Special Extended Teaching Note

New Ways of Using Corpora for Teaching Vocabulary and Writing in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The use of appropriate of words in writing, particularly frequently occurring four words combinations in academic register, is very important because it is an effective building block of academic text used by expert writers for effective communication. Yet teaching of four-word lexical bundles is rarely discussed in ESL writing textbooks. Recent research has shown that corpora can be a useful tool for helping L2 writers improve their use of four-word lexical bundles. This article presents an attempt to teach four-word lexical bundles to advanced intensive ESOL students at a community college in the USA. The article shows the application of iWeb for the selection and instruction of four-word lexical bundles to teach different ways of concluding an essay.

Key Words: corpora, lexical bundles, iWeb, Padlet, L2 academic writing

Introduction

Teaching academic writing to advanced non-native speakers in an Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at a Community College in the US, I observed that the majority of my students had little realization that expert writers do not always create/write novel sentences. Rather, they have a mastery over the use of fixed phrases or multi-word, prefabricated expressions. They make use of them for a variety of purposes: to express stance, e.g., “are more likely to”; to show attitude, e.g., “it is going to be”; to organize discourse, e.g., “if you look at”, and to express reference, e.g., “there is a lot of”’ However, my IELP students would attribute native-like proficiency to native speakers knowing more words.
Formulaic language is a broad term which is defined as “words and word strings which appear to be processed without recourse to their lowest level of composition” (Wray, 2002, p. 4). In the literature, there are more than forty terms describing aspects of formulaic language (Wray, 2002). For this discussion, we consider one such type of formulaic language, which is called lexical bundles — a “recurring sequence of three or four words” (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002, p. 443). It is important to mention that Biber et al. (2002) particularly consider the four-word clusters to be lexical bundles. They argue that two-word sequences are too short and numerous, and they are less significant as textual building blocks than four-word clusters. They are widespread, and they contribute to fluent linguistic production. In the words of Hayland (2012), they are an “important defining feature of academic discourse and a significant component of fluent linguistic production” (p. 166). They are important not only because of their pervasiveness in oral and written discourse but because they are necessary for appropriate, fluent language production and comprehension (Meunier, 2012; Sinclair, 1991).

Course materials for teaching writing skills to non-native writers do not include four-word clusters, despite the research exploring the use of lexical bundles in university teaching and textbooks (Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004).

In order to help my students write four-word clusters, I used iWeb. I discovered that by using the iWeb corpus (https://corpus.byu.edu/iweb), released in May 2018, it was possible to help students speak and write like expert users of the English language. iWeb is especially useful for learners as it gives particular attention to the top 60,000 words in the corpus. It provides a wide range of information on each word: frequency information, definitions, synonyms, WordNet entries, related topics, clusters, and key words in context/concordances lines.

The following are the steps to introduce and teach four-word clusters that I used in my IELP writing classes using iWeb.

**What Were My Goals of Teaching?**

My goal was to enhance the academic writing skills of my students. Specifically, I wanted my students to write well-tried expressions when finishing their essays. I also wanted them to use and apply new information available to them through the advancement of corpus research, especially iWeb, which is expressly designed for learners and teachers of English.
Why Did I Focus on Lexical Bundles?

A. Their pervasiveness, especially in the written and oral discourse of expert language users, was one of my most important rationales for teaching lexical bundles to students explicitly.

B. My students struggled with the appropriate combination of words, making their academic writing come across as awkward at times.

C. Research shows that, “gaining full command of a new language requires the learner to become sensitive to the native speakers’ preferences for certain sequences of words over others that might appear just as possible” (Wray, 2000, p. 463). For instance, vocabulary researchers Pauwels and Peters (2015) did classroom-based research with students with Dutch L1 that shows students make significant gains in their writing skills when taught formulaic expressions over the course of a semester.

How Did I Help My Students Finish Their Essays?

Writing an appropriate conclusion is extremely important in all types of essays. It is the last chance to present one’s viewpoint to the reader and to leave one’s impression as a writer. The concluding paragraphs of my students showed a number of issues, but the one common issue that stood out was their inability to write longer strings signaling the conclusion. The phrases most commonly used by them were the two-word clusters, “in conclusion” and “to conclude,” which, although appropriate academic phrases to finish an essay, did not contribute much to their writing proficiency as compared to writing four-word clusters. In other words, my students did not know the other possible variations in the use of the word “conclusion” for finishing their essays. Therefore, I wanted to expose them to a wider range of phrases available to them and help my students to have lexical diversity in signaling the conclusion of their essays.

Step I: Introduce BYU Corpora

In a computer lab with student access to computers and Internet connection, I asked my students to go to https://www.english-corpora.org/ and click the link to iWeb, titled “The Intelligent Web-based Corpus.”
Step II: Type the Word in the Search Box

Students typed the word “conclusion” in the search box and clicked the button which says “See the detailed info for word,” which took them to the page shown in Step III below.

Step III: Survey the Information but Focus on Lexical Bundles

The page below provides an enormous amount of information on the target word (e.g. dictionary, collocates, key word in context, topic).
I informed my students that the Dictionary section has active links which give additional information from online dictionaries and other sources. In addition, they can listen to the pronunciation of the word by clicking the active links to Youglis, Playphrase, Yarn, Google Translate, and Google Images. However, I asked my students to scroll further down on this page and focus on four-word clusters including the word as shown below.

**Step IV: Examine the Usage**

After focusing on the four-word sequences listed under Clusters, students read the actual usage of these sequences under the section Concordance Lines shown below. The activity allowed students to figure out the regularities and patterning in English when authors use the word, “conclusion,” as shown below in the concordance lines.
Step V: Apply the Knowledge

I set a Padlet, a type of digital board, (https://padlet.com/) for students to share their use of formulaic sequences in their own sentences. The use of Padlet encouraged collaboration among students. As their postings were visible to their classmates, they became more responsible in their work and sensitive to language usage while posting on Padlet.
Conclusion

Teaching lexical bundles helps students attain accuracy and proficiency in their writing expressions. The use of iWeb, designed specifically for learners and teachers, provides detailed information on the most frequently used lexical bundles, and the use of Padlet offers students the opportunity to learn from each other. In short, having students work together on their writing skills through the use of lexical bundles is not only an effective way of helping students improve their ability to grasp and produce texts in the academic register but also an interesting and enjoyable use of class time. Once my students arrived at the understanding that language is largely formulaic and then applied that understanding to find the clusters of a given word, they began to use clusters not only for concluding their essays but in all aspects of their essay writing.

References


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