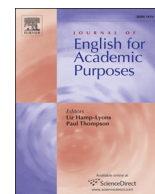


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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Comparing patterns of L1 versus L2 English academic professionals: Lexical bundles in Telecommunications research journals[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 June 2015

Received in revised form 13 November 2015

Accepted 17 November 2015

Available online 24 December 2015

Keywords:

Lexical bundles

Structures

Functions

Academic articles

ABSTRACT

Corpus-driven research on phraseology has documented different types and functions of lexical bundles (recurrent formulaic sequences) in spoken versus written registers, providing a foundation for recent studies that explore patterns of language development in the use of these bundles. Some studies focus on changes in the phraseological patterns of novice/student writers compared to 'expert' writers, while others have focused on a comparison of L1-versus L2-English students. However, no study to date has directly compared the use of lexical bundles by L1-English versus L2-English academic professionals. The current study addresses this gap by examining the structural and functional types of lexical bundles employed by L1 English and L1 Chinese professionals writing for English medium Telecommunications journals. The findings show major structural differences (phrasal vs. clausal) between L1 and L2 writers. L2 writers mostly use bundles consisting of verbs and clause fragments (especially passive verb structures), while L1 writers use bundles consisting of noun and prepositional phrases. Results also demonstrate that L2 professionals use bundles that are functionally different from the L1 professionals, and even misuse certain bundles. In addition, the relationship between structural types and functional categories shows that L1 and L2 professionals employ bundles with different structural characteristics serving similar functions.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, an extensive body of research has employed corpus-driven methods to explore the phraseological patterns of spoken and written registers (see [Gray & Biber, 2015](#)). Many of these studies have explored the use of lexical bundles: recurrent lexical sequences (e.g., *take a look at, know what I mean*) identified through corpus analysis that includes specific frequency thresholds and dispersion requirements. Studies have described lexical bundles in a range of spoken and written registers and have built on earlier research to explore patterns of language development in the use of lexical bundles. Lexical bundles have been used to explore developmental differences between novice/student and expert writers (e.g., [Chen & Baker, 2010](#); [Cortes, 2004](#)), proficiency levels of L2-English writers (e.g., [Staples, Egbert, Biber, & McClair, 2013](#)), and between L1-English and L2-English student writers (e.g., [Ädel & Erman, 2012](#); [Chen & Baker, 2010](#)).

[☆] The handling of the editorial process for this paper was completed by Professor Hamp-Lyons.

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Scholars disagree on whether academic writers follow the same developmental progression in the use of lexical bundles, or whether L2-English writers differ from L1-English writers in the use of bundles. Results of previous research are unclear as to whether the novice/student versus expert distinction, or the L1 versus L2 distinction leads to the differences that have been found. For example, [Chen and Baker \(2010\)](#), and [Ädel and Erman \(2012\)](#) both found consistent and interpretable differences between L1 and L2 student writers, while [Cortes \(2004\)](#) and [Römer \(2009\)](#) argue that the novice/student versus expert distinction is as important as the distinction between L1 and L2 writers. Surprisingly, though, most developmental studies have confounded the influence of expertise with the influence of L1. [Perez Llantada \(2014\)](#) is the only previous study that we found that compared the use of lexical bundles in academic journals by L1-English and L2-English professional writers (and also L1 Spanish writing in Spanish). In this large scale study that looked at these different L1 authors of research articles from twelve disciplines, she finds that register was one of the most important predictors of bundle use.

It seems uncontroversial that all novice writers (L1 and L2 alike) must learn the discourse conventions of advanced academic writing, including the appropriate use of lexical bundles (see, e.g., [Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2013](#); [Cortes, 2004](#)). But some previous research indicates that L1-English writers have a head start in this task, resulting in consistent differences between L1 and L2 groups of students who are otherwise matched for level (and discipline in the case of the Ädel & Erman study). The question investigated in the current study is whether those differences disappear at the expert level, or if the differences between L1 and L2 continue for experts.

We investigate this question through a corpus-based comparison of published academic research articles by L1-English writers versus L1-Chinese writing in English from the same academic discipline. In the following section, we introduce the construct of lexical bundles as it is used in the current study. Then, we present a corpus-based investigation that compares the use of lexical bundles by English L1 and L2 professional scholars writing in Telecommunications journal articles.

1.1. Previous research on lexical bundles

[Altenberg \(1998\)](#) was probably the first to employ corpus analysis to investigate frequently recurring lexical phrases in English, identifying 470 3-word sequences that occurred at least 10 times in the London–Lund Corpus (spoken English). Around the same time, [Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan \(1999\)](#); Chapter 13) identified the most common 'lexical bundles' in conversation and academic writing, defined as sequences of words that occurred at least 10 times per million words in the target register, distributed across at least 5 different texts. These bundles were interpreted in structural/grammatical terms (e.g., main clause fragments: *have a look at*; noun phrase or prepositional phrase fragments: *the end of the*).

Many studies have employed a lexical bundle framework to describe expressions typical of different registers, focusing on variation across registers, and describing the discourse functions served by different types of lexical bundles. [Biber, Conrad, and Cortes \(2004\)](#) compare the distribution and functions of lexical bundles in four registers: conversation, university classroom teaching, university textbooks, and published academic research writing. That study found systematic differences at all levels. Overall, there were more frequent (i.e., tokens) and more different (i.e., types) bundles in speech than in writing. Conversation bundles consist mostly of verbs and clause fragments (including dependent clause fragments), while in academic writing lexical bundles consist mostly of noun phrase and prepositional phrase fragments.

Several researchers ([Biber, 2006](#); [Biber et al. 2004](#); [Hyland, 2008a](#)) have shown that lexical bundles also vary in their discourse functions (e.g., expressing stance, discourse organization, or referential meanings). It turns out that these functional differences are as important as structural differences for the description of register variation; for example, conversation tends to use bundles for stance functions, while academic writing tends to rely on referential bundles.

More recently, lexical bundle studies have explored issues related to language development. Several studies have investigated the use of lexical bundles by L2-English writers across proficiency levels (e.g., [Staples et al., 2013](#)), or compared the use of bundles by L1-English versus L2-English writers (e.g., [Ädel & Erman, 2012](#); [Chen & Baker, 2010](#); [De Cock, 2000](#); [Nekrasova, 2009](#)). Most of these studies conclude that L1-English writers use more lexical bundles, and more varied bundle types, than L2-English writers ([Ädel & Erman, 2012](#); [Chen & Baker, 2010](#)). However, [Staples et al., \(2013\)](#) found that lower proficiency L2-English writers use more lexical bundles overall (not distinguishing between clausal and phrasal types) than higher proficiency L2 writers.

Other studies have compared novice versus expert writers, not focusing on the L1 versus L2 distinction. For example, [Cortes \(2002, 2004\)](#) finds that novice writers (student writers) use bundles in ways that are functionally different from those of experts (published authors). In addition, [Cortes \(2004\)](#) also finds that many bundles used by experts are rarely used by undergraduate and graduate students.

[Römer \(2009\)](#) finds that some bundles common in expert writing occur much less frequently in either L1-English or L2-English student writing. Based on that finding, Römer argues that the novice versus expert distinction is more important than the L1/L2 distinction for understanding language development in the use of lexical bundles. However, [Hyland \(2008a\)](#) documents a somewhat different developmental progression, finding that postgraduate students tend to employ more lexical bundles (types) in their academic writing than professional academics, apparently as a way of displaying their competence in academic discourse. Similar to [Römer \(2009\)](#), [Chen and Baker \(2010\)](#) do a 3-way comparison: L1-English students versus L2-English students versus L1-English expert writing (published research articles). Chen and Baker find few differences between the L1 and L2 student writing. Most differences in their study were between student versus expert writing with students using more verb phrase based bundles and more discourse organizing bundles than the expert writers.

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