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At the same time: Lexical bundles in L1 and L2 university student argumentative writing

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ABSTRACT

This corpus-based study compares L1-English and L1-Chinese undergraduate students' use of lexical bundles in English argumentative essays, and identifies the most common bundle misuses in L2 student writing. Data consist of two corpora of student-produced argumentative essays: 101 high-rated essays written by L1-English students and 105 high-rated essays written by L1-Chinese students. Using Biber's (Biber et al., 1999; Biber et al., 2004) structural and functional taxonomy, we compared the forms and functions of four-word bundles used by L1-English and L1-Chinese university students. Findings indicate that L2 students not only use substantially more bundle types and tokens than L1 writers, but the structural and functional patterns of bundles also differ. While L1 writers' bundles consist of mostly noun and preposition phrases, L2 students use significantly more verb phrase (clausal) bundles. Results also show that L2 student writers use significantly more stance bundles than L1 writers. In addition, most of the misused bundles in the L2 writers' essays pertain to grammatical mistakes, particularly with articles and prepositions. We conclude with some pedagogical implications for ESL composition.

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1. Introduction

Recently, a growing body of studies has focused on university student writing, as the number of second language (L2) writers in universities in English-dominant countries, such as the US, has increased exponentially (Staples & Reppen, 2016). Guided by the need to assist such learners in developing competence in academic writing, researchers have examined lexicogrammatical features in these students' timed placement tests (e.g., Hinkel, 2003), prompted TOEFL writing (e.g., Staples, Egbert, Biber, & McClair, 2013), and disciplinary texts (e.g., Ädel & Erman, 2012). Although these studies have provided valuable insights into L2 student writing in such situations, surprisingly little research has concentrated on matriculated L2 undergraduate student writing in the context of first-year composition (FYC), despite the fact that these writing classes are required for nearly all first language (L1) and L2 undergraduate students in the US (Aull & Lancaster, 2014). The few available studies focusing on L2 student writing in US-based FYC have examined interpersonal resources (e.g., Lee & Deakin, 2016) or other linguistic aspects such as phrasal and clausal features (e.g., Staples & Reppen, 2016).

Even fewer studies have investigated the use of lexical bundles, or recurrent multiword sequences (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999), in L2 FYC student writing, although such formulaic units play critical functions in

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academic writing (Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Biber et al., 1999; Cortes, 2004). While a few studies have examined the use of lexical bundles in L1 and L2 university student texts (e.g., Chen & Baker, 2010; Huang, 2015; Ädel & Erman, 2012), they consist of data drawn from timed essays or disciplinary writing. Little, however, is known about the lexical bundles used by L2 undergraduate students in FYC, and how they compare with L1 students.

Using Biber's (Biber et al., 1999, 2004) structural and functional taxonomy, this corpus-based study compares the use of lexical bundles in English argumentative essays produced by L1-English senior-level undergraduate students and L1-Chinese undergraduate students in an ESL FYC course in the US. Gaining a deeper appreciation of how these L1 and L2 student writers use bundles can provide valuable insight for assisting L2 learners in acquiring better control over these crucial building blocks of language more effectively.

2. Lexical bundles in academic writing

Lexical bundles refer to the most frequently recurring multiword sequences of three or more words in a register or genre (Biber et al., 1999). Unlike idioms which are relatively fixed expressions, lexical bundles are extended collocations that “are usually *not* complete structural units, and usually *not* fixed expressions” (Biber & Conrad, 1999, p. 183), such as *is likely to*, *as a result of*, and *at the end of the*. In order to qualify as lexical bundles, multiword expressions must meet frequency and dispersion criteria: occur at a frequency of at least 20–40 times per million words and across five different texts (Biber et al., 2004; Cortes, 2004).

Over the past two decades, lexical bundles have received considerable attention in the academic writing literature. Biber et al. (2004) compared lexical bundles across spoken and written registers: conversations, classroom teaching, textbooks, and academic prose. They found that spoken registers not only include more types and higher frequencies of bundles than written texts, they also differ in bundle structures and functions. Conversations and classroom teaching are comprised of mainly verb-phrase based (VP-based) bundles while noun-phrase and preposition-phrase based (NP- and PP-based) bundles are preferred in textbooks and academic prose. They also discovered that conversations mainly rely on stance bundles (e.g., *I don't know what, I don't want to*), but textbooks and academic prose consists of a greater number of referential bundles (e.g., *one of the most, in the case of*). Such differences occur, as Conrad and Biber (2005) explain, because academic texts place greater importance on presenting primarily factual information while spoken language emphasizes interpersonal interactions.

Focusing specifically on academic writing, researchers have investigated lexical bundles in published research articles (RAs), PhD dissertations, master's theses, and disciplinary student writing. Hyland (2008a, 2008b), for example, compared bundles in RAs, PhD dissertations, and master's theses across four disciplines: engineering, microbiology, business, and applied linguistics. Cortes (2004) compared RAs and student writing in history and biology. Both studies found disciplinary variation in the use of bundles, with the hard science fields relying more heavily on bundles than humanities and social sciences. They also found a mismatch in the structural, functional, and frequency patterns of bundles used between student writers and disciplinary experts. Such differences, as Hyland (2008b) suggests, may be explained by the fact that student-produced genres serve different purposes and readers. Unlike disciplinary experts, students engage in a diversity of pedagogic genres for the purposes of reader assessment of competence. As Cortes (2004) found, most papers that students write, especially undergraduate students, are not research papers. It could be that, while there may be some general lexical bundles used across academic texts, genre may be an important variable in the employment of bundles (Hyland, 2008b). For instance, Hyland (2008b) found that many bundles frequently used in RAs are rarely employed in dissertations and theses, and Cortes (2013) even found that specific bundles are associated with particular rhetorical moves in RA introductions.

Additionally, Cortes (2008) compared history RAs written in English and Spanish by respective L1 writers. It was found that Spanish RAs include a greater number of bundles, yet the bundles in both groups have similar structures and perform identical functions. Comparisons of English RAs written by disciplinary experts from dissimilar L1 backgrounds, however, show different trends. For example, in a comparative analysis of English Telecommunications RAs written by L1-English and L1-Chinese professionals, Pan, Reppen, and Biber (2016) found that L2 texts not only include a greater number of bundle types and tokens, but they also differ from L1 texts in structural patterns. Unlike L1-English RAs, texts produced by L1-Chinese professionals were found to include more VP-based bundles than NP- or PP-based types, thus showing their preference for clausal over phrasal bundles. Similarly, in their comparison of doctoral dissertations written in English by mainland Chinese students and published RAs, Wei and Lei (2011) found that L2 dissertations consist of more bundle types and tokens as well as more VP-based bundles than RAs.

These studies show that genre, discipline, writer level, and L1 may impact the use of lexical bundle in important ways. Most research in this area, however, has focused on specialist texts and/or how bundles in published RAs differ from those in student writing. Although such comparisons may be a crucial starting point, specialist texts may not represent appropriate targets for students, particularly undergraduate students, as these students and specialists not only write different genres, but their texts also differ in purpose, audience, scope, and evaluation (Lee & Casal, 2014). These studies also tell us little of the ways in which L2 undergraduate students use such multiword sequences.

In response to better understanding L2 student writing, a few studies have examined lexical bundles in L1 and/or L2 student texts. Staples et al. (2013) investigated bundle variation across three proficiency levels in prompted TOEFL writing. They found that lower-proficiency students used the most bundles while the highest-proficiency group used the fewest, thus supporting second language acquisition (SLA) theory that, as learners gain proficiency in an L2, they tend to employ fewer

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