



AN ANALYSIS OF ESL LEXICAL BUNDLES IN  
LEARNERS' ACADEMIC WRITING

BY

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degree of Master of Human Sciences in Teaching of English  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is an analysis of the production of lexical bundles among L2 learners. The data for the analysis were collected from 40 English as a Second Language (ESL) students' term papers from Universiti Teknologi Mara Terengganu. The study aims to find out the extent lexical bundles were used by L2 learners in their essays. The frequency of lexical bundles found in the essays was calculated, the types of the bundles were sorted according to their categories and the factors contributing to the use and the avoidance of lexical bundles were identified. The study shows that the L2 writers attempted to produce lexical bundles in their term papers but they were very limited. This may be attributed to cross linguistic influence. In terms of the functional type of bundles produced, the writers produced more referential bundles compared to stance bundles and discourse organizers. There was also evidence that there were students who avoided the use of lexical bundles in their essays. The factors that contributed to this avoidance were lack of exposure, fear of making mistakes and uncertainty. An important pedagogical implication of the study is that lexical bundles should be exposed or taught to students in formal classroom teaching in order to help students produce more understandable and quality writing.

## خلاصة البحث

أجريت هذه الدراسة لتحليل التعبيرات الاصطلاحية للغة الأولى التي ينتجها متعلمو اللغة الثانية. وتم جمع البيانات من 40 بحثاً أعدّه طلاب مادة الإنجليزية بصفتها اللغة الثانية من جامعة مارا للتكنولوجيا بتيرينجانو. وتهدف الدراسة إلى معرفة مدى استخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية لدى متعلمي اللغة الثانية في مقالاتهم. وقد تم حساب تكرار التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في المقالات، ومن ثم تم تصنيفها حسب أنواعها، كما تم تحديد العوامل التي تسهم في استخدامها، والعوامل التي تجنب من استخدامها. وأثبتت الدراسة أن متعلمي اللغة الثانية حاولوا إنتاج التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في أوراق البحوث، إلا أنها كانت محدودة جداً. ويمكن القول بأن السبب يعود إلّتاأثر اللغة الأخرى. ومن حيث النوع الوظيفي للتعبيرات الاصطلاحية، أنتج المتعلمون التعبيرات المرجعية أكثر مقارنة بالتعبيرات الموقفية والخطابية. كما أن هناك أدلة على أن بعض الطلاب تجنبوا استخدام حزم المعجمية في مقالاتهم. وكانت العوامل التي ساهمت في هذا التجنب عدم الإلمام بالتعبيرات الاصطلاحية، والخوف من الوقوع في الخطأ، وعدم اليقين. ومن التوصيات المهمة من هذه الدراسة هو أهمية تعريف المتعلمين بالتعبيرات الاصطلاحية أو تدريسهم في الحصة التدريسية الرسمية من أجل مساعدتهم على إنتاج كتابة مفهومة وذات النوعية الأفضل.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Teaching English as a Second Language

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Lexical bundles are important in language production especially for L2 learners in order to gain control of a new language. Language users who are familiar with these bundles can achieve naturalness in L2 and can become native-like users. These bundles which are words which exist frequently in different language contexts help the learners to sound right in using the language. The presence of these bundles in various genres shows their significant role in making up the texts. To illustrate some of the significant roles of the bundles, written documents or texts are certainly among the best materials for further analysis on these multi-word constructions. In relation to this, the study on the lexical bundles in writing context has been conducted as a basis of the need of knowledge of lexical bundles among language users.

The present study is a descriptive research that deals with an analysis of lexical bundles produced by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in their academic writing. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the learners' use of English lexical bundles in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing context. The analysis is beneficial as ESL learners seem to be very much dependent on their first language knowledge in learning a target language. The first language is important in learning a new language as they tend to associate ideas and attitudes with meanings. The language accommodates them with these needs and eventually leads to a language transfer activity.

The presence of the first language influence in the second language learning activity involves modification and expansion of the grammatical rules especially when

it implicates complexity. Modification and expansion take place when the language operates beyond its normal scope, where there are unusual constraints of the language. Modification, for example, occurs when the learners apply the grammatical rules acquired in their L1 in their L2 even though there is no such rule in the L2. Meanwhile, expansion happens when they combine the rules of L1 and L2 and this leads to more complicated situations. This scenario is likely to happen among L2 learners when they find it possible to transfer L1 knowledge into their target language. What makes it worse is that the situation causes the misapplication of L1 grammatical rules in second language learning.

There is a particular example of the context in which the learners seem to have an obvious misapplication of the rules. The example of this misapplication can be found in L2 writing context. A focus of attention is given to EAP in relation to the existence of lexical bundles in writing. As a matter of fact, the writing context provides a concrete evidence of the misapplication of the rules of L1 and creates an area analysis for the researcher. It is indeed challenging to identify formulaic sequences such as lexical bundles in a normal language. Wray (2008) has described this identification as “trying to find black cats in a dark room: you know who they are but you just can’t pick them out from everything else” (p.101). Thus, recognition is much needed as the best approach in identifying formulaic sequences. Moreover, the identification on the basis of frequency also helps to extract material that has the features of the lexical bundles needed.

Therefore, it is notable that the nature and extent of lexical bundles that appear in academic written records should be further explored so that it can provide a springboard for an extensive research on lexical bundles in an EAP setting. The aim to become a native-like user of the language should be achieved as we tend to appreciate

native speaker's language as the means to reach effective communication. The analysis conducted has a great potential to contribute to the comprehensive model of formulaicity for basic proficiency and accuracy. It is a worthwhile analysis as the formulaic language such as lexical bundles in nature takes many forms and is difficult to define and identify.

## **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Learning a second language, in many contexts, requires the learners to distinguish both L1 and L2 as two separate systems. There is also an essential need for the learners to develop awareness that when learning L2, they are prompted to pay constant attention to the language that has been learned. Even though learners come from different backgrounds and learn in a variety of contexts, they may achieve good performance by having a conscious process of study and concentration. This process of learning takes place when learners are concerned about producing the right language with all the relevant rules.

However, in producing the right language, there is a distinction between 'learning' and 'acquisition'. In his Monitor Model, Krashen argues that compared to 'learning', 'acquisition' is more important in L2 because in achieving fluency in L2 performance, it is not by what we have learned, but what we have acquired (Taher, 2011). Since this 'acquired system' makes the L2 users responsible for spontaneous language use and since the 'learned system' requires the users to make minor changes and polish the 'acquired system', the process of learning a language becomes complex. The L2 learners, in the process of making those changes and polishing the system, will unconsciously transfer their L1 knowledge in their L2 learning activity.

According to Khaled (2010), L1 transfer happens when the learners manipulate L1 knowledge and also strategies to facilitate their learning of a target language. In the situation when L2 grammatical rules are similar to L1, the transfer happens in a positive way. However, in most situations, the influence that occurs will cause an obstacle to a new learning process. This obstacle will gradually diminish the aim of learning which is to produce meaningful language. The awareness of the errors caused by negative transfer should be of great concern to ESL teachers so that they can help those designing appropriate activities and strategies which the students can benefit from.

However, handling native and non-native language transfer in ESL might be complicated since it needs both students and teachers to engage actively in any learning activities or strategies. There are students who perceive transfer as something facilitative at all times. They are very much dependent on the L1 to facilitate them in learning a new language. Khaled (2010) emphasizes that adapting transfer strategies in the learning process helps to get the positive influence of the first language knowledge when learning L2. However, this depends on how different both languages are, because the greater the difference is, the more negative transfers are likely to occur. This is due to the fact that learners who lack knowledge or exposure to L2 will use their L1 as part of their strategies or references.

Referring to all the skills of language learning, namely, speaking, listening, reading and writing, studies of transfer which particularly deal with the effects on those skills must not be neglected. Writing, for example, will involve the transfer of forms, particularly lexical items. According to Wolfersberger (2003), to make sure that the process of writing will be sustained and no complete breakdown in language happens, lower L2 proficiency writers depend too much on their L1 during the writing

process. Since the ability to write in L2 is not a naturally acquired skill, learners need to go through a process of learning in becoming natural writers (Myles, 2002). Undoubtedly, the process of learning requires conscious effort and practice among students to meet the requirements of becoming proficient writers in L2.

## **1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of analyzing lexical bundles in ESL learners' academic writing is to allow researchers to explore more about the forms, structures and also functions of lexical bundles which are produced by L2 learners. As lexical knowledge is very essential in learning a new language, the researcher believes that it is imperative to conduct this study. It would provide good insights for researchers, instructors as well as second language learners of the actuality of these multi-word expressions as part of the linguistic features in a language unit.

Thus, this has inspired the researcher to explore the analysis of this formulaic language so that in the future, there will be persistent attention to this formulaic language to acknowledge its necessity and functionality in language learning. The analysis will become a handy reference for language practitioners to discover more about approaches and attitudes to the naturalness of using the language. As achieving naturalness is a desirable goal for language learners, the study addresses their needs to become a native like language user.

## **1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Fluency in L2 linguistic production is not an easy process especially if there is no familiar pattern to be linked to the first language. There are situations for both languages, L1 and L2, which do not share similarities especially in their grammatical

rules and there are some more situations which share similarities in the rules. To be linguistically competent, the L2 learners will have to integrate the knowledge and information of the first language to their new language, and this action can help them in gaining control of the new language. To achieve this competence, both L1 and L2 have to share similarities in grammatical rules, but unfortunately in most situations they do not possess this criterion.

Even though in some occasions there is no similar pattern shared by both languages, there is a belief that the acquisition of the foreign language is greatly influenced by the native language of the learners. This has been referred as cross-linguistic transfer (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2000). Cross-linguistic influence inevitably creates a great impact on L2 learning. Bull (1995) illustrates that this influence in some cases will be a conscious and positive attempt to facilitate the learning process, but in some other circumstances, it will become unfavorable, in which case will result in a negative transfer.

It is noteworthy that the influence of L1 can cause a negative result, or what is known as a negative transfer, on the L2 production. When the learners learn language, they will develop skills. They consciously or unconsciously transfer those skills learned from their first language (L1) to a new language (L2). Khaled (2010) refers to this as an indication that when reading or writing, particularly in a second language, first language knowledge or skills are transferred. The process of transfer, however, will be detracted if it interferes in the learning of the L2. The interference, for instance, happens when the L1 features which are expressed or comprehended differently from L2, are transferred into the L2 (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2000).

Therefore, L2 written production particularly is given much attention by scholars since lexical richness or richness of the vocabulary can be easily measured. This makes it possible for researchers to observe the factor of lexical richness and its change (Laufer & Nation, 1995). As vocabulary is a major component of the language, lexical knowledge becomes an integral part in learning a new language. As a matter of fact, in gaining control of a new language, it needs the sensitivity of the learners to adapt themselves to become as natural as native speakers. This naturalness is not achieved in a short period of time. Due to this reason, learners will have problems in their new language production, especially when they deal with a complex structure of language, for instance, multi-word expressions like lexical bundles. These lexical bundles, as have been mentioned by Hyland (2008), have attracted the attention of researchers who study EAP especially to explore more about the forms, structures and also functions. This is due to the fact that these lexical bundles help to shape meaning and achieve coherence in a text.

The difficulties in achieving L2 ‘naturalness’ due to lack of knowledge and exposure is not a new issue because different learners have different levels of proficiencies. They might perform differently, depending on how much knowledge and exposure the learners receive from L2. As second language learners use different strategies to assist them in L2 language production, for instance, by transferring their native language skills, there is an essential need to analyze the lexical bundles produced by ESL students in EAP writing. The analysis will give a clear picture of the patterns and structures of lexical bundles used by the students in their academic writing.

## **1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To calculate the frequency of lexical bundles produced by ESL learners.
2. To discover the patterns and structures of L2 lexical bundles produced by ESL learners.
3. To determine the factors that influence the production of L2 lexical bundles among ESL learners.
4. To identify the types of lexical bundles which are avoided by ESL learners.

## **1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the frequency of lexical bundles produced by ESL learners?
2. What are the lexical bundles produced by the ESL learners?
3. What are the factors that influence the production of L2 lexical bundles among ESL learners?
4. What are the lexical bundles avoided by ESL learners?

## **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is an attempt to discover the patterns and structures of lexical bundles produced by ESL learners, who experience using this formulaic language in their L2 writing activities. Even though learning a language requires a learner to master all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, it is believed that writing will allow the researcher to have better insights into cross- linguistic influence. It provides simple ways to assess and present quick feedback. In other words, this productive skill

will offer support for the claim that L1 does influence L2 in the production of lexical bundles. It is hoped that this present study will reveal the pattern of L1 influence in the production of L2 lexical bundles, which can serve as a starting point for outlining tasks and courses to produce more natural English learners. This study, therefore, intends to identify and analyze the list of lexical bundles produced by L1 learners in L2 writing.

### **1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study focuses on lexical bundles in learners' written production especially in English academic writing, involving Diploma of Public Administrative students who were taking English for Academic Purposes (BEL 311). The respondents were in their third semester, taking the subject for one semester from December 2013 until April 2014. Since the nature of their core subjects are factual-based subjects, students of the program are expected to read more authentic materials compared to others. Based on this observation, they are likely to be more exposed to L2 materials, both in writing and reading. All the textbooks and reference books, for example, are in English. However, English language is not their first language; therefore, the study is conducted to determine the types, the frequency, the factors that influence production and those bundles which are avoided. To specify the scope, the production of lexical bundles are further identified and analyzed.

## **1.8 ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS**

The thesis consists of five main chapters. Chapter One (Introduction) outlines the background of the study, purpose of the study, statement of the problem, the research questions, the significance of study and the scope of study. Chapter Two (Review of literature) reviews the literature related to the area of study. Chapter Three (Methodology) presents the procedures and data collected through textual analysis to identify lexical bundles. Meanwhile, Chapter Four (Results and Discussion), presents the data and results of the study. Chapter Five (Conclusion), the final chapter, discusses the findings based on the analysis and the discussion presented in the previous chapters.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, the review of literature which is related to the current study and an analysis of L2 lexical bundles in ESL learners' academic writing are presented. A number of researchers have attempted to define these lexical bundles and investigate their roles in language learning, processing and also production. There has been a growing awareness that the production of language is composed of formulaic lexical units. In L2 language learning context, there is indeed a need to acquire second language multi-word sequences in order to demonstrate certain proficiency levels. This lexical richness is one of the major determinants of the vocabulary used by second language learners. There has been interest in quantifying the degree of using a varied and large vocabulary, particularly lexical bundles. A well-written composition, composed of lexical bundles, makes effective use of vocabulary. Therefore, it is useful to investigate how this formulaic language reflects the learners' language production.

#### **2.1 LEXICAL BUNDLES**

Lexical bundles which for the first time appeared in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English comes from the field of Corpus Linguistics (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999). Lexical bundles have been described by Allen (2009) as a formulaic language which could help language learners in becoming natural language users. Marziah and Mansor (2011) add that this formulaic expression consists of subcategories like proverbs, collocations, idioms and also speech formulae. In becoming a natural language user, Weisser (2001) justifies that the concept of

'naturalness' possesses the characteristics of appropriateness, grammaticality and also authenticity. The degree of appropriateness in a given situation, for example, will be considered to determine the naturalness of the language. Apart from that, an awareness of the correct forms of using a language or grammatical and ungrammatical utterances should be well distinguished. The authenticity can be achieved by looking at spontaneous speech and also materials used for teaching, whether they are authentic or not.

Meanwhile, Hyland (2008) describes these lexical bundles as extended collocations, which can exist more frequently than expected. They are commonly linked together in natural discourse as sequences of word forms. They help in forming contextual meanings and developing coherence of the text. In written production particularly, these lexical bundles are seen as an integral part of the structure. Hyland (2008) adds that writers who always participate in a particular discourse will find that these bundles are familiar to them. This is due to the factor that the absence of lexical bundles might cause lack of fluency or accuracy in learners' writing.

Lexical bundles are also defined as "the most frequent recurring fixed lexical sequences in a register" (Biber & Conrad, 1999, p.183). These bundles are likely to appear more often in a language discourse. In their research, they have found that, for three-word and four-word lexical bundles, there are approximately about 4,000 different bundles in conversations and 3,000 different bundles in academic prose. The examples of three-word lexical bundles are "in order to", "one of the" and "part of the". Meanwhile of four-word lexical bundles, the examples are "have a look at", "as a result of" and "in the form of".

Since lexical bundles are regarded as multi-word units of language and these multi-word units are known as formulaic language sequences, Wray and Perkins (2000) have defined these formulaic language sequences as:

A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (p.1)

Cortes (2004) illustrates that there are different labels or names which are used to refer to the same word combinations. The terms are listed in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Terms used in the literature to describe word combinations

<i>building blocks</i>	<i>frozen phrases</i>	<i>prefabricated patterns</i>
<i>chunks</i>	<i>idiomatic expressions</i>	<i>ready-made expressions</i>
<i>clichés</i>	<i>idioms</i>	<i>ready-made formulas</i>
<i>collocations</i>	<i>lexical bundles</i>	<i>ready-made utterances</i>
<i>conventionalized forms</i>	<i>lexical phrases</i>	<i>routine formulae</i>
<i>fixed expressions</i>	<i>lexical units</i>	<i>sentence builders</i>
<i>formulaic language</i>	<i>multiword units</i>	
<i>formulas/formulae</i>	<i>prefabricated routines</i>	

Source: Cortes (2004)

## 2.2 RESEARCH ON LEXICAL BUNDLES

Previous research shows that the knowledge and the use of lexical bundles in L2 among language learners are equally important to ensure that the naturalness of language is achieved. However, this ‘naturalness’ seems to be difficult to accomplish due to the influence of the learners’ first language. A number of studies which are related to these word combinations have been conducted by linguists and researchers (eg. Biber, 2006; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004 ).