Designing a Lexical Framework for an EAP Program at an American EMI University in Japan

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Abstract: This study outlines the design and implementation of a lexical framework for the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at Lakeland University Japan (LUJ), an American English Medium Instruction (EMI) institution. The project was developed in response to a persistent gap between students' in-class performance and both standardized test outcomes and undergraduate matriculation. A needs analysis showed the value of a systematic approach to vocabulary learning that could be aligned with the existing course learning outcomes (CLOs) and the academic goals. As a consequence, five vocabulary workbooks were created, with a total of 2,400 words drawn from the New General Service List (NGSL) and the New Academic Word List (NAWL). The workbooks promote revision and verbal elaboration which also reinforce grammar structures appropriate to each level for each workbook (CEFR A1-C1). The materials were further enhanced through inclusive language updates, self-check sections, Quizlet sets, and short assessments. Future research will likely examine the framework's impact on learner autonomy, teachers' instructional practices, and the potential extension into domain-specific vocabulary areas in order to further enhance student success in an EMI setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at Lakeland University Japan (LUJ) prepares students for an English-taught language degree program offered in Japan in the context of English Medium Instruction (EMI) education. The LUJ EAP program consists of five levels covering CEFR A1 to B2. By the end of the entire LUJ EAP program, students are expected to discuss, read, and write at a level ready for undergraduate level classes. A standardized English test score is also required for direct entry to the undergraduate program.

The drive to create a language framework in the EAP program came from a number of factors such as a poor alignment with the undergraduate program's needs and the qualifying score for entrance to the undergraduate program from the

EAP program being significantly raised by the university in 2018. However, no resources were made available to aid or facilitate the raising of English proficiency on a programmatic level. This left students without the scores needed to start the undergraduate classes and a faculty struggling to simultaneously improve students' English proficiency scores and academic skills. Furthermore, during the Covid-19 pandemic, all classes were moved online between 2020 and 2022 decreasing the communicative opportunities for students to reuse and reencounter language. The TOEFL ITP test was also limited to certain students during the pandemic to minimize close-contact situations and the test was then made optional for students once in-person classes resumed. Despite the need for social distancing, LUJ continued to administer the test in person for Level 4 and Level 5 students, as around that time, remote teaching and remote proctoring were limited options that were starting to emerge (Patael et al., 2022).

As a result, a disconnect began to develop between positive in-class student performance and a lack of standardized test achievements. This, then affected progression along the institutionally established curriculum and international standards as shown by TOEFL ITP results outlined in Figure 1.

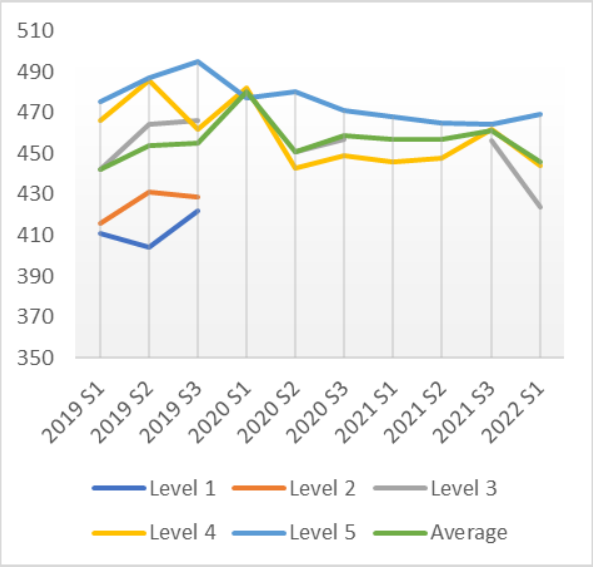

Figure 1 - Average LUJ EAP program test scores from 2019-2022.

Institutionally, the drop in the scores between 2019 and 2022 can be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, as education had to be delivered online or with minimal contact to prevent contagion. Furthermore, transition from traditional to remote methods was abrupt and required accommodating operational aspects that were not necessarily part of any school's purview, such as how conducive to education a student's home environment was (see Grah & Penger, 2021).

Furthermore, the continued institutional limitations on funding for research and professional development resulting from the pandemic left the faculty in a position where they could either do nothing and continue trying to solve the problem on an ad-hoc basis or attempt to improve the linguistic competency of the students and measure the impact.

The organic response to the difficulties mentioned was the creation of vocabulary workbooks that utilized already existing materials, such as word lists and test preparation materials. Although this approach could be described as a reactive measure, there can be arguably two contrasting views at the classroom level: teaching for the test, which may result in washback (Spratt, 2005), or ownership over the curriculum to drive change and reflect on the future of the program (see Kiely, 2006). The team consciously chose the latter. Washback risks, however, were not completely ignored, and attempts were made to control them by the testing methods employed.

Nonetheless, as mentioned previously, while the TOEFL ITP had historically been used at LUJ as a CEFR B2 benchmark for entrance into the undergraduate program, the EAP program had never established nor used a specific lexical framework equivalent to a B2 level according to the CEFR standards. Instead, the focus was predominantly on the academic skills of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, note-taking skills, essay writing, and presentations, which had historically responded to policy interpretation changes.

The above-mentioned reaction, while new in research, constitutes an approach to policy that views documents as living artifacts which depend on participants' conceptualization of their contents to exist. This means that frameworks do not exist

in a void but inside a system that provides input and receives it cyclically. Researchers define this as the policy transaction approach (Ansell et al., 2025).

As such, our approach followed a simplified method which sought to understand the context as simply and efficiently as possible to construct the meaning of the policy requirements from our perspective. The process was informed by a simplified needs analysis drawing Long's (2005) work, followed by improvements that allowed the inclusion of ipsative and formative milestones that would further feed into the curriculum and its in-class articulation while observing milestones. The entire process in turn, constituted a virtuous cycle based on contextually meaningful interventions already identified in the literature (see Malecka et al., 2022), and a demonstration of how policies are not dead artifacts but instruments intended to generate a reaction.

In other words, the program reacted cyclically to its needs. In particular, we conducted statistical analyses to understand student behavior and proceeded to identify areas of concern that would feed the curriculum and its articulation. Given the internal-review nature the initiative originally had, it is not possible to show any of the data or calculations due to binding regulations, such as the United States Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act. Thus, after interdepartmental discussions, the EAP department identified the following issues as aspects deserving further attention:

- Skills

Students attained good academic skills in the EAP program but would often struggle in the first semester classes in the undergraduate program even after they achieved a required standardized test score. This is due to the change of focus from learning English to using English instrumentally, as has been noted by scholars in similar contexts (see Brooks et al., 2025), thus making it contextually adequate.

- Reading

In both the EAP and undergraduate programs, students had problems understanding lexically dense material in a short time-frame, mainly due to terminology mismatch and variation, which has been identified in the literature as well (Brown et al., 2021).

- Resources

Some students kept vocabulary notebooks of their own but some did not. In addition, teachers independently utilized a number of different lexical resources in classes at various stages of the program, while appropriate from a curricular execution standpoint due its context responsiveness, this caused divergence. Furthermore, the EAP textbooks, like the curriculum, focused on skills rather than explicit language, thus providing little chance for re-encountering and reusing lexical items. All these initiatives sought to promote metacognition, as well as the identification of strategies that may improve overall performance of the student (Bandura, 1997), which may have an impact on learning (Halmo et al., 2024).

Consequently, while many students had solid academic skills and were able to progress through the EAP program, there was a lack of coherent English vocabulary learning from one level to the next.

2. CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Curriculum modification, even at a minimal level, places the discussion within the realm of organizational theory due to both motivations and the effects changes may have over participants. For instance, Supriani et al. (2022) argue that one of the key ingredients is the drive to improve overall program quality while Fuad et al. (2022) believe that bureaucratic elements should be considered as driving factors – bureaucracy may well mean the intricacies of the curriculum itself or its execution. Regardless, our intention was to solve an issue systematically, namely through formative assessment activities that ultimately allowed compliance with summative overarching standards.

Along these lines, the team considered that the best practice is to address missing parts in lexical knowledge rather than assume a complete lack of understanding, partly because assessment practices

may not necessarily contribute to the learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). In addition, developing knowledge through strategies such as reviewing and previewing using the L1 due to the potential benefits for output quality in the L2 (Aubrey & Philpott, 2025) is also recommended. However, these strategies may also have drawbacks, such as fossilized mistakes that learners may never correct (Hamad Al-khresheh, 2015). However, these may serve as evidence for planning more effective output (Cárdenas, 2018) or situations in which learners freeze due to perceived lack of conceptual understanding (see Halmo et al., 2024).

We also understand that vocabulary learning requires repetition via tools that facilitate the learning and instructional process, all of which have an under-researched impact, as it happens with textbooks (Nordlund, 2015). Furthermore, our process departs from the assumption that there exists a strong connection between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Laufer, 1997), that connects textual understanding and lexical unit command density. We also understand that some reading operations, such as scanning may be less dependent on lexical comprehension and more on chunking and identification, as demonstrated by Naranjo et al. (2021) for A1-A2-level students.

Even though higher education reading often requires careful reading as part of basic skills (Bergman, 2024), it has been noted that a reader will not be able to read effectively unless the reader knows a certain percentage of the running words in a text (Liu & Nation, 1985). At the same time, the reading process itself may also promote lexical gains (Wei & Hu, 2025) or not necessarily require full comprehension to carry out certain operations.

This justifies the need for materials that actively support and promote students' reading by presenting adequate material and fostering natural processes that crystallize knowledge and understanding such as repeated encounters (Dougherty et al, 2010; Nation, 2017).

Due to the nature of our approach and institutional pressure to maintain and/or enhance student progression to the undergraduate program, we decided to contextualize the lexical acquisition process and develop a curricular proposal within our limitations.

3. LEXICAL ACQUISITION

In order to develop our curricular proposal, we decided to operationalize lexical knowledge according to Dale's (1965) proposal, which argues that lexical knowledge manifests in stages:

Stage 1: Never having seen the term before
Stage 2: Knowing there is such a word, but not knowing what it means
Stage 3: Having context-bound and vague knowledge of the word's meaning
Stage 4: Knowing the word well and remembering it

Although it may be argued that Dale's work relies on culturally responsive learning approaches such as rote memorization or verticalized education, and it has been noted that being able to harness culturally familiar educational arrangements can lead to improved attainment in an unfamiliar educational setting (Gu et al., 2010).

Another aspect that can lead to a greater likelihood of learning is verbal elaboration such as agreement, disagreement, comparing, contrasting, discussing, and personalizing (Nation, 2017). Indeed, Coomber et al (1986) showed that the retention of knowledge is heavily dependent in the depth of elaboration during the initial contact with and further practice of new material and that retention and review are closely connected.

Unfortunately, as Kilickaya and Krajka (2010) note, the teaching of vocabulary often presents items in an activity without the opportunity to prepare learners through activation and it does not always allow for the regular revision of the previously encountered items. This is the problem that we faced at a curricular and resource level. However, we considered that repetition is expected by some learners due to educational system tradition (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020).

Therefore, it was decided that a lexical framework be built that could sit alongside and work with the academic skills framework that easily allowed for

constant revision and verbal elaboration.

4. LEXICAL SELECTION AND FRAMEWORK IMPLEMENTATION

The lexical items were selected from the vocabulary list of an English test preparation textbook and wordlists provided by the EAP program textbooks, which corresponded to materials developed by established publishers and industry standards. Then, the lexical items were cross-referenced with the New General Service List (NGSL) and the New Academic Word List (NAWL) creating a total of 2400 words with 480 words at each level. These were then split into 30 units each containing 16 words in each unit enabling the units to be completed within a semester. CEFR-compliant wordlists were not included due to resource access. The levels created are as follows:

- Level 1: 480 target words from the NGSL 1st 1000 and 2nd 1000 words.
- Level 2: 480 target words from the NGSL 2nd 1000 words.
- Level 3: 480 target words from the NGSL List 2nd 1000 and 3rd 1000 words.
- Level 4: 480 target words from the NGSL 3rd 1000 words and the NAWL.
- Level 5: 480 target words from the NAWL.

Worksheets were then created with activities that allowed for review and elaboration while also providing space for learners to write definitions in their L1 if desired. This meant that the word list followed a standardized and globally recognized system that many skills textbooks follow (CEFR, NGSL, NAWL) while allowing for activities and testing that could be easily utilized across different EAP classes at all levels of the program, thus allowing scalability and constant formative appraisal. All activities aimed to promote improvement via a cycle focused on teacher's improvement of their praxis and students' polishing of their study techniques. The activities basically implied an application of Kiely's (2006) calls for reflection upon the future goals of the curriculum within the context of the department – here, the program as a whole. Testing, then, targets academic achievement improvement via the identification of individual-specific weaknesses that can translate into strategies (see Miao et al., 2025) and may eventually promote self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

The first activity in the worksheet required learners to match target words with synonyms and definitions from a short sentence that used the words in context (see Figure 2). The rationale is knowledge activation via identification, which the literature already defines as desirable (Pearson et al., 2012).

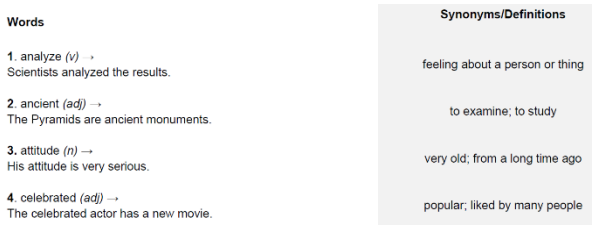

Figure 2 - The English Vocabulary Workbook Level 3 (Learoyd, 2024).

The second activity included the words in chunks in mis-ordered sentences that the learner then wrote into the correct order to create a grammatically accurate sentence using the target word, which has been long established (see Purpura, 2004, for details). The completed sentences would allow for verbal elaboration in discussion prompts, writing prompts, sentence modification, paraphrasing, or speech topics (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Example from The English Vocabulary Workbook Level 3 (Learoyd, 2024).

In addition, the sentences utilized grammatical structures from the different levels allowing for the review of and exposure to grammatical forms if desired. Level 1 used grammatical forms from CEFR A1 to A2, Level 2 from CEFR A1 to B1, Level 3 from CEFR A1 to B2 and Level 4 and 5 from CEFR A1 to C1.

After using these activities in classes, it was determined that edits and corrections were necessary. Due to institutional rules and policy limitations, it is not possible to discuss at length what exactly motivated the updates, but most of the identified areas responded to how students reacted to the materials. A cursory summary is as follows:

First, the content of sentences that were designed for verbal elaboration contained references to Japan, Tokyo, and LUJ, but not all LUJ students are from Japan or have spent a long time in Tokyo. These references were subsequently amended to "my country", "my city", "my school" or "my university". Second, there were personal references such as "father", "mother", "brother", and "sister" in the exercises for verbal elaboration, but not all students have these relations, so were altered to "family member" and "friend". These changes allowed all students to elaborate using the target vocabulary and matched the diversity of students in LUJ's EAP program. The edited and corrected worksheets were then made into workbooks for each level including answer sections and alphabetized tables containing parts of speech which enabled students to self-check their answers and engage in further study of the vocabulary as needed.

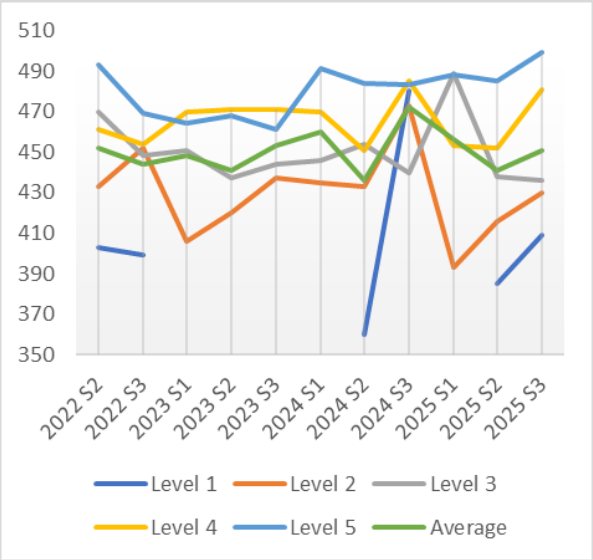

Figure 4 - Average LUJ EAP program test scores from 2022-2025.

Finally, Quizlet packs were created to encourage further review and engagement outside the textbook and classroom while quizzes and short tests were designed and given in classes to motivate the completion of the exercises, show progress, and contribute to overall assessment of students. The current materials are under constant review for further improvements. Finally, as of 2025, the in-person TOEFL ITP test again became mandatory for all LUJ EAP students every semester, as it was pre-2020. This policy adjustment will enable us to systematically measure the impact of the changes described above and any other additions or modifications to the EAP program. Initial observations seem positive (see Figure 4), as overall scores have been increasing since the first term of 2025 (2025 S1).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The EAP program at LUJ now has five vocabulary workbooks with target words from the NGSL and NAWL that overlap with program textbooks and standardized test word lists while utilizing CEFR A1 to C1 grammatical forms in activities that facilitate frequent review and verbal elaboration. The next steps are to gain feedback from the students, track the overall scores of the students in standardized English tests, and assess the extent to which the lexical framework has altered the EAP program's approaches to teaching and assessing vocabulary. Once more evaluations have been completed, there are possibilities to produce lexical frameworks in other areas of EMI education. These include phrasal verbs, idioms, the remainder of NAWL word list for use in the undergraduate program, and English for Specific Purposes (mathematics, computer science, environmental science, business, etc.) for students who want to pursue more specific areas of academia both at LUJ and beyond.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

Other research could explore from a clinical evaluation perspective the effectiveness of our proposal by conducting a longitudinal study that validates the current curricular approach. Additionally, since most of the actions described in this paper correspond to organic reactions to environmental cues or threats, such as the COVID-

19 pandemic, the team is aware of any limitations with regards to the generalizability of any conclusions. Additionally, the aggregated nature of the data used to demonstrate our points, given the difficulty of permission processing, limits the scalability of our results. Therefore, any future initiatives should focus on conducting an evaluation of the program and its changes from a specific underpinning approach, be it the policy transaction approach or any other.

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