' awareness of how to provide evidence-based feedback on the lexical usage of ESP students' presentations. The training was designed around the framework of the AfL approach, which emphasises values such as using for assessment purposes assignments that the professional world of the learner requires, providing clear, evidence-based feedback that helps the learner understand the learning task better and sets for

them improvement goals, etc. – values that ESP teacher education also cherishes and tries to incorporate in their coursework.

Providing feedback is not intuitive to pre-service student teachers, and the teacher trainees participating in this study were no exception to the rule. The training they received seemed to be successful in some respects and lacking in others. It was successful in raising the teacher trainees' awareness of how to evaluate various lexical categories in an ESP presentation; how to incorporate their evaluation into the mock feedback they gave to the ESP students; how to make the lexical feedback evidence-based; how to highlight relevant lexical deviations in an evidence-based manner; and how to raise the ESP learners' awareness of the way different lexical features work together in an effective presentation.

Two areas that seemed to need to be more explicitly emphasised in the training process were areas that the majority of the teacher trainees failed to account for in their mock feedback – i.e. to include positive comments on the ESP students' lexical accomplishments and to connect their critical comments to clear recommendations about areas in need of improvement. On a final note, the present study was a small scale exploratory study with some limitations (for instance, small number of participating teacher trainees, little diversity in the proficiency level of the ESP presenters, teacher trainees' feedback was analysed only qualitatively, etc.); however, it confirmed that providing ESP training to TESOL teachers planning to teach in EAP/ESP contexts is more than a strong recommendation. It is a must.

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