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More does not mean better: Frequency and accuracy analysis of lexical bundles in Chinese EFL learners' essay writing

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on lexical bundles, the most frequently occurring multi-word sequences in a given register, has mostly focused on frequency and classification analysis and has not fully addressed the question of how accurately these bundles are used by English as second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) learners. This study aims to describe and compare both the frequency and accuracy of lexical bundles used by junior year and senior year English major students in Chinese universities. The results indicate that though senior students tend to produce lexical bundles more frequently and with a wider variety in their essay writings, they have not used lexical bundles significantly more accurately than their junior counterparts. It can be concluded that Chinese EFL learners have only achieved quantitative gain but failed to make significant progress in quality bundle use during their four years of English learning. Common misuses are documented and categorized for more explicit and effective instruction to further strengthen L2 learners' phraseological competence.

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1. Introduction

For more than half a century linguists have been interested in phraseology, the study of the structure, meaning and use of word combinations (Cowie, 1998). The literature has noted a phraseological tendency and its processing advantages, which are widely believed to be the formulaic nature in first or native language (L1) use, and which are of great value in second and foreign language (L2) learning (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Sinclair, 1991; Wray, 2002, 2012).

Under the umbrella of phraseological units or formulaic sequences, there are a variety of sub-types such as idioms, collocations, lexical bundles, etc., which are to some extent different from one another in terms of fixedness, idiomaticity or salience. As one of the major phraseological variations and a corpus accessible feature of phraseology, lexical bundles are defined as the most frequently occurring sequences of three or more words in a given register regardless of their idiomaticity and structural status (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). They are generally understood as extended collocations and form-meaning composites which are often structurally incomplete but help to achieve important discourse functions (Biber & Conrad, 1999; Cortes, 2004).

Most descriptions of lexical bundles by L2 learners focus on frequency and classification analysis, that is, how frequently bundles are used and what structural or functional types of bundles are preferred. However, the question of how accurately L2 speakers or writers use these bundles has not been fully addressed. This study describes both the frequency information and

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accuracy index of lexical bundles used by Chinese EFL majors who are undergraduate students learning English as their major subject in mainland Chinese universities. It intends to contribute a preliminary model for measuring the grammatical correctness and functional appropriacy of L2 learners' lexical bundle performance, which should shed light on modelling linguistic description and measurement of lexical bundles, as well as other phraseological variations.

2. Importance of lexical bundles and its description

For the past decade, linguists and researchers have been interested in the study of lexical bundles mainly for two reasons. Firstly, lexical bundles are one of the important phraseological variations which help to illustrate and testify the phraseological tendency in natural language use. The fundamental notion that words are not used separately but to be co-selected in forms of collocations, lexical bundles and other formulaic sequences has been widely supported by linguistic theories such as the idiom principle (Sinclair, 1991), pattern grammar (Hunston & Francis, 2000), lexical priming theory (Hoey, 2005) and Construction Grammar (Fried & Östman, 2004). Modern cognitive science and psycholinguistic experiments have also provided hard evidence and empirical supports for the processing advantages of multi-word sequences, hence the importance of phraseological competence in language learning (Ellis, 2012; Millar, 2011). It is therefore worthwhile for the current research to have a diagnostic examination of Chinese EFL majors' bundle performance so as to generate pedagogical implications.

Secondly, lexical bundles are corpus accessible features so that learners' phraseological performance can be observed and evaluated by frequency indexes and concordance lines. Learner corpus research shows that lexical bundles are frequently used by both native and non-native English learners in either academic (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber & Conrad, 1999; Cortes, 2004, 2013; Hyland, 2012; Wei, 2007) or other registers such as political debate (Partington & Morley, 2004), legal language (Ruth, 2013) and so on. Researchers have also classified lexical bundles and established their structural and functional typologies (Altenberg, 1998; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a), by which the distributional characteristics of these frequently-occurred multiword sequences can be discussed and compared between different learners or registers.

Generally speaking, frequency-based descriptions of Chinese EFL majors' bundle use are mainly designed as contrastive interlanguage analysis (Granger, 1996, 1998) of two different paradigms: one comparing the Chinese learners with natives, the other comparing learners of different language proficiencies. Most researchers reported that learners tend to use more lexical bundles in both oral and written English than natives do. For example, Chinese EFL majors were found to use more 3-word (Wang & Zhang, 2006) or 4-word bundles (Pang, 2009) in their timed essays than their native counterparts. Many studies (Diao, 2004; Ding & Qi, 2005; Guo, 2011; Yang, 2006) also compared the quantity of bundles used by Chinese EFL majors of different English proficiency levels (or from different curriculum stages), which resulted in a positive correlation.

Frequency counts from corpus data are undoubtedly the most important defining feature of lexical bundles and the initial indicator for phraseological awareness. However, frequency alone is not enough for a panoramic view of bundle performance. Earlier phraseologists such as Wray (2002) and De Cock (2000) have doubted the value of studying formulaic language only by using frequency criteria since it may fail to provide enough grounds. Later empirical studies further indicated that, although L2 learners are capable of frequently using collocations or other forms of phraseological items, "this quantitative gain is not paralleled by a qualitative gain" (Paquot & Granger, 2012, p.137), as many of these multi-word sequences are actually used inaccurately. Even high-proficient L2 learners were often found to have misused some collocations and phrasal verbs (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Li & Schmitt, 2010). A few studies on Chinese EFL majors' oral production of lexical bundles or formulaic sequences (Qi, 2010; Qi & Ding, 2011) have identified a high percentage of errors from their English speech as well.

The current research therefore intends to argue that more does not always mean better and that quality may speak louder than quantity when addressing L2 learners' phraseological performance. It is then essential to include accuracy factor as an equally or even more important property. By taking full advantage of a large representative collection of essays written by Chinese EFL majors, the study is designed to compare both frequency and accuracy of lexical bundles used by junior (Year 1, Year 2) and senior (Year 3, Year 4) students. Meanwhile the quantitative and qualitative results of the investigation will be statistically tested so that possible changes (progress or deficiency) in their bundle performance during the 4-year tertiary English study can be detected. More specifically, it will address the following three research questions:

- (1) Do seniors use lexical bundles more frequently and with a wider variety than juniors in essay writing?
- (2) Do seniors use lexical bundles more accurately than juniors in essay writing?
- (3) What are the most common errors in lexical bundle use identified from Chinese EFL majors' essay writing?

3. Methods and procedures

3.1. Contrastive interlanguage analysis and trend study

Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA) (Granger, 1996, 1998) has been widely practiced as an effective model for corpus research on learner language, which compares interlanguage users with native English speakers in order to identify learner deviation from target norms, or with another interlanguage to observe different linguistic features. Most CIA studies on L2 learners' phraseological performance, as reviewed in the previous section, are particularly of the interlanguage versus native language paradigm. Except for this intra-L1-group comparison, inter-L1-group comparison (Paquot, 2008) is another CIA model which compares one learner population with another.

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