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## Learning Transfer through Corpus-Aided Instruction

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine learning transfer in corpus-aided instruction. Fifty second language college students in writing classes participated in this study. Corpus research and qualitative research were employed to navigate the students' learning transfer. Findings show that corpus-aided instruction has some potential to increase multilingual learners' writing skills. This study will be of interest and value to scholars and teachers working in areas such as corpus linguistics, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and second language writing, providing pedagogical implications for language educators and teachers. This study would also help ESL/EFL educators and teachers improve awareness of lexicogrammar along with the knowledge and information of corpus linguistics. It is hoped that language teachers and educators can build corpus literacy (i.e., the ability to use the technology of corpus linguistics for language development) to support their multilingual learners to develop 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. Based on the preliminary findings, suggestions and implications are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

corpus-aided instruction, learning transfer, EFL, academic writing, second language learning

### 1. Introduction

Writing is essential for learning in higher education. As a basic step for learning second language (L2) academic writing, they should acquire word and phrase combinations of disciplinary writing conventions in academic settings (Cortes, 2004). Due to multilingual learners' needs, Phraseology, the study of fixed expressions and multi-word lexical units, has been paid attention to for effective L2 instruction. The exploration of phraseology is grounded on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 2004), which sees language as a social semiotic system. In SFL, lexicogrammar as a system of wording represents linguistic resources for construing meanings through words and structures, encompassing a much broader set of phenomena in phraseology (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Applied linguists and researchers have investigated lexicogrammar with diverse components of a language. One of the features within lexicogrammar is a lexical bundle (Biber et al., 1999). Lexical bundles are the most frequently occurring sequences of multiple words and phrases in a written register indicating

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formulaicity of lexicogrammar in a language (Biber et al., 1999). Producing lexical bundles in written registers is challenging for international L2 students with different levels of writing proficiency and expertise (Cortes, 2004). Becoming adapted to the rhetorical styles and writing expectations of different disciplines is important in gaining membership in the academic community. Therefore, teaching lexical bundles would help multilingual learners improve their academic writing proficiency and boost their confidence in L2 writing.

Corpus linguistics is an essential field in examining a variety of linguistic features in lexicogrammar. Corpus linguistics, which arose in the 1990s, compiles lists of various common word combinations (e.g., lexical bundles and collocations). Johns' (1994) early work used "data-driven learning" (p. 296) to make language learning innovative in technological and methodological respects with the utilization of machine-readable text in corpus. In light of beliefs and findings of second language acquisition and learning, overall, this study has the potential for redefining second language learning as the development of flexible meaning-making language capacities across contexts and broadening the scope of L2 writing. The following research questions then guide this study:

- 1) Did learning transfer occur from the corpus-aided instruction to L2 learners' academic writing?
- 2) What were challenges of multilingual learners' learning transfer?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Corpus linguistics**

Corpus linguistics provides a variety of potential research investigations with regard to linguistic features, such as vocabulary, grammatical structures. And semantic domains. Through the corpus-based investigations, language re-searchers (Biber et al., 1999; Cortes, 2013) rigorously investigated the co-occurrence of seemingly similar structures and patterns, serving different functions in different contexts. Corpus data is recognized as valuable in gaining knowledge of language patterns and perspectives on the language system (Sinclair, 2004). A great deal of corpus research has made an impact on the attention to lexical association patterns, including systematic co-occurrence with other words. Corpus research with a frequency-based approach suggests new visions of existing language regularities and reveals previously unobserved language phenomena (Biber et al., 1999). Furthermore, corpus research represents a "natural" approach as regular patterns are detected in the data that are meaningful to multilingual learners based on their adaptive behaviours.

### **2.2. Learning transfer**

Learning transfer has been spotlighted by L2 writing scholars and specialists (James, 2010; Johns, 1994; Leki & Carson, 1997) due to its significance in the

field of L2 writing over the past decades. Leki and Carson (1997) claim that the aims of learning ESL writing courses are “transcendent” (p. 39). This means that students should be able to apply learned knowledge in the ESL writing instruction to a new situation. Other L2 writing scholars (James 2010; Johns, 1994) also maintain that developing transfer of learning is critical in ESL/EFL reading and writing classes. Several studies (DePalma & Ringer, 2014; Nelms & Dively, 2007) have paid attention to pedagogical values of learning transfer. Nelms and Dively’s (2007) study explores variables that may affect transfer of knowledge between general composition and discipline-specific writing intensive courses. The study suggests a crucial aspect that successful transfer of composition knowledge should involve changes in writing instruction. Perkins and Salomon (1992) explain that learning transfer takes place when learning in one context improves or weakens relevant outcome in a different context, providing specific types of transfer: near transfer (to closely associated contexts and performances) and far transfer (to fairly different contexts and performances). Near learning transfer occurs between similar contexts, such as instruction to the outcome in the same instructional context, while far learning transfer may occur between contexts that seem remote to one another. Learning transfer is a transitional process between learning activity systems; therefore, it is necessary to identify if instructions are actually transferred to the target students’ lexicogrammatical writing gains after the corpus-aided instructions take place.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The target population was international L2 students studying at the U.S. Midwestern university. The students assigned to learn academic writing in ESL composition classes were sampled for this study. The target international L2 students were selected according to the availability and the research criteria as purposive sampling. Fifty L2 college students taking ESL composition classes participated in this study, and their participation was voluntary. Thus, the students who did not agree on the consent were not included in the study. There were 22 male students (44%) and 28 female students (56%). 44 students (88 %) were from China, while six (12%) of them were from Malaysia. The range of the age was 18 to 24 years old ( $M=19.38$ ,  $SD=1.40$ ). The average of the self-reported GPA was 3.3 with the range from 2.7 to 3.9 on the 4.0 scale. Fifteen students among them participated in in-depth interviews, writing conferences, and member-checking.

#### **3.2. Research design**

This study is part of a large project, and a qualitative portion of the study is reported. Qualitative research and corpus research were applied. Qualitative data are helpful in exploring learning transfer from corpus-aided instruction to the

learners' acquisition of lexical bundles in their actual writing. Hence, this study achieves collaborative inquiry and contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of second language acquisition (SLA), L2 writing, and corpus linguistics.

### **3.3. Data collection and analysis**

Data from semi-structured interviews, writing conferences, and the students' written assignments were incorporated for in-depth understandings of the use of lexical bundles and learning transfer in the corpus-aided L2 writing instruction. Semi-structured interviews were employed in a summative way after the corpus-aided instructions. Interviews were conducted once or twice with the individual students depending on their availability. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured writing conference protocol (selectively adapted from Liu and Jiang, 2009) was used in a formative way. "Think-back" questions were asked to the participants to reflect on their learning experiences in the writing conference. Think-back questions are useful in obtaining specific information about past experiences because the participants can concentrate on what they have done as opposed to what can be done in the future. In this study, writing conferences strengthened the identification of learning transfer and the participants' use of lexical bundles in corpus-aided instruction.

Corpus concordance analysis was the major tool for the investigation of learning transfer in students' written products grounded on move analysis (Cortes, 2013; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Swales, 1990). Then, all the qualitative data were analysed to identify recurring patterns or themes through the constant comparative analysis in Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded Theory comprises a set of rigorous research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories and a theoretical explanation of the actions that continually resolve the main concern of the participants. The current study covered contextual conditions, highly pertinent to the natural phenomenon of the research site for the qualitative research part. Semi-structured interviews, writing conferences, and member checking were performed after the instructions to identify potential variables of learning transfer, such as the participants' improved language features and skills from the corpus-aided instruction.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. EFL students' learning transfer**

Qualitative research examined learning transfer and development of the participants' academic writing from the word-level to the textual-level in a language. The genre of their papers was a research-based paper. The main focus was to see learning transfer from corpus-aided instruction to academic writing regarding the connection between the lexical bundles and functions in writing. Selective examples of lexical bundles with rhetorical patterns are presented as below:

### *Making topic generalizations*

Public colleges are more likely to suffer from budget slash and induce that more and more students own less resources for studying, such as professors. (Participant#3)

Because the differences between the culture and the laws in two countries, people in America are more likely to announce bankruptcy than people in China. (Participant#4)

### *Making generalizations or interpretations of the results*

When it comes to adolescent homosexual people, coming out or not to parents could be a tough decision. (Participant#2)

### *Announcing present research descriptively and/or purposefully*

In this paper, I will write in details about three main problems with American education. (Participant#7)

Corpus Multimodal learning transfer is another area in which far transfer might be expected to occur. In the interdisciplinary era, research posters should be taken into account as a type of academic writing. In this study, therefore, research posters were examined for the evidence of multimodal learning transfer. Prezi is web-based presentation software similar to Microsoft PowerPoint slides. Hence, Prezi can be regarded as one of the multimodal texts. Several students' re-search posters and the Prezi presentation materials were collected. Research posters are valued as a way to present not only completed research results but also ongoing research and preliminary findings to the audience at a professional conference (D'Angelo, 2012). Research posters may broaden the multimodal nature in terms of the academic writing genre (D'Angelo, 2012).

In the process of the interviews, several students mentioned that they used the lexical bundles from the instruction and shared their research posters and the Prezi presentation. Two research posters from business and English literature classes were gathered from the students in Figure 1. The Prezi presentation was collected from the one majoring in English literature as in Figure 2. Three lexical bundles were observed: "be one of the", "is one of the", and "on the basis of". The two items, "be one of the" and "is one of the", were referential bundles indicating claiming relevance of field.

## **4.2. Challenges of the students' learning transfer**

The main purpose of implementing qualitative research is to enhance interpretability and meaningfulness of the findings. A grounded theory methodology offered a systematic approach, focusing on the insight of learning challenges from the participants. The challenges of learning transfer emerged the degree of understanding. Participants acknowledged a need to use lexical bundles in their

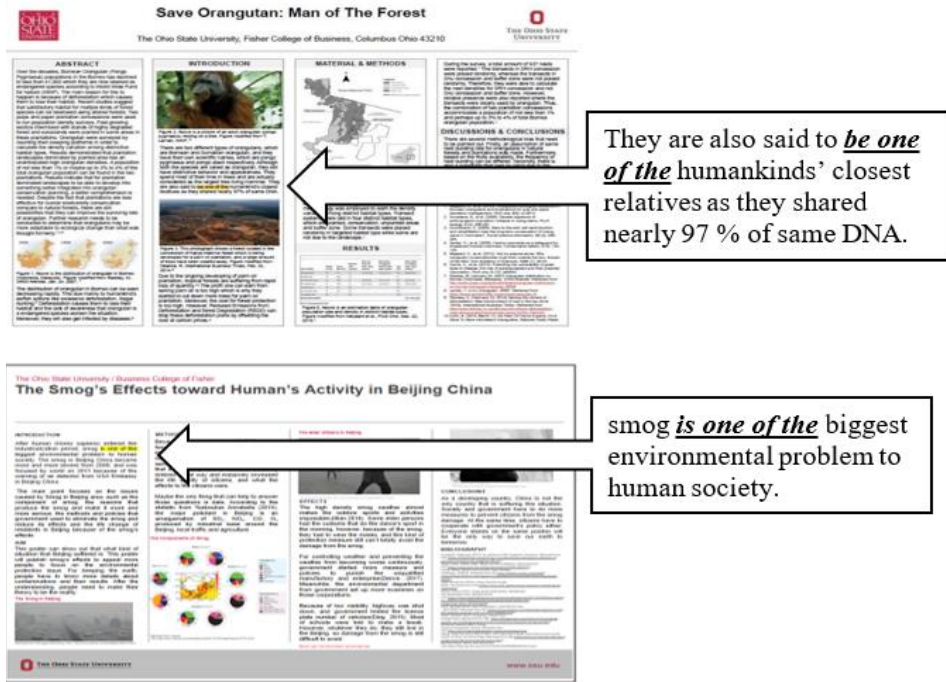


Figure 1: Lexical bundle used in the student' research posters

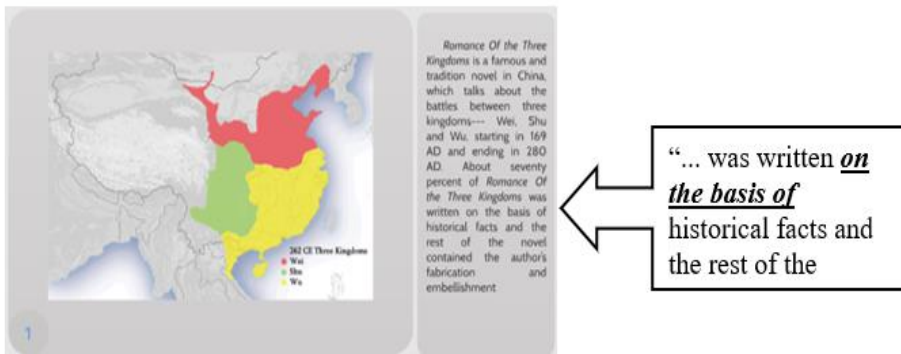


Figure 2: Lexical bundle used in the student' Prezi presentation

actual writing, such as producing a logical and coherent academic paper with appropriate lexical bundles aligned with the genre being written. However, some students were confused about the meaning of lexical bundles, which led them to avoid using them due to a lack of the applicability of lexical bundles:

I don't usually use lexical bundles because I don't know how to explain my idea with them (lexical bundles). So, I usually use simpler words instead of the chunk of words. (Participant9, writing conference)

Other participants also expressed the personal needs of using lexical bundles in their writing. They desired to use a variety of lexical bundles, produce a congruent and logical paper, and articulate ideas fluently with lexical bundles. In particular, findings revealed more challenges of learning transfer: 1) overuse of known lexical bundles, 2) misuse or mistakes of lexical bundles. The participants had concerns about the correct use of lexical bundles regarding the meaning and function. For example, one student said:

Public I used 'what's more' a lot in my paper because I can't remember the multiword phrases. They don't automatically come to my mind... I am not really sure how to use another multiword phrase [that] can be added in my paper. (Participant#3, interview)

Regarding the overuse of known and familiar lexical bundles, Granger (1998) reported that "students 'cling on' to certain fixed phrases and expressions which they feel confident in using" (p. 156). Cortes (2004) also found the pattern of the repetitiveness of fixed expressions in nonnative speakers' written essays. The challenges that the participants encountered resembles the findings of the previous research.

Secondly, the misuse (or mistakes) of lexical bundles was the issue of the participants. Some mistakes of lexical bundles (e.g., in the other hand, one of the company) were discovered in the writing conferences. This tendency may indicate that the instruction did not fully make the students internalize lexical bundles. This misuse pattern was found to be similar to the results from Huang (2015) and Pan et al.'s (2016) studies. Huang (2015) explained all instances of lexical bundle misuse with "ungrammaticality" and "inappropriacy" (p. 20). Pan et al.'s (2016) study compared L1 and L2 writers' lexical bundle use and found that L2 writers often misused discourse-organizing bundles neither grammatically nor functionally. Pan et al.'s (2016) study provided the potential pedagogical implication that second language writing teachers should focus on structural patterns of academic writing. Therefore, participants had some challenges of using lexical bundles in their papers with a vague understanding of functional lexical bundle use and showed the tendency of avoiding, overusing, and misusing lexical bundles.



## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Benefits of using lexical bundles in L2 writing instruction

The Many researchers (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010; Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Hyland, 2012; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010) advocate direct instruction on lexical bundles in writing courses for L2 students. Cortes (2004) insists that “as lexical bundles are very frequent in published academic prose, it is necessary to encourage students to use these expressions” (p. 420). Hence, novice L2 writers must learn the discourse conventions (i.e., lexical bundles) of academic writing with the adequate use of lexical bundles (Biber et al., 2013; Cortes, 2004; Pan et al., 2016).

Lexical bundles are beneficial in L2 writing instruction with the principles of frequency, range, teachability/ learnability, and the usefulness in academic writing (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010; Nation, 2001). Coxhead and Byrd (2007) note several beneficial effects of using lexical bundles in academic writing: 1) providing ready-made sets of words for crafting academic prose, 2) facilitating fluent language use, 3) recognizing L2 writers as a “member” of a discourse community, and 4) representing register-specific ways of expressing particular meanings. The findings in this study showed that the corpus-aided instruction is effective in increasing multilingual learners’ writing skills.

Therefore, explicit corpus-aided instruction would be effective in L2 college students’ writing proficiency. The findings can be aligned with prior literature about the effectiveness of intentional language learning (Schmitt, 2008). Schmitt (2008) affirms that intentional vocabulary learning leads to “a better chance of retention and of reaching productive levels of mastery” (p. 341). Explicit deliberate learning (i.e., intentional learning) is best for learning salient elements of word knowledge along with the rate and efficiency of learning, while incidental learning comes from a sufficiency of time and exposure (Nation, 2001). Therefore, it would be critical to consider how to maximize the learning conditions of different corpus-aided instructional practice.

Using lexical bundles in writing instruction is helpful in developing language learning autonomy. Johns (1994) supports learner autonomy by data-driven learning, and corpus linguists (Gavioli, 2009) also stress learner autonomy through corpus linguistics. Applying lexical bundles to different assignments is closely related to language learning autonomy in that multilingual learners independently explore the use of lexical bundles without the instructor’s guidance and understand them in cognition. Corpus-aided instruction allows self-access of the relevant materials with learner autonomy and helps L2 students become active researchers for the application of the lesson to the actual use in their academic writing.

### 5.2. Actualization of learning transfer in L2 students’ academic writing

Learning transfer is the major issue throughout this study. “Transfer remains a vital construct in L2 writing pedagogy” (Hirvela et al., 2016, p. 52). Hirvela et al. (2016) strongly contend that teaching writing should be closely connected to



students' transfer and application to their own written products. Task similarity/difference is closely connected to learning transfer for ESL writing students (Leki & Carson, 1997). This study examined learning transfer from word-level lexical bundles to textual-level moves/steps in L2 students' academic writing (Nelms & Dively, 2007; Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Participants in this study showed various connections of lexical bundles to rhetorical moves/steps in both text and different semiotic systems. Cortes (2004) suggests having students "notice" the lexical bundles frequently used in academic writing. To maximize students' learning transfer, it is necessary to utilize corpus-based pedagogy in L2 writing instruction.

## 6. Conclusion

This study is of significance due to the pedagogical value, the usefulness of the most frequent words in language teaching (Nation, 2001), regarding the research of L2 composition and corpus linguistics in SLA and academic writing. A phraseological approach associated with corpus linguistics enables us to redefine and broaden aspects of linguistic theories. Furthermore, the utility of corpora can work as a basis for material designs and curriculum development and create a great impact on revealing the representativeness of the English language used by international college students (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010; Simpson-Vlach and Ellis, 2010). Lexical bundles in corpus linguistics have the potential to explore phraseological differences between registers and disciplines (Römer, 2009). Well-designed writing instruction can result in transfer in ESL contexts. Accordingly, corpus-aided instruction maximizes learning transfer with a focus on lexicogrammar.

This study also stimulates active awareness and perceptions of the prevalent usage of lexical phrases in practice. The idea of the overall research design in this study was generated from the implications of prior research (Hyland, 2012; Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010) that the future research should link the constituent of applied linguistics (i.e., the analysis of lexical bundles) and the pedagogical use (i.e., the application of the use of lexical bundles) in the boundaries of composition studies and applied linguistics (Silva & Leki, 2004). Novice L2 writers must learn the discourse conventions (i.e., lexical bundles) of academic writing with the adequate use of lexical bundles (Biber et al., 2013; Cortes, 2004). Therefore, this study contributes to the development and advancement of L2 writing instruction and curriculum in the long term by providing effective language learning methods with the use of lexical bundles in learner corpora.

Learner-generated corpora can be helpful in guiding corpus-based writing pedagogy. Learner corpora involve "pedagogic mediation to contextualize the data for the students' own writing environment" (Flowerdew, 2009, p. 393) and play an important role in selecting and structuring teaching contents (Granger, 2002).

Swales (2019) also indicates that corpus-based research should have pedagogical value. Therefore, learner corpora enable L2 writing teachers to identify potential learner needs based on their use of a target language and evaluate the level of lexical and grammatical complexity of learner language.

To systematize corpus-aided pedagogy for L2 students and corpus literacy for L2 teachers, several suggestions are encouraged for the future research. Authentic materials from the students' writing are recommended. Students' written products include valuable information about linguistic features and structural rhetoric that can be used in the future writing class. Since this study revealed that corpus instruction would be effective to L2 learners, more research of corpus-aided instruction should be implemented to develop corpus-aided pedagogy. Lastly, many researchers (e.g., McCarthy, 2008; O'Keeffe & Farr, 2003) have integrated corpus linguistic techniques into teacher education, setting up guidelines for teacher education in corpus literacy. Although this study touched upon corpus literacy to some extent, future research should further extend standards and guidelines of corpus use for curriculum and instruction in teacher education.

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