

Special Extended Teaching Note

New Ways of Using Corpora for Teaching Vocabulary and Writing in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The use of appropriate of words in writing, particularly frequently occurring four words combinations in academic register, is very important because it is an effective building block of academic text used by expert writers for effective communication. Yet teaching of four-word lexical bundles is rarely discussed in ESL writing textbooks. Recent research has shown that corpora can be a useful tool for helping L2 writers improve their use of four-word lexical bundles. This article presents an attempt to teach four-word lexical bundles to advanced intensive ESOL students at a community college in the USA. The article shows the application of iWeb for the selection and instruction of four-word lexical bundles to teach different ways of concluding an essay.

Key Words: *corpora, lexical bundles, iWeb, Padlet, L2 academic writing*

Introduction

Teaching academic writing to advanced non-native speakers in an Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at a Community College in the US, I observed that the majority of my students had little realization that expert writers do not always create/write novel sentences. Rather, they have a mastery over the use of fixed phrases or multi-word, prefabricated expressions. They make use of them for a variety of purposes: to express stance, e.g., “*are more likely to*”; to show attitude, e.g., “*it is going to be*”; to organize discourse, e.g., “*if you look at*”, and to express reference, e.g., “*there is a lot of*” However, my IELP students would attribute native-like proficiency to native speakers knowing more words.

Formulaic language is a broad term which is defined as “words and word strings which appear to be processed without recourse to their lowest level of composition” (Wray, 2002, p. 4). In the literature, there are more than forty terms describing aspects of formulaic language (Wray, 2002). For this discussion, we consider one such type of formulaic language, which is called lexical bundles — a “recurring sequence of three or four words” (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002, p. 443). It is important to mention that Biber et al. (2002) particularly consider the four-word clusters to be lexical bundles. They argue that two-word sequences are too short and numerous, and they are less significant as textual building blocks than four-word clusters. They are widespread, and they contribute to fluent linguistic production. In the words of Hayland (2012), they are an “important defining feature of academic discourse and a significant component of fluent linguistic production” (p. 166). They are important not only because of their pervasiveness in oral and written discourse but because they are necessary for appropriate, fluent language production and comprehension (Meunier, 2012; Sinclair, 1991).

Course materials for teaching writing skills to non-native writers do not include four-word clusters, despite the research exploring the use of lexical bundles in university teaching and textbooks (Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004).

In order to help my students write four-word clusters, I used iWeb. I discovered that by using the iWeb corpus (<https://corpus.byu.edu/iweb>), released in May 2018, it was possible to help students speak and write like expert users of the English language. iWeb is especially useful for learners as it gives particular attention to the top 60,000 words in the corpus. It provides a wide range of information on each word: frequency information, definitions, synonyms, WordNet entries, related topics, clusters, and key words in context/ concordances lines.

The following are the steps to introduce and teach four-word clusters that I used in my IELP writing classes using iWeb.

What Were My Goals of Teaching?

My goal was to enhance the academic writing skills of my students. Specifically, I wanted my students to write well-learned expressions when finishing their essays. I also wanted them to use and apply new information available to them through the advancement of corpus research, especially iWeb, which is expressly designed for learners and teachers of English.

Why Did I Focus on Lexical Bundles?

- A. Their pervasiveness, especially in the written and oral discourse of expert language users, was one of my most important rationales for teaching lexical bundles to students explicitly.
- B. My students struggled with the appropriate combination of words, making their academic writing come across as awkward at times.
- C. Research shows that, “gaining full command of a new language requires the learner to become sensitive to the native speakers’ preferences for certain sequences of words over others that might appear just as possible” (Wray, 2000, p. 463). For instance, vocabulary researchers Pauwels and Peters (2015) did classroom-based research with students with Dutch L1 that shows students make significant gains in their writing skills when taught formulaic expressions over the course of a semester.

How Did I Help My Students Finish Their Essays?

Writing an appropriate conclusion is extremely important in all types of essays. It is the last chance to present one’s viewpoint to the reader and to leave one’s impression as a writer. The concluding paragraphs of my students showed a number of issues, but the one common issue that stood out was their inability to write longer strings signaling the conclusion. The phrases most commonly used by them were the two-word clusters, “in conclusion” and “to conclude,” which, although appropriate academic phrases to finish an essay, did not contribute much to their writing proficiency as compared to writing four-word clusters. In other words, my students did not know the other possible variations in the use of the word “conclusion” for finishing their essays. Therefore, I wanted to expose them to a wider range of phrases available to them and help my students to have lexical diversity in signaling the conclusion of their essays.

Step I: Introduce BYU Corpora

In a computer lab with student access to computers and Internet connection, I asked my students to go to <https://www.english-corpora.org/> and click the link to iWeb, titled “The Intelligent Web-based Corpus.”



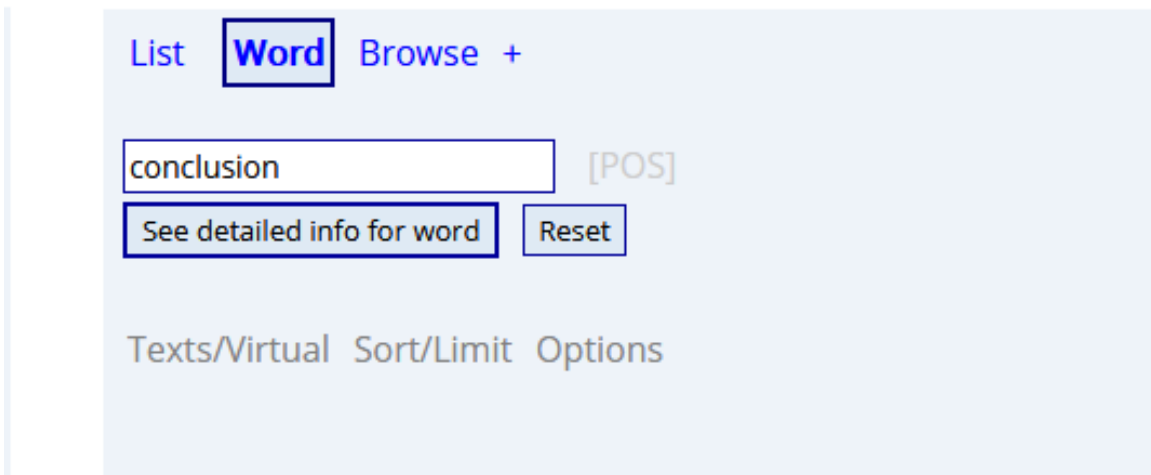
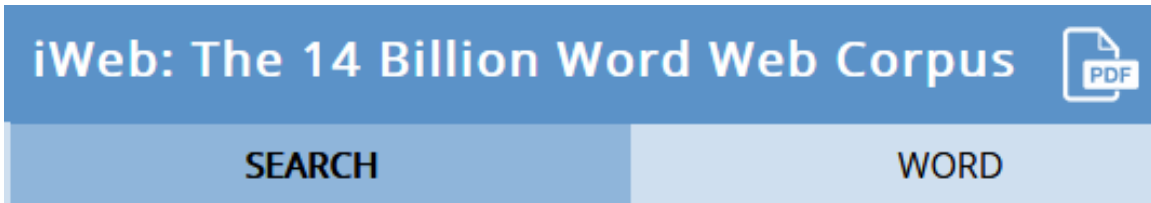
Created by Mark Davies, BYU (Google Scholar). [Overview](#), search types, looking at variation, corpus-based resources.

The most widely used online corpora -- more than 130,000 distinct researchers, teachers, and students each month.

English	# words	language/dialect	time period	compare
iWeb: The Intelligent Web-based Corpus NEW	14 billion	US/CA/UK/IE/AU/NZ	2017	Info (中文)

Step II: Type the Word in the Search Box

Students typed the word “conclusion” in the search box and clicked the button which says “See the detailed info for word,” which took them to the page shown in Step III below.



Step III: Survey the Information but Focus on Lexical Bundles

The page below provides an enormous amount of information on the target word (e.g. dictionary, collocates, key word in context, topic).

iWeb: The 14 Billion Word Web Corpus

SEARCH WORD CONTEXT HELP

conclusion (NOUN) #2081

1. a position or opinion or judgment reached after consideration
 2. an intuitive assumption 3. the act of ending something

PlayPhrase YouGlish Yarn
 Translate: choose language

SYNONYMS (more)
 deduction conclusion assumption deduction inference, supposition end conclusion finish ending closing termination finale close wrap-up

TOPICS (more)
 evidence, argument, finding, conclude, scientific, study, hypothesis, theory, assumption, interpretation, doctrine, analysis, argue, judgment, court, experiment, reasoning, assert, moral, existence

COLLOCATES (more)
 NOUN finding, evidence, recommendation, argument, summary, premise, introduction, observation
 VERB come, draw, reach, lead, jump, arrive, summarize, derive
 ADJ logical, foregone, obvious, false, firm, valid, definitive, inevitable
 ADV overall, logically, following, statistically, reluctantly, inexorably, therefrom, diametrically

CLUSTERS (more)

conclusion •	conclusions about • conclusion to • conclusions from • conclusion in • conclusion about • conclusion on • conclusions on • conclusion from
• conclusion	in conclusion • to conclusions • draw conclusions • logical conclusion • foregone conclusion • drawing conclusions • successful conclusion • different conclusions
conclusion ••	conclusion that it • conclusion that i • conclusions based on • conclusion that there • conclusions and recommendations • conclusion that they • conclusion that we • conclusion that he
•• conclusion	to the conclusion • at the conclusion • to a conclusion • after the conclusion • to this conclusion • jump to conclusions • to that conclusion • in the conclusion

I informed my students that the Dictionary section has active links which give additional information from online dictionaries and other sources. In addition, they can listen to the pronunciation of the word by clicking the active links to Youglish, Playphrase, Yarn, Google Translate, and Google Images. However, I asked my students to scroll further down on this page and focus on four-word clusters including the word as shown below.

iWeb: The 14 Billion Word Web Corpus

SEARCH WORD CONTEXT HELP

conclusion •••	conclusions can be drawn • conclusion of the hearing • conclusion of the first • conclusion of the event • conclusion of the study • conclusion to be drawn • conclusion of the course • conclusion of this course
••• conclusion	come to the conclusion • came to the conclusion • to the same conclusion • come to a conclusion • draw your own conclusions • to its logical conclusion • come to this conclusion • coming to the conclusion

Step IV: Examine the Usage

After focusing on the four-word sequences listed under Clusters, students read the actual usage of these sequences under the section Concordance Lines shown below. The activity allowed students to figure out the regularities and patterning in English when authors use the word, “conclusion,” as shown below in the concordance lines.

CONCORDANCE LINES (more)

1	nara.gov	they depend on the development of standards in semantics . #	Conclusions	and	Recommendations	# It would be a sound fiscal investment
2	www.oilvoice.com	deemed a key contributory factor . # In shape , these	conclusions	are	similar	to those of IPA in reviewing 250 global FPSO projects
3	imoa.info	reproduction and growth in animals . The main quantitative	conclusions	are	summarised	here . The reader should consult the original for
4	jampaper.com	our surroundings . It also helps us to think and draw	conclusions	at	a	water rate . Surprisingly , puzzles do assist us in
5	stephensons.co.uk	the Police Station for interview , all the way through to	conclusion	at	trial	Death by careless or inconsiderate driving # The
6	powerscore.com	of most strongly support and the fact that this has no	conclusion	correct	?	probably answered my own question , but as I
7	worldlil.org	preferably to the refugees former place of residence . The other	conclusion	emphasised	the	inseparability of causes and solutions , and the
8	anyflip.com	informal talk . # c. expanding notes G 4 . Drawing	conclusions	from	an	informal talk . real world : d. drawing conclusion
9	mannerofspeaking.org	with which she speaks from 12:00 to 12:30 and in her	conclusion	from	15:55	to 17:35 . # All in all, a great
10	reactivetrainingsystems.com	Supplement Reference Guide that you can get on Examine.com . The	conclusions	here	are	based on actual science and not supplement industry
11	scratchmommy.com	Id like to share my findings with you and explain the	conclusion	I	have	reached concerning
12	www.watoday.com.au	explanation has been given to exclude the inevitable	conclusion	in	all	the circumstances that the action was done as a hostile
13	ndei.org). However , this was not statistically significant . #	CONCLUSIONS	in	EWL	terms , bariatric surgery is more effective in
14	typologycentral.com	weigh the facts . Due to this arriving at a logical	conclusion	is	almost	always (even if the conclusion is correct) is
15	addbalance.com	why (processes underlying change)?? # This sobering	conclusion	led	to	the formation of the largest clinical trial in the history
16	www.pbs.org	and grandchildren out of the good jobs . That is the	conclusion	of	a	new report from the Georgetown University Center on
17	hibid.com	have in their possession their earnest money deposit . At the	conclusion	of	bidding	on the property , the successful bidder will be
18	deniseminger.com	fat and 2 higher saturated fat . If one accepts the	conclusions	of	Gaggiula	and Mustad , Clarke et al. , Howell et al
19	easynotecards.com	A # 81 # Which of the following happens at the	conclusion	of	meiosis	? # A) Homologous chromosomes of a pair
20	womenpriests.org	statements of Paul VI over the past three years , the	conclusion	of	the	Congregation should have come as a surprise to no one

Step V: Apply the Knowledge

I set a Padlet, a type of digital board, (<https://padlet.com/>) for students to share their use of formulaic sequences in their own sentences. The use of Padlet encouraged collaboration among students. As their postings were visible to their classmates, they became more responsible in their work and sensitive to language usage while posting on Padlet.

The screenshot shows a Padlet board with the title "Concluding Essays and Arguments" and the instruction "Write your own sentences in English using the following clusters". There are four columns representing different students:

- Student A:**
 1. I don't know what conclusions can be drawn about underage crimes.
 2. At the conclusion of the game, my teammates will encourage each other.
 3. The conclusion to be drawn is that underage crimes should be concerned.
 4. Mak helps us to come to a conclusion about our behavior after final exam.
- Student B:**
 1. A lot conclusions can been drawn when you don't think critical.
 2. At the conclusion of the event everyone was shocked with the new announcements.
 3. The conclusions to be drawn is clear and understandable to everyone.
- Student C:**

Conclusion can be drawn:
Before any conclusion can be drawn about what you read, you have to know if it is facts or opinions.

Conclusion of the event/studies /hearing:
Before Independence day, at the conclusion of the event, the president gave his decisions about the political programs.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the
- Student D:**
 1. Various conclusions can be drawn about this book that I just finish reading.
 2. Draw your own conclusion! - said Mak, after we finished watching the critical thinking video.
 3. Medical professionals are implementing new strategies for the diaqnosis, treatment,

Conclusion

Teaching lexical bundles helps students attain accuracy and proficiency in their writing expressions. The use of iWeb, designed specifically for learners and teachers, provides detailed information on the most frequently used lexical bundles, and the use of Padlet offers students the opportunity to learn from each other. In short, having students work together on their writing skills through the use of lexical bundles is not only an effective way of helping students improve their ability to grasp and produce texts in the academic register but also an interesting and enjoyable use of class time. Once my students arrived at the understanding that language is largely formulaic and then applied that understanding to find the clusters of a given word, they began to use clusters not only for concluding their essays but in all aspects of their essay writing.

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