

**The Impact of English Proficiency
Level on Using Lexical Bundles among EFL Learners**

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Abstract

The core of this study focuses on a special brand of word combination known as “lexical bundles”. It is not easy to find out a three or four-word lexical bundles in a small informal conversation. However, based on previously created taxonomies, this qualitative study seeks to analyze these lexical bundles in terms of their structures and functions. These taxonomies are used for classifying lexical bundles which their classifications are combined into a couple wider groups namely phrasal lexical bundles and clausal lexical bundles. The data of this study is collected from an informal conversation among three MA students in Anbar University. They were asked to discuss a topic “If You Have Got a Chance to Travel to a Country”, but they were not told that our focus would be on lexical bundles so as to get as more natural and real discussion as possible. The conversation was recorded by audio recording, then transformed into a script. A free version of the program “N-Gram Phrase Extractor” is used to explore lexical bundles and their frequencies. This study hypothesizes that higher level of proficiency of English leads to broader use of lexical bundles in spoken register. The findings showed that the more proficiency a speaker may have the more developed skill of using lexical bundles in speech he has.

Keywords: EFL Learners, impact, lexical bundles, proficiency.

Introduction

Lexical bundles can be defined according to Biber et al. (2000) as “a sequence of three or more words that co-occur frequently in a particular register”. They frequently occur in spoken and written registers. They can be categorized into a number of fundamental structural kinds because they have strong grammatical connections. They fall into two groups, structural and function (Biber et al., 2000).

While some researchers care about investigating lexical bundles in discourse whether written or spoken, some other researchers consider the academic field to look at discourse as academic or non-academic (Cortes, 2006). There have been a lot of studies focuses on the written academic register. There are not much of studies describe the using of lexical bundles in spoken register (Chen & Baker, 2010; Conrad & Biber, 2005).

The production of lexical bundles in any register is very important. It can help shaping the meaning in specific contexts and contributing to our sense of coherence and cohesion in a text such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical relationships (Hyland, 2008; Jassim, 2023). Nekrasova (2009, p. 647) states that Lexical bundles can be “stored and retrieved holistically from the mental lexicon” in language production. A speaker who aims at gaining a high level of indigenious-like ability in language learning requires to having an effective and skillful use of chunk expressions. These might not be enough to distinguish between L2 proficiency levels, hence a more comprehensive approach is recommended, which also looks at lexical bundles (expanded collocations) in L2 output.

When Juknevičienė (2009) conducted her study, she analyzed and contrasted the language produced at three distinct levels by Lithuanian EFL learners and English native speakers concerning using of lexical bundles. According to the research, she concluded that non-native learners "rely on more limited set of lexical phrases" and frequently utilize the same "safe" bundles more frequently in their writing. As a result, people with a greater level of English proficiency or who are native speakers employ more lexical bundles than people with a lower level of English competence.

Granger (1998, p. 151) investigated academic essays of non-indigenous speakers and claimed that “learners use fewer lexical chunks than their native-speaker counterparts, and they have less sensitivity to the collocational relationships”.

It comes out that lexical chunks are absorbed and used by lower and intermediate learners substantially less frequently than by native speakers. It is clear from earlier studies that lexical chunk competence has a significant impact on the language competency of L2 learners. The more proficient L2 learners are likely to be at recognising and employing lexical bundles, and vice versa, the more advanced they are. As a result, we can draw the conclusion that individuals with greater levels of language competency employ vocabulary appropriately in their daily lives (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010).

In the investigation conducted in this study, the lexical bundles were functionally classified using a taxonomy created by Cortes (2004) and enhanced by Biber and his fellows (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber et al., 2004). It has three major categories: “stance bundles”, “discourse organizers,” and “referential expressions”

Problem situation

The use of lexical bundles in spoken or written register is little among EFL learners, especially Arabic Iraqi university students since English is a foreign, not a second, language and it has been using in Academic situations only. There are a variety of factors may affect the use of lexical bundles; ages, gender, level of language proficiency ... etc. Language proficiency is the focus of this study.

Research Questions

According to the problem situation and research objective, then we can find out some research questions which are:

1. What is the most frequent lexical bundle used by 3 MA students of Anbar University?
2. Does proficiency level of English have an impact on using lexical bundles in spoken register?

Theoretical framework

A frequency-driven approach is devoted to acknowledge lexical bundles (Biber & Conrad, 1999). Frequencies can be very important as they show which words or structures are central in a language. Thus, they can help determining which of them are the most important and consequently should be included in conversation (Crossley & Salsbury, 2011). Simply, one can say that they are the most frequency occurring, such as “*what do you think*” and “*I don’t know*”. These illustrations highlight two main traits of lexical bundles: they typically lack entire grammatical structures and idiomatic meaning. Based on the approach, the common 5 lexical bundles had been found out. This study assumed the student, who will use the most frequency occurring sequences of words in a spoken register, has the highest level of proficiency in English among his mates.

Therefore, a comparison between level of proficiency in English and frequency use of lexical bundles will be identified to carry out this study.

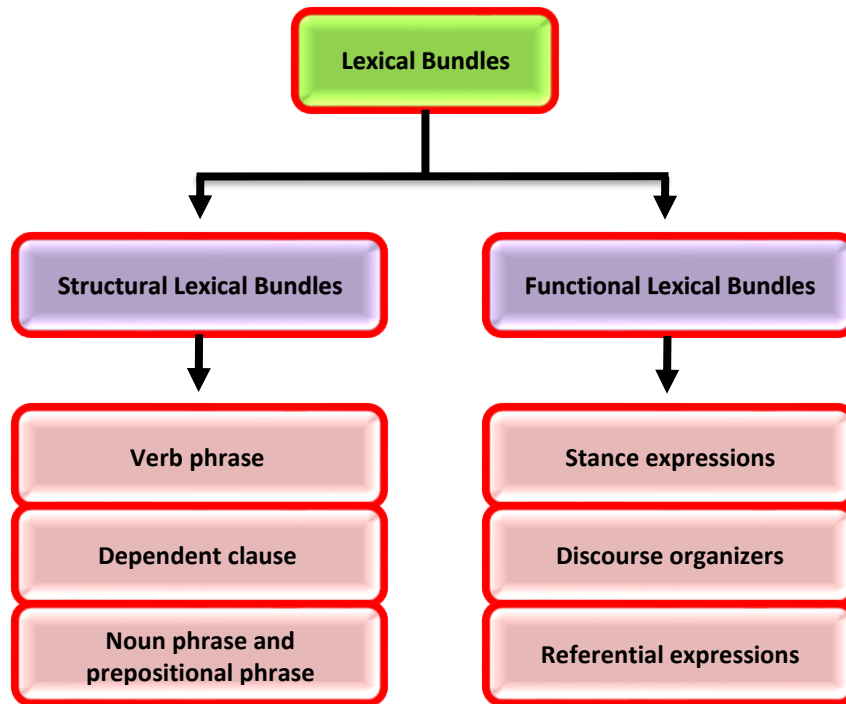


Figure 1: Biber's taxonomy of lexical bundles

Methodology

We have chosen 3 and 4-word lexical bundles out of five common ones that had been used by three MA students. In regard of their use of those 5 common lexical bundles, we had compared their level of proficiency in English.

Data Analysis

Structural lexical bundles:

When speaking more personally, especially when expressing attitudes and wishes, the conversational structures are utilized with bundles (Rafiee et al., 2011). Here are the examples for structural lexical bundles used by the three MA students from Anbar University.

Structural lexical bundles can be categorized into:

1. Lexical bundles that include **verb phrase** fragments.
 - “*don't have to*” It has been used by candidate A three times in the conversation.
 - *you don't have to* think or assume ...,
 - *You don't have to* save a lot of money for oversea traveling,
 - *You don't have to* spend a lot then.

2. Lexical bundles that include **dependent clause** fragment.

- “*might want to*” this lexical bundle has been used by all the candidates during their conversation on travelling. For example:
- Candidate A: I need to think about it because after I graduate ***I might want to*** find a job first).
 - Candidate B: I feel very stress in my study, so ***I might want to*** travel with you guys.).
 - Candidate C: ***you might want to*** know the culture of that country because different countries have different cultures).

3. Lexical bundles that include **noun phrase and prepositional phrase** fragment.

Prepositional phrase expression.

- “*at the same time*” has been used three times by candidate A, and six times candidate B during the conversation, some of them are as follow:
- Candidate A: ***at the same time*** I need to ask my parents opinion first).
 - Candidate B: ***at the same time*** it is very interesting and funny.

At the same times you can learn German language again. It is a good idea, right?

Functional lexical bundles

1. Stance expressions:

Regarding the attitudinal stance desire, the stance lexical bundle (I would like to) has been used by candidates B and C respectively.

- a) Candidate B: If now I have a chance to travel to a country, mmm...***I would like to*** choose Korea.

He used this lexical bundles to express his attitude or desire to choose the place he likes to go to.

- b) Candidate C: ***I would like to*** visit Europe countries because I have never been in a countries which has 4 seasons. ***I would like to*** experience 4 seasons.

From this sentence we can know that he also shows his desire to visit European countries.

As for the other type of stance, lexical bundle refers to Obligation / directive personal.

For example: “you don’t have to”, which is used to direct individuals, has been used by candidate A three times restrict in the conversation

- a) Candidate A: ***You don’t have to*** spend a lot then.

: Sometimes *you don't have to* think or assume too much, just go to the place which you like and enjoy it.

This shows his feeling of the idea of travelling.

2. Discourse organizers.

Discourse organizers show connections between previously spoken and newly spoken words. The topic introduction or focus and the topic elaboration clarification are the two main purposes. In the conversation, topic instruction discourse organizer (what do you think) has been used by all candidates, but candidate B used it more than the others.

a) Candidate B: *What do you think* Candidate C?

: There are a lot of interesting places for us to discover in Asia countries. *What do you think* about it?

From here we can see that, candidate B is trying to express his focus on different things.

b) Candidate A: But none of my friends has done it so I don't know anything about it. *What do you think* about it?

Candidate A is trying to focus on the connection between his opinion and his friends opinions as well.

c) Candidate C: Save money and still can enjoy a lot. hahaha... *What do you think* about it?) to focus on the importance of saving money in order to get more fun.

There are no topic elaboration discourse lexical bundles has been used in the context.

3. Referential expressions.

Referential bundles make explicit references to real or imagined things, as well as to the text's setting. Referential expressions fall into four different categories: imprecision, attribute specification, identification/focus, and time/place/text reference. Only two of them have been used in this conversation which are specification of attributes and time/place reference.

a) Specification of attributes. (quality specification):

For example: a lot of

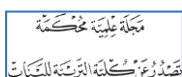
These three word-strings lexical bundles have been used the most in this conversation by the three candidates with different portion for each one of them. For example:

Candidate A

He only used seven “a lot of” in this conversation.

Candidate B: “If you dare then you will save **a lot of** accommodation fee”. “I agree with C because we can learn **a lot of** things during the trip”.

Candidate B



Candidate B has used this lexical bundle more than his other two mates. He used it nine times in the conversation.

Candidate B: “Nowadays **a lot of** people like to watch Korea drama or TV shows”; “In this program, it has introduced **a lot of** nice places in Korea”; “He gains **a lot of** knowledge during his working holiday”; “He met **a lot of** people”; “done **a lot of** excited things like buggy jump”; “There are **a lot of** interesting places for us to discover in Asia countries”, and so on.

He was able to use more lexical bundles than his other mates due to his proficiency in English.

Candidate C:

He also used “**a lot of**” four times in this conversation.

Candidate C: “There are **a lot of** advantages of travelling lot”; “We have to prepare **a lot of** documents”.

Findings

The following tables (1 and 2) and figures (2 and 3) expose the results that each candidate got concerning using lexical bundles in their conversation about the topic raised to them “If You Have Got a Chance to Travel to a Country”.

From tables (1 and 2) and figures (2 and 3), we can see that candidate B had got the highest percentage of using common lexical bundles among other candidates and this is due to his higher level of proficiency in English. Thus, it can be concluded for sure that lower proficiency leads to less use of *lexical bundles* in spoken register and this confirms the hypothesis of this study that higher level of proficiency of English leads to higher use of lexical bundles in spoken register.

Table 1: statistics of candidates’ use of three-word lexical bundles

Three-word lexical bundles	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
1. A lot of.	7	9	4
2. I agree that.	3	4	4
3. I hope that.	4	4	3
4. We have to.	3	6	4
5. A good idea.	3	4	3
Total	20	27	18

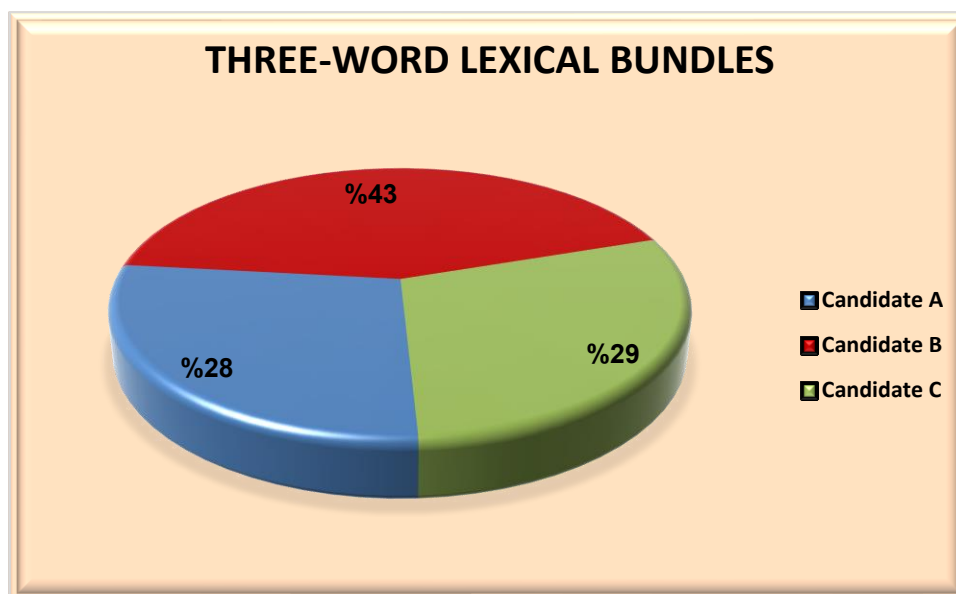


Figure 2: Percentages of candidates' use of three-word lexical bundles

Table 2: statistics of candidates' use of four-word lexical bundles

Four-word lexical bundles	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
1. I would like to	3	6	4
2. At the same time	3	6	4
3. What do you think	3	4	3
4. You might want	3	4	3
5. It depending on you.	4	5	3
Total	16	25	17

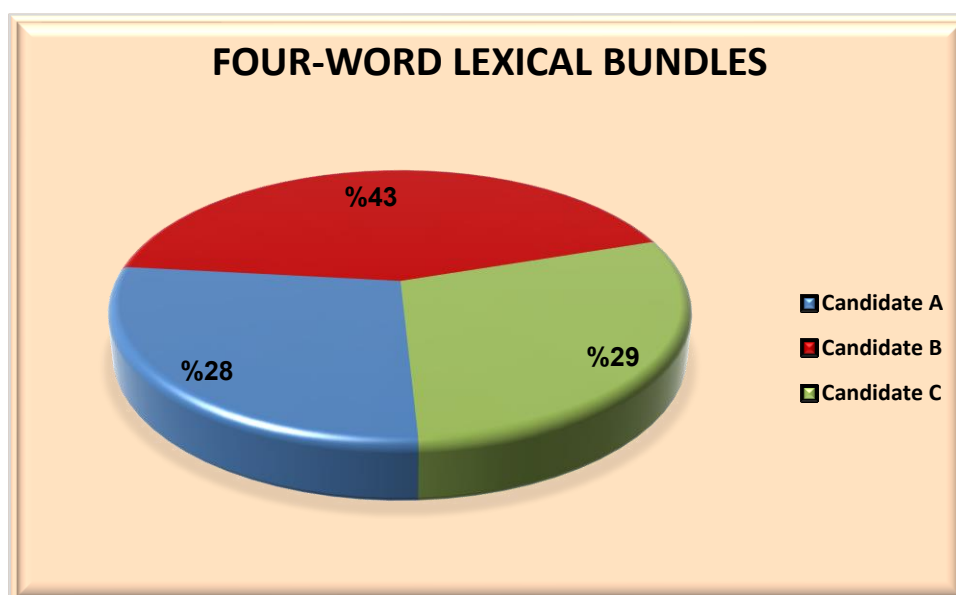


Figure 3: Percentages of candidates' use of four-word lexical bundles

Based on the frequency driven approach, five common lexical bundles had been found out, three and four-word lexical bundles were among them. They commonly used by them during their 20-minute informal conversation.

The lexical bundle which was mostly used among three-word lexical bundles is *a lot of*. It has been used 20 times in the informal conversation which conducted among the three students. The lexical bundle *a lot of* belongs to the referential expressions which refers to specification of attributes (quality specification), which is one kind of the three types of functional lexical bundles.

We found out that these three MA students used more function characteristic during their conversation. They tend to express their feeling to their closer friends in informal situation. For example: one of them showed his personal uncertainty whether he needs more time to think about his capability of going with his friends or not.

The findings of this study were compatible with our hypothesis which states that whenever the speaker has higher level of proficiency in English, this leads to wider implementation of lexical bundles in his speech.

Conclusion

The major purpose of this work is to catch on the level of proficiency in English influences the use of lexical bundles among three MA students in the University of

Anbar. The findings support the hypothesis which is higher level of proficiency in English will influence the frequency use of lexical bundles. Lexical bundles play a significant role in our life, as they can be produced in both spoken and written contexts that make us more familiar and clearer when interacting with others. It can be challenging to divide up formulaic language into neat two, three, or four word pieces; in fact, linguists have spent years of their life trying to define the various levels of formulaicity in language.

While the study's findings add to our understanding of how lexical bundles are used in relation to language competency. Future research should take into account the roles these variables play as they could not all be controlled for in this one. Furthermore, the study's sample sizes of the population could be criticized because only 3 pupils took part in it. The conclusion drawn from this study is expected to provide insights for further studies.

This study can let more students try to learn on some lexical bundles during their language acquisition. Lexical bundles help a lot during the spoken register or written register. Lexical bundles can make clearer to the other what are you talking about. There are a lot of varieties which influence the use of lexical bundles. The researchers can continue to find out more relevant factors which will influence the use of lexical bundles.

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