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Beyond Accuracy: L2 Graduate Students' Evaluation of Word and Phrase Suitability in Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is an integral communication mode for graduate students in higher education. Meaningful writing extends beyond accuracy as it also encompasses the suitability of discourse convention of the discipline. In this study, graduate students' ability to evaluate suitability at the word and phrasal level is examined. A survey of ten items were distributed to students who were enrolled in the researcher's academic writing module. In each item, there was an underlined word or phrase set within a context. Students had to evaluate the word or phrase as not suitable, somewhat suitable, or suitable. Students were also invited to provide comments for their evaluation. Students' evaluation of suitability was analyzed descriptively, while their comments were coded into three categories. There were 122 students who completed the survey, but not all provided comments; nevertheless, the number of comments came to 647. The study found that the students were able to evaluate the suitability of the word or phrase under examination. However, students were not necessarily able to explain their choice of suitability. Students were also found to overgeneralize words which might be comparable in meaning, but not interchangeable. In terms of students' comments, most were general and were focused on grammatical accuracy. The findings of this study affirm that academic writing pedagogy grounded in raising students' genre knowledge remains important.

KEYWORDS: Academic Writing, Academic Vocabulary, Genre Knowledge, Graduate Students

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, being able to use English to communicate in an understandable and acceptable manner is important. English is valued not only because university graduates are expected to communicate proficiently at the workplace, but because many learning processes within the higher education setting itself and the broader realm of academia are conducted in English (Gurney, 2018). In line with this, researchers have remained invested in understanding students' development of writing skills, especially those whose first language is not English (e.g., Tremblay-

Wragg et al., 2021; Walcott, 2021). At the graduate level (master's and doctoral), studies have sought to examine challenges that impede L2 students' ability to learn academic writing convention, and subsequently propose pedagogical approaches that may be helpful (e.g., Singh, 2019). A common challenge experienced by L2 graduate students is their ability to evaluate the suitability of language use in academic writing. This persisting challenge is perhaps the result of a heavy focus on knowledge on form and structure of the English language, with little attention paid on disciplinary genre, as well as the implicit expectation for writers to adhere to particular writing conventions of the disciplinary community. These have been studied through graduate students' understanding of writing features of published academic texts and that of their own (see Negretti, 2021). While helpful, these studies take on a broader focus, through the exploration of students' metacognition, that is, students' decisions or thought processes about their writing experience as a whole. This current study, on the other hand, aims to provide a more targeted view of students' ability to evaluate suitability in academic writing, with an interest at the word or phrasal level. In this study, L2 graduate students are asked to complete a survey where they need to evaluate the suitability of a word or a phrase in context. Students are also invited to comment on their choice. It is hoped that the findings will affirm the necessity of teaching academic conventions, particularly in written discourse. Furthermore, findings from this study may enhance the current literature on receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, especially since there is a tendency to emphasize students' vocabulary knowledge and size, instead of their actual ability of vocabulary use (see discussion by Zhong, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Suitability in Academic Writing: Developing Genre Knowledge

An emerging pedagogical approach for graduate students is that of raising their awareness of language use in written texts, for the purpose of familiarizing them with suitable writing conventions. This approach moves away from the overt emphasis on accuracy in form, which, for a long time, has promulgated the idea that a reduction of error in writing will lead to better quality academic texts. This inadvertently positions such pedagogical approach within the notion of deficiency (see Badenhorst et al., 2015). A focus on deficiency unfortunately places students as incapable of rule mastery. In such a learning environment, the focus is tilted towards the reproduction of accurate language form, without much regard for meaningful production. According to Wingate (2018), teaching from the point of deficiency arises from the confusion between and conflation of language ability and academic literacy. Wingate defines

academic literacy as the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing. These capabilities require knowledge of the community's epistemology, of the genres through which the community interacts, and of the conventions that regulate these interactions (p. 350).

Based on Wingate's definition of academic literacy, academic communication extends beyond accurate use of language. In particular, to develop suitable academic writing skills, appropriate genre knowledge is necessary, which "refers to a shared sense of the conventions of grammar, vocabulary, content, and so on which allow us to express the values and identities that relate to our particular discipline." (Hyland, 2008, p. 550). Furthermore, as stated by Patriotta (2017), "[c]onventions reflect dominant views in science and culture at a particular point in time and, as

such, they largely reproduce the world as it is. It is important to recognize, however, that they are tacit agreements, unwritten rules of the game.” (p. 757). In other words, research writing conventions may not be spelled out explicitly, yet those within the discipline need to be familiar with them, and at the same time be flexible to adapt to communication changes within the discipline.

The development of genre knowledge, hence, is vastly different from the process of acquiring knowledge about language forms. Genre knowledge grows on the basis of the author's recognition of writing features that are not only meaningful, but also acceptable to his or her disciplinary community. According to Tardy (2009, pp. 20-22), genre knowledge is multidimensional, comprising of formal knowledge (the structural aspect of a genre, which includes lexicogrammatical features); process knowledge (the procedural practices as observed through the author's writing process, and subsequently the audience's reading process); rhetorical knowledge (the purpose of a particular genre, including persuasive strategies of the genre); and subject-matter knowledge (specialist knowledge about the discipline) (see also Kuteeva & Negretti, 2016). In recent studies by Kuteeva and Negretti (2016), Kuteeva (2013), and Negretti (2017), genre knowledge is found to develop over time by explicitly thinking about writing features found in academic texts.

At this juncture, it is apt to bring in discussions pertaining to receptive and productive academic vocabulary, given the focus of this study on the suitability of words and phrases in academic texts. Furthermore, both types of vocabulary knowledge are pertinent to the development of genre knowledge. In general, receptive vocabulary knowledge may be considered as one's "ability to recall and recognise multiple aspects of word knowledge in reading and listening" while productive vocabulary knowledge has to do with the actual "use [of] multiple aspects of word knowledge in writing and speaking". (Zhong, 2018, p. 358). While both deal with vocabulary knowledge, receptive vocabulary does not have significant links with its productive counterpart (see Miralpeix & Munoz, 2018). In fact, Durrant (2014) states that more knowledge is required of students for the productive use of academic vocabulary. More than this, the vocabulary used to write academic texts may not necessarily constitute words which are considered core to the academic register (Malmstrom et al., 2018). As such, word lists that are typically recommended as teaching and learning materials may actually not be practical; instead, it is suggested that students pay close attention to vocabulary that they encounter in their discipline-specific discourse, and those that they are expected to use in communicating within their disciplinary circles (Durrant, 2014; 2016). A more targeted approach also aligns with the nature of academic vocabulary use, which is shaped by the type of text written and its rhetorical function (Csomay & Prades, 2018). This form of pedagogy would go well with a genre approach for writing development, where students are expected to put to use their knowledge of appropriate organization or elements (e.g., vocabulary) applicable to their academic writing needs.

Evaluating Academic Discourse for Writing Development

Graduate students are expected to engage with academic text not only to read for content, but also to produce academic texts, such as research articles for publishing purposes (e.g., Golebiowski, 2018; Li, 2016). Scholars have contended that the process of reading academic texts should not be done solely for collecting information to support the writing of research papers; instead, reading should be done as a 'writerly reader' process, where the reader actively imagines him- or herself in the position of the writer. The main intention is to be receptive towards how information is

presented to develop a deeper understanding of the rhetorical features used (see Bai & Wang, 2020). The 'writerly reader' approach may be compared to efforts by EAP practitioners to increase L2 writers' metacognition towards the process of writing. For example, the integration of intertextuality in EAP. Teaching writing (or communication) grounded in intertextuality necessitates an examination of how meaning is derived from the interaction between different sources, and how this meaning is conveyed suitably and in a convincing manner to the intended audience (Badenhorst, 2019). Furthermore, when L2 students are analyzing academic texts beyond content, they are actually engaging in the evaluation of 'codes' that shape the texts' organization, which also includes the comparison of what students had experienced in the past, and their growing understanding of academic discourse (Du & Liu, 2021).

All these point towards the integral role that evaluation plays in developing students' metacognition in an academic writing setting. Metacognition is the ability to evaluate the successfulness of a text (Negretti, 2012; 2017). The criteria for evaluation may be defined by students' own writing experience, or even determined by knowledge of a particular genre (see Negretti, 2017). In terms of vocabulary knowledge, being able to evaluate the suitability of vocabulary is necessary to produce accurate and meaningful communication (see Teng & Zhang, 2021). Studies related to academic vocabulary, however, have focused primarily on students' vocabulary size (Malmstrom et.al., 2018; Zhong, 2018) or vocabulary used in students' essay (Csomay & Prades, 2018; Chen & Flowerdew, 2018; Du & Liu, 2021; Singh, 2019), and on broader scopes of metacognition of a text as a whole or the writing process of an academic text (Negretti, 2012; 2017), none of these studies have provided any indication of students' metacognitive ability to evaluate the suitability of academic vocabulary. This presents a caveat, especially in the area of L2 writing.

THE STUDY

In the literature review, various concerns were presented, highlighting the challenges that L2 graduate students face, especially in academic writing. As a response to these challenges, academic writing scholars have proposed pedagogy that promotes awareness-raising to help students increase their knowledge about disciplinary writing, or genre knowledge. Studies have typically taken a broad approach when examining this knowledge, primarily through the examination of students' metacognition, where writing form, language choice, or rhetorical structures are examined. This study, on the other hand, aims to gauge students' ability to evaluate suitability at the word or phrase level, which are components Tardy (2009) considers the formal dimension in genre knowledge. In this study, suitability is operationalized as the evaluation of language used in academic writing or communication. Issues of suitability at the word or phrase level are discussed from the perspective of L1 transfer or overgeneralization (Phoocharoensil, 2014), as well as the necessity of evaluative words or the use of appropriately respectful and objective phrases. In terms of usage at the word or phrasal level, Tardy et al., (2020) explain that students may possess an array of vocabulary items yet do not have knowledge of how to use them, especially in the academic genre.

Study Context and Participants

This study employed convenience sampling, where the researcher invited his students to participate. The students, who were doing either a master's or a doctoral degree in different disciplines at a public university in Singapore, were taking a graduate-level writing module taught by the researcher. To ensure lessons were relevant, in spite of the varied disciplinary background

of the students, the tutorials in this module would require students to identify particular uses of language or writing features observed in their own course or research readings. These were then converted into the teaching and learning materials. The purpose is to illustrate the variety of conventions students may consider adopting when they write (see Hyland, 2007). It should also be noted that for many of these students, it was their first time being in a university program conducted in English.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through an online anonymous survey. The survey consisted of ten items with various words and phrases that students themselves had used in their written work. Based on the list provided by Academic Vocabulary Lists (n.d.), the words or phrases were categorized as general English, academic core, or technical or domain specific, or a combination of any or all of these (see Table 1). It is crucial that the words and phrases comprise these categories, to ensure that they reflect typical academic discourse that students encounter. These words and phrases that students themselves used, and would encounter in academic discourse provided the basis for validation of the items. Definite and indefinite articles, and prepositions were not identified for these categories.

Table 1

Categories of words; words in phrases

| Word or Phrase (Category – type or combination) |
|---|
| Get (General) |
| Catch (General) |
| Gain (Core Academic) |
| Might (General) bring (General) confusion (General) |
| A very (General) hot (General) trend (Core Academic) |
| the lack of (Core Academic) absorption (Technical) of information (Core Academic) |
| mental (Core Academic) capability (Core Academic) |
| concentrate (General) on |
| many (General) factors (General) that contribute (Core Academic) |
| deteriorating (General) sense (General) of morality (Core Academic) |

In each item, an extended context (between one to of a few sentences) was given, with the word or phrase underlined. The context was on the topic of contract cheating, which the students had read about in class in conjunction with the lesson on ethical writing and plagiarism. The provision of context is necessary to gauge students' knowledge of complex vocabulary construction, such as collocation and association (Zhong, 2018). In each context, students had to evaluate the suitability of the underlined word or phrase. There were three levels of suitability, all of which were kept simple to ensure students' understanding:

Not suitable: use is not appropriate for academic writing

Somewhat suitable: use is more common in non-academic communication

Suitable: use is common in academic texts

There were three items where the suitability of words had to be evaluated, and the remaining seven were for the evaluation of phrases. Students were also invited to provide further remarks about their evaluation.

Data was collected over two semesters: 2nd Semester of the 2020-2021 academic year (62 students) and the 1st Semester of the 2021-2022 academic year (60 students). Students' evaluation of the items was analyzed descriptively in terms of frequency and percentage, and the students' (qualitative) comments were examined in terms of its content. For the qualitative data, a grounded approach for content analysis was utilized, as this study was exploratory and did not have any pre-determined criteria for students' provision of comments. This was also because students' genre knowledge may not be comparable, as these students come from distinct academic writing experiences.

After the qualitative data was collected, categories were formed based on Vaughn and Turner's (2016) qualitative data thematic coding framework. To start, qualitative data was read iteratively to identify categories. Next, related categories were merged, and in this step, the categories were further conceptualized and refined. This would then define the exclusionary criteria, which provided the distinctness of each category. Through this framework, the qualitative data from this study was grouped into three categories. The first category is general comment (GC), which refers to students' broad or specific identification of suitable usage or a problem, without providing any explanation or correction. The second category is general comment through revision or response (GCtR), which refers to recommendations for revision. The first two categories – GC and GCtR – situate the evaluation of suitability at the general level of academic writing. The third category is specific comment with revision or response (SCwR). This category refers to students' identification of suitable usage or a problem within the context of occurrence, and not academic writing in general. This is followed by an explanation or a recommendation for revision. Furthermore, if the word or phrase is identified as suitable, the student might even comment on the meaning of the context.

RESULTS

Out of 122 students who were invited to participate, 116 completed the survey. While all of the 116 participants provided their evaluation of the suitability of the underlined word or phrase, not all of them provided qualitative comments. In this section, the frequency and percentage of students' evaluation of suitability is provided, followed by the frequency of comments according to the three categories. Some qualitative comments are provided as examples (verbatim). The number of comments for all ten items, according to the evaluation of suitability is provided in Table 2. The number of comments according to the three comment categories for all the ten items is provided in Table 3.

Table 2

Number of comments according to evaluation of suitability

| Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable | Total |
|--------------|-------------------|----------|-------|
| 259 | 190 | 198 | 647 |

Table 3

Number of comments according to categories

| GC | GCtR | SCwR | Total |
|-----|------|------|-------|
| 367 | 196 | 84 | 647 |

Suitability at the Word Level

For Items 2, 4, and 9, students had to evaluate the suitability of words.

Table 4*Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 2*

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 2 | Contract cheating occurs due to services made available on the Internet. Students are able to identify service providers online, and pay them to produce work according to particular requirements. Furthermore, because information can be accessed easily through the Internet, and because they are paying for an original work that is produced to meet the requirements of their assignments, students do not quite <u>get</u> the issue of contract cheating. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 69 (59.5%) | 28 (24.1%) | 19 (16.4%) |
| GC | 20 | 9 | 6 |
| GCtR SCwR | 14 | 1 | |
| Total | 10 | 4 | |
| | 44 | 14 | 6 |

The use of the word 'get' in Item 2 (Table 4) is grammatically correct; nonetheless, some might argue that it is too basic, or that it lacks meaning. A majority of the participants evaluated the word 'get' as not suitable (59.5%), while 24.1% evaluated it as somewhat suitable and 16.4% evaluated it as suitable. For those who evaluated it as not suitable, they commented that 'get' was an "informal expression" (GC) or that "it was too vague" (GC). Some also suggested a revision, "understand is better to express clearly" (GCtR), and that "'get' sounds informal. It can be changed to 'aware of' or 'understand'" (SCwR). Students who commented that it is somewhat suitable stated that "'get' is not very academical" (GC); they also offered a revision "use 'do not get'" (GCtR); and evaluated that "'get' is not a proper word in academic writing, in this case, can be changed to notice, realize..." (SCwR). Those who deemed this word suitable, on the other hand, commented that it is "grammatically correct" (GC) and that there is "no mistake" (GC).

Table 5*Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 4*

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 4 | However, to instill ethical values among students. Higher education institutions and university staff should also take responsibility. For example, institutions can organize courses that teach students about ethical practices in doing academic work. University staff, such as lecturers, should also be taught how to <u>catch</u> contract cheating. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 46 (39.7%) | 42 (36.2%) | 28 (24.1%) |
| GC | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| GCtR SCwR | 13 | 6 | |
| Total | 6 | 4 | |
| | 31 | 22 | 12 |

In Item 4 (Table 5), students had to evaluate the word 'catch'. While the intended meaning may be clear, other words such as 'detect' or even 'identify' would be more suitable. The problem here is the overgeneralization of meaning, and the seemingly appropriate use for the concept of cheating or plagiarism. More students evaluated that 'catch' was not suitable and somewhat suitable, with 39.7% and 36.2% respectively. Those who evaluated the word as not suitable gave comments,

such as “the word catch here [is] not appropriate” (GC); “catch can be replaced by recognize” (GCtR); and “catch is a colloquial word, find can be a better replacement” (SCwR). Students who evaluated the word as somewhat suitable gave comments such as “this phrase is too colloquial” (GC); offered revisions such as “detect” (GCtR) and “may say detect instead” (GCtR), and “‘catch’ cheating is right in some cases but in this case, I prefer to use figure out for contract cheating” (SCwR). Those who evaluated the word as suitable, on the other hand, gave general comments, such as “the reason is adequate” (GC) and “this is used to describe an action” (GC).

Table 6

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 9

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 9 | There are more university students these days, as a degree is essential to <u>gain</u> a job. However, this may change in a few decades' time, given that there is an increasing number of self-made entrepreneurs. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 36 (31.0%) | 52 (44.8%) | 28 (24.1%) |
| GC | 12 | 16 | 5 |
| GCtR SCwR | 22 | 18 | |
| Total | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | 35 | 36 | 8 |

The use of the word ‘gain’ in Item 9 (Table 6) was intended to be unsuitable. Similar to Item 4, the meaning of ‘gain’ here is overgeneralized to be comparable to words such as ‘secure’. At least 31.0% evaluated the use of the word gain as not suitable, 44.8% evaluated it as somewhat suitable, and 24.1% evaluated the use of the word as suitable. Those who evaluated the word as not suitable commented that it was “not formal” (GC) and it was “oral expression” (GC); or offered a revision, by making sense of the word ‘gain’ – “gain some benefits, and obtain a job will be more suitable” (GCtR); and there was one comment that explained the overall meaning of the context, “Education may not make entrepreneurs, especially those who start from scratch. The probability of becoming a high-quality migrant worker is higher.” (SCwR). Students who evaluated the word as somewhat suitable commented that the word is “more common in non-academic communication” (GC); some also offered revisions, “obtain is a better word” (GCtR), or “find a job would be better” (GCtR). There was also at least one comment that responded to the suitability of ‘gain’ by means of understanding the context, “a degree is essential for them to gain a job” does not show the subject” (SCwR). Those who evaluated the use of the word as suitable provided general comments such as, “seem to be a suitable fixed phrase”, and a few gave specific comments that sought to explain the meaning of the context, such as “a higher education certificate is a pre-condition to gain a job”.

Suitability at the Phrasal Level

For Items 1, 3, 5 to 8, and 10, students had to evaluate the suitability of phrases.

Table 7

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 1

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Item 1 | Contract cheating is an academic offence that is relatively unknown to many higher education institutions around the world. The reason for this is because students do not necessarily have the financial means to engage in contract cheating. As contract cheating is not yet acknowledged by many universities around the world, its permissibility <u>might bring some confusion</u> , mainly because work that is being produced can be claimed as being original. |
|---------------|---|

| Suitability | Not Suitable 23 (19.8%) | Somewhat Suitable 45 (38.8%) | Suitable 48 (41.4%) |
|--------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| GC | 5 | 11 | 14 |
| GCtR SCwR | 2 | 12 | |
| Total | 6 | 12 | 5 |
| | 13 | 35 | 19 |

The phrase in Item 1 (Table 7) had a problem of suitability, in that the meaning of ‘raise some questions’ was represented through ‘bring some confusion’. The intention is to see whether students could evaluate this overgeneralization. 41.1% evaluated the phrase as being suitable. In this category, there were 14 GCs, with comments such as “grammatically correct”; “commonly used in academic writing”, and 5 instances of SCwRs, with comments such as, “The author used modal word ‘might’ which is hedged and suits the academic context.”. On the other hand, there were 38.8% who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable, and 35 participants left comments. An example of GC was “used to show a tone with uncertainty”; an example of GCtR was “‘bring’ can be replaced by ‘cause’”; and an example of SCwR was

Can replace ‘might’ with ‘can’ to make a stronger claim; ‘some’ is avoidable as it does not indicate anything qualitatively or quantitatively here. The experience of confusion itself makes a clear, direct point.

Only 19.8% evaluated the phrase as not suitable, and 13 provided comments. There were five GCs, with comments such as “grammatically correct”; two GCtRs, with comments such as “might cause some confusion”; and six SCwRs, with comments such as “confusion is not appropriate here, might is not appropriate here”.

Table 8

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 3

Item 3 It comes as no surprise that more students are susceptible to contract cheating, especially since many classes are being conducted over the Internet. Students' being in the online space where there is an abundance of educational information and service has rendered contract cheating a very hot trend.

| Suitability | Not Suitable 50 (43.1%) | Somewhat Suitable 39 (33.6%) | Suitable 27 (23.3%) |
|--------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| GC | 23 | 11 | 11 |
| GCtR SCwR | 10 | 8 | |
| Total | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| | 36 | 21 | 15 |

In Item 3 (Table 8), the phrase ‘a very hot trend’ illustrated the unnecessary use of adverb (very) and suitability of adjective (hot). This phrase was evaluated by 43.1% as not suitable, and 33.6% evaluated it as somewhat suitable, and 23.3% evaluated the phrase as suitable. Those who evaluated it as not suitable indicated that “‘hot’ is not an academic word” (GC); “Hot is quite colloquial, I think popular or emerging is better here” (GCtR); “oral English, needs to be replaced by “increasing trend””. Students who evaluated this phrase as somewhat suitable commented that “meaning is correct but hot is often used in spoken English” (GC); “can just say “a hot trend”, very is not appropriate for academic writing” (GCtR); “Hot is a little bit positive adjectives, and we can

use increasing to better express our meaning” (SCwR). Students who evaluated this phrase as suitable commented that the “use is common in academic texts” (GC); also, there was one comment that remarked on the overall meaning of the phrase within the context, “because the internet provides a very convenient way for students to cheat”. While this phrase may sound colloquial and inappropriate for academic discourse, students may be overgeneralizing the word hot to replace the word popular. It may also be the case that students are overextending the use of ‘hot’ due to its use in the phrase, ‘hot topic’. For instance, some recent research titles with ‘hot topic’ found in Google Scholar include, “Hot topics in global perianal fistula research... (2020)”, “Hot issues on myocarditis, pericarditis and cardiomyopathy in children (2021)”, or “Heat waves: A hot topic in climate change research (2021)”.

Table 9*Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 5*

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Item 5 | There are many reasons why a student might engage in contract cheating. It may be the case that the student did not manage his or her time carefully, and finds him or herself racing against time to complete assignments in the last minute. Another reason for students' involvement in contract cheating may be <u>the lack of absorption of information</u> of their subjects, and the pressure to attain good grades. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable 25 (21.6%) | Somewhat Suitable 28 (24.1%) | Suitable 63 (54.3%) |
| GC | 4 | 10 | 24 |
| GCtR SCwR | 8 | 11 | |
| Total | 4 | | |
| | 16 | 21 | 24 |

The phrase ‘the lack of absorption of information’ in Item 5 (Table 9) was intended to be unsuitable in terms of word use (absorption), even though the meaning may be understood through the context. Nonetheless, more than half of the participants evaluated the phrase as suitable (54.3%), with all of the comments being general, such as “the use of the words are suitable” and “nothing wrong”. Those who evaluated the phrase as not suitable gave comments such as “too many prepositions ‘of’” (GC); offered a revision without an explanation such as “absorb information” (GCtR); and “it could be simplified as the lack of studying” (SCwR). Students who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable provided some similar comments to those who evaluated it as not suitable, such as “the sentence uses too many ‘of’ here” (GC), and some provided revisions “keep information” (GCtR) but without explaining the issue with ‘absorption’.

Table 10*Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 6*

| | | | |
|--------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Item 6 | Nonetheless, various reports have highlighted the emergence of contract cheating around the world. This is indicative that students' <u>mental capability</u> might be a cause for concern if contract cheating is becoming rampant. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable 61 (52.6%) | Somewhat Suitable 8 (6.9%) | Suitable 47 (40.5%) |
| GC | 14 | 2 | 24 |
| GCtR SCwR | 18 | 1 | |
| Total | 2 | | 2 |
| | 34 | 3 | 26 |

Similar to Item 5, the phrase underlined in Item 6 (Table 10) was intended to be not suitable, due to it being a term that may be disrespectful. Most of the students evaluated the phrase as not suitable, with comments that the phrase is “confusing” (GC); or “grammatically incorrect” (GC). Some offered a revision, such as “mental health” (GCtR) or explained that “mental is an adjective, here should be mentality?” (GCtR). Only a couple of students were aware of the problematic use of the phrase, with one commenting “language is ableist; I am sure there would be a better word for this” (SCwR). There were only eight students (6.9%) who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable, with comments such as “maybe use a better expression” (GC) and one offered a revision, “psychological diathesis” (GCtR). It was worrying that there were quite a number of students who evaluated the phrase as suitable (40.5%). Some comments were that the phrase “describe the situation” (GC), and explained the meaning of the phrase in light of its context of occurrence, “cheating is originated from a practical performance of the mental capability” (SCwR).

Table 11

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 7

| | | | |
|--------------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 7 | The problem of contract cheating does not only <u>concentrate on</u> undergraduate students, but also affect those in graduate programs. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 50 (43.1%) | 24 (20.7%) | 42 (36.2%) |
| GC | 7 | 7 | 17 |
| GCtR SCwR | 18 | 8 | 1 |
| Total | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| | 30 | 15 | 20 |

The phrase ‘concentrate on’ in Item 7 (Table 11) was intended to be problematic, through the overgeneralization of words such as ‘affect’. While the meaning may be understood when the whole context is read, the use of ‘concentrate’ is unsuitable. This item presented an interesting divide among the participants, as there were 43.1% who evaluated it as not suitable, yet there were 36.2% who deemed it suitable. The remaining 20.7% evaluated it as somewhat suitable. There were more comments provided by those who evaluated the phrase as not suitable, with comments such as “the word ‘concentrated’ is mismatched here” (GC); “be focused, instead of concentrate” (GCtR); and “concentrate on means doing it subjectively, which is not suitable for ‘the problem’” (SCwR). Those who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable gave comments such as “this is more common in non-academic communication” (GC); and “‘on only’ is better and clearer” (GCtR). Students who evaluated the phrase as suitable, on the other hand, left comments such as “words are proper” (GC); “not only... but also” (GCtR) to refer to the suitable use of this combination; and “contract cheating can have bad negative influence to everyone” (SCwR) to refer to the meaning understood from the context of the phrase.

Table 12

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 8

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 8 | There are <u>many factors that contribute</u> to the increase in contract cheating. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 7 (6.0%) | 9 (7.8%) | 100 (86.2%) |

| | | | |
|------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| GC | 3 | 3 | 36 |
| GCtR SCwR | 2 | 5 | |
| Total | 1 | | 1 |
| | 6 | 8 | 37 |

The phrase in Item 8 (Table 12) was intended to be suitable. While a majority of the students (86.2%) evaluated the phrase as suitable, there were still some who evaluated it as not suitable and somewhat suitable. Those who evaluated the phrase as suitable provided mostly general comments, such as “expression is common in academic texts written by researchers with high English language proficiency”; and “I always use this phase in my own article, so I believe it is formal. Lol.”. Students who evaluated the phrase as not suitable gave comments such as “not suitable for negative descriptions” (GC); “it should be changed as ‘many factors that contribute to’” (GCtR); and “subject should be human”. On the other hand, those who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable gave comments such as “that is not suitable for academic writing, but in non-academic communication” (GC); and “many factors contribute” (GCtR).

Table 13

Context, evaluation, and comment categories for Item 10

| | | | |
|--------------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Item 10 | One plausible reason for contract cheating is students' <u>deteriorating sense of morality</u> . This may be partially due to the educational institutions' failure in instilling ethical values among students. | | |
| Suitability | Not Suitable | Somewhat Suitable | Suitable |
| | 21 (18.1%) | 25 (21.6%) | 70 (60.3%) |
| GC | 3 | 4 | 30 |
| GCtR SCwR | 10 | 8 | |
| Total | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| | 14 | 15 | 31 |

Item 10 (Table 13) was intended to be unproblematic. The underlined phrase in this item was evaluated as suitable by a majority of the participants (60.3%). Comments from participants who evaluated this as suitable were, “It is a specialized and academic word” (GC); and at least one who provided a specific remark on the overall meaning of contract cheating that was understood through the context, “Students and educational institutions should be responsible for phenomenon” (ScWR). Nonetheless, there were still students whose evaluation was not suitable or somewhat suitable. For those who evaluated this item as not suitable, GCs such as “serious”, and GCtRs such as “‘deteriorating’ is not suitable and I think I can just change it to ‘decreasing’” were provided by the students. There was one specific comment (SCwR), however, that seemed to remark on the meaning of the phrase but without explaining how the phrase is not suitable (“It’s often used to describe something becoming worse”). There were 21.6% who evaluated the phrase as somewhat suitable. An example of a GC was, “This description is too serious and too absolute”; an example of a GCtR was, “Deteriorating is not so suitable in the sentence”; and an example of an SCwR was, “Morality can only partially restrict the interest chain, and the law can do better”. Again, the SCwR saw the student evaluating the overall meaning of the context where the phrase appeared.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to gauge students' ability to evaluate suitability at the word and phrase level. From the survey data and the coding of the qualitative comments, this study found that there were many instances of words and phrases evaluated as being not suitable (259). Furthermore, comments that were provided were mostly general (GC=367). While it appears that many students

were able to evaluate the suitability of words or phrases, students' comments indicated that they may not necessarily understand the suitability of these words or phrases. This is evident in students' focus on grammatical accuracy, which is assumed through the high number of general comments. For instance, if we consider students' comments on Item 5, we can see that the focus of the comments was on the preposition 'of', instead of the suitability of the word 'absorption'. This may also be evidence that students pay attention to isolated words, instead of the context where these words occur. Students' focus on isolated words is further evidenced in Item 6, where the recommended revisions for 'mental capability' was simply to rewrite the word into a different form (e.g., mentality). This, unfortunately does not rectify the issue of the phrase being disrespectful and inappropriate. Furthermore, if a word or phrase is considered suitable, the students did not delve into it further, seen through the high number of GCs (e.g., Items 8 and 10). All these results may be pointing towards a lack of genre knowledge among the participants, and more importantly, not recognizing the implicit rules associated with academic discourse. As mentioned earlier, genre knowledge encompasses multiple dimensions of knowledge about academic discourse, including being able to manipulate language in a suitable manner (Tardy, 2009). What is seen in the results, however, provides evidence that students were still concerned over form and accuracy. From an academic vocabulary perspective, it could be that the participants were receptive towards the words and phrases presented to them in the items; yet, they do not have sufficient productive vocabulary knowledge to determine suitability. Another possibility is that the words or phrases provided in a context may increase its informational load, thus rendering a word or phrase as being more unfamiliar (see Teng & Zhang, 2021).

Implications

Given these findings, it becomes imperative that writing instructors or EAP practitioners strive to create classroom opportunities where students are able to think of language use (Loo, 2020a). One way of doing this is to provide corrective feedback or even grammar lessons that require students' thoughtful response, instead of linear transmission from instructor to student (Loo, 2020b, 2021a; Loo & Imperial, 2022). Another possibility is the comparison of students' rhetorical knowledge that is shaped by their cultural background (Golebiowski, 2018). These pedagogical principles are possible even for students whose language proficiency is still developing, as studies have shown that students are perceptive towards language use around them (e.g., Loo, 2021b). We could also observe this in the current study, where students' evaluation was shaped by their familiarity of what they have seen in academic writing. This may be indicative of students having some experience regarding academic communication, yet still requiring more help, especially if they aspire to develop as a writerly reader. For graduate students, a more meaningful experience in developing academic writing skills and language proficiency is important as it enables them to cross the threshold of a novice writer to a skilled writer (Negretti, 2017). This not only requires explicit instruction in academic expressions (e.g., Durrant, 2014; 2016), but it should also involve creating a space where students can practice information-gathering processes, such as resource identification. This is imperative, given the exponential rise in questionable academic and research resources on the Internet. These materials may contain problematic use of language that may mislead those who are new to research discourse (see discussion by Taylor, 2019). Furthermore, the teaching of EAP, especially academic writing for publication purposes, may be more effective when done through short and needs-based sessions, such as workshops conducted in collaboration with disciplinary experts (Cargill et al., 2018), or a guided identification or learning of relevant academic words (Townes, 2020) or even one-to-one conferences (Aldohon, 2021).

For future studies, researchers may consider other qualitative data sources, such as students' discussion of their evaluation in a focus group setting, or through a think aloud protocol. Moreover, researchers should also consider students' evaluation of context from their disciplinary area, as well as graduate student supervisors' perceptions regarding their role in their students' disciplinary communication development (e.g., Ulla & Tarrayo, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The current study illustrated the possibility that L2 graduate students may only be familiar with the rules of language use, where grammatical accuracy is prioritized. While this may indicate that students possess an extent of formal dimension in genre knowledge (Tardy, 2009), it does not provide evidence that students can meaningfully deconstruct the use of language in context and to contribute towards suitable vocabulary production for academic discourse; instead, it affirms the assumption that many L2 students learn the English language from the perspective of deficiency. Another observation that supports this assumption is students' overgeneralization of meaning across vocabulary that might share a core meaning (denotation), and the uncritical evaluation of sophisticated-looking vocabulary as being suitable. This may illustrate students' receptive vocabulary knowledge, but not productive. With these observations, it may be that L2 graduate students will require further guidance to complete their academic literacy knowledge, and to subsequently increase their genre knowledge.

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