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An exploratory study on an integrated genre-based approach for the instruction of academic lexical phrases

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ABSTRACT

This study explores a holistic approach in the teaching and learning of academic lexical phrases. It incorporates the Sydney school genre-based pedagogy and corpus-informed explicit instruction into the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) genre-based framework for a better "text in context" exemplification of genre knowledge and genre related language features (including lexical phrases). A distinction is made between general (or "lexical bundles" in traditional terms) and move-specific lexical phrases in the academic genre of research paper. An intervention study using this approach was conducted over a semester in an intact classroom with Masters students in China. The results indicated significant gains in receptive knowledge of lexical phrases and genre structure by the participants, and learners of different starting levels showed similar final attainment after instruction. The considerable number of appropriate uses of both types of lexical phrases in a rewriting task further supported the potential of this approach in academic lexical instruction. More importantly, a multiple regression analysis was performed and implies that the growth in the use of general lexical phrases cannot be isolated from the development of genre knowledge and specific language features such as the move-specific lexical phrases.

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1. Introduction

Formulaic sequences have received quite a lot of scholarly attention over the past decades. These sequences are variously known as clusters (Hyland, 2008a), lexical phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), recurrent word-combinations (Altenberg, 1998), lexical bundles, n-grams etc. The word strings that repeatedly occur together (possibly including incomplete grammatical units) in statistical terms and identified by corpus frequency-driven analysis are usually called lexical bundles (e.g. Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a,b). Numerous studies have pointed out the importance of mastering these bundles, mainly from these three aspects: First of all, they constitute a large portion of discourse (e.g. Altenberg, 1998; Schmitt & Carter, 2004). Secondly, as important building blocks of the characteristic features of academic texts, the absence of such sequences may indicate the lack of mastery of a novice writer in a specific disciplinary community (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Li & Schmitt, 2009); in other words, the appropriate use of phrases is a marker of a proficient language learner. Thirdly, the "chunking process" (Lewis, 1997) may help second language learners to write more easily with ready-made sets of words rather than single lexical words (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007). For the inclusion of such bundles in the EAP pedagogy, Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010) created an "Academic Formula List" with similar purpose to the

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widely used Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). It includes phrases identified on the basis of a combination of quantitative and qualitative criteria with teachers' insights. Most recently, Ackermann and Chen (2013) developed an "Academic Collocation List" consisting of the most frequent 2468 collocations of pedagogical relevance. The availability of such lists of EAP-specific phraseology and vocabulary will have considerable impact on curriculum and teaching material design.

The target lexical phrases this study is devoted to are academic lexical phrases, especially in the genre of research articles. However, despite the growing interest in understanding the nature and importance of these phrases, little research has been conducted to teach them in the ESL/EFL classroom. On the other hand, although various factors have been found to foster the use of formulaic sequences, mainly including repetitive explicit awareness-raising activities in forms and sounds (as presented in the exhaustive review by Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012), very few of these interventions focused on academic lexical phrases in academic discourse. The four major intervention/experimental studies to date include AlHassan and Wood (2015), Cortes (2006), Jones and Haywood (2004) and Peters and Pauwels (2015). The first two studies did not generate significant results in the learning gains, especially in terms of the lack in the use of target phraseology in students' post-instruction essays. The latter two may be considered partial replication studies of the first two. By overcoming the methodological flaws in Jones and Haywood's (2004) study, Peters and Pauwels (2015) have gained positive and significant results suggesting that explicit, vocabulary-focused instruction on academic lexical phrases has the potential to boost students' awareness, cued output and spontaneous use of the phrases, and that it should be included in any academic English courses. AlHassan and Wood's (2015) study has yielded similar results and further indicated that focused instruction (consciousness-raising consisting of presentation and practice stages) of formulaic sequences upgrades L2 learners' writing skills and gives them a "zone of safety" in writing.

Apart from the relatively small sample sizes (29 and 12 respectively), these two studies differ in their target essay questions and phrase selection. Peters and Pauwels' (2015) study focused on contextualized lexical phrases selected from the "Academic Phrasebank" (http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk) and the target genre for assignments was research paper. However, AlHassan and Wood (2015) study was mostly concerned with lexical bundles (identified by frequency driven analysis) for writing short essays describing graphs, but a few contextualized lexical phrases were also selected from Lewis' (1997) and Nattinger and DeCarrico's work (1992). However, interestingly, both studies provided strong evidence for the special importance of "context" and "function" in the learning of the target phrases. For example, Peters and Pauwels' (2015) participants used almost all target phrases at least once, and they noted that: "some formulaic sequences may have been more relevant to the writing assignment than others" (p. 38). AlHassan and Wood (2015) also found that "some formulaic sequences were implemented by almost all participants." These phrases included the ones that are context-salient, such as "*the rise and fall*", "*dramatic increase*", "*remain the same*", and "*in conclusion*". With similar exposure to the phrases and type of instruction on them in both studies, these results seem to suggest that contextualized lexical phrases could be treated differently from relatively decontextualized bundles (bundles with less clear pragmatic/generic functions) and that phrases which have more relevant pragmatic uses may be acquired more quickly than others. Although not inspired by these two studies (this paper was written before they were published), the present study is different from the above ones in that I situate lexical phrases as important "lexico-grammatical" features within the genre-based framework and consider them as important building blocks for developing genre awareness from the bottom-up together with genre schematic structures from top-down, and I want to distinctively separate these two types of phrases, as will be introduced below.

Empirical studies about lexical bundles and the teaching of them are usually investigated under the SLA/lexical learning framework, as an extension of vocabulary studies. But interdisciplinary studies in genre and corpus have shown that another group of lexical phrases, which is called "typical lexical grammatical realization of moves" (L. Flowerdew, 2008), is at least equally important for students to master. Since 1992, a number of genre-based pedagogical projects and approaches (e.g. Flowerdew, 2000; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Jacoby, Leech, & Holten, 1994; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Swales & Feak, 2004) have mentioned the teaching of these contextualized lexical phrases as part of the "language focus" for studying a particular genre. These phrases were not identified empirically until Flowerdew and Forest (2009) studied these phrases by corpus-based methods. For example, an important "move"[1] at the beginning of an introduction section of a research article is "establishing a research territory" (Swales, 1990). In such a move, the signaling phrase "*there has been a growing interest in …*" usually appears.

To distinguish them from the "lexical bundles" mentioned earlier, these phrases are redefined as "move-specific lexical phrases" (henceforth MLP) in this study. The author argues to keep "MLP" and "lexical bundles" as separate concepts, and rename "lexical bundles" (excluding move-specific ones) as "general lexical phrases (GLP)", for the sake of serving different pedagogical purposes. MLPs have much more variety and flexibility, while GLPs help to raise students' awareness of frequently used multi-word sequences and reduce their psychological processing load in both reading and writing academic texts (e.g. Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). To illustrate this, one can examine the move "indicating a gap" as an example. There may be a dozen different MLPs for expressing this move, including "*little research has been done*", "*Few studies have investigated …*", but each of them may not be a highly frequent phrase by corpus frequency analysis in statistical terms. On the other hand, the highly frequent GLPs like "*in the case of*", or "*it should be noted that*" are usually not specifically associated with a move. MLPs in this study cover a much wider range of phrases. They can be tightly or loosely-bounded phrases (loosely-bounded ones are like frames: "*The correlation between … and … was tested using …*"), and the length ranges from two words (e.g. *"Smith noted*

[1] 'move' in Swalesian tradition means the smallest discourse unit that performs a certain communicative or rhetorical function.

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