



An Empirical Control Research on the Lexical Approach to Business Correspondence Writing in Vocational Colleges

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Abstract. With the trend of economic globalization, business correspondence plays an increasingly important role in transmitting information, dealing with business activities and better cooperation. However, the current business correspondence teaching approach hasn't come to a better effect to meet the above requirements. With the development of philosophy, psychology and corpus linguistics, more and more linguists have been aware of the limitation of the traditional approach. Lewis (1997) conducted a series of studies on lexical chunks and considered language is composed of chunks producing continuous coherent texts when they are combined. Chinese scholars have done some research on the appliance of lexical chunks, but how to implement this approach to business correspondence writing for vocational college students, is still at the margins. Accordingly, based on the lexical approach proposed by Lewis, this paper combines characteristics of languages used to compose business correspondence with the current learning status of vocational college students and processes the analyses of significant differences and the relationship between kinds of lexical chunks and the writing competence of vocational college students with the assistant of SPSS. The results indicate that lexical approach could effectively enhance students' of business correspondence writing competence.

Keywords: Lexical approach · Business correspondence writing · Vocational colleges

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1 Instruction

With the acceleration of economic globalization, international economic activities have become increasingly frequent. As a way of communication, business correspondence plays a more and more significant role in transmitting information as well as dealing with business activities. Hence, those who acquire both business expertise and proficiency in English are urgently needed. In order to meet the demand for those talents, more and more vocational colleges begin to offer business correspondence courses to students in preliminary level. On the other side, as for vocational students, knowing how to write business correspondence will obviously help them catch more opportunities in job-hunting.

In traditional correspondence writing, syntax is the major concern and grammar-based approach is often used. In this kind of teaching method, students succeed in applying grammatical rules into accurate use of language. But sometimes their compositions are awkward and inaccurate although they are correct in grammar. Later, influenced by the impact of task-based approach, teachers pay more attention to communicative language teaching. Students take topics as the thread and regard tasks as the centre. This teaching method believes language should be mastered in terms of its actual use in reality as much as possible. On the other hand, it focuses too much on language performance and often leads to inaccurate use of language.

Furthermore, students of vocational colleges are relatively limited in English proficiency whose language production is apparently weak. In correspondence writing, they always encounter the following issues: Due to less acquisition of vocabulary, they can't choose the appropriate words according to the context. Sentence patterns that they used are not standardized with many syntax errors. They know little about writing skills and the logical relation of letters is not reasonable. Therefore, it is obvious that grammar-based approach or task-based approach can't help vocational college students write effectively or fluently.

Moreover, compared with university's four-year schooling system, time for English courses in vocational colleges is limited since the students only have two years or less time for English courses. Hence, a new teaching mode, under which students know how to write ordinary business correspondence in a short time, needs to be explored.

2 Research Methods

2.1 Research Questions

The paper aims to illustrate the impact of lexical approach on business correspondence writing by answering the questions as follows:

- (1) Is it appropriate to put lexical approach into practice to business correspondence writing?
- (2) Can lexical approach contribute to enhancing vocational college students' correspondence writing competence?

- (3) If it really works, what is the relationship between the lexical chunks used by students and business correspondence writing competence?

2.2 Participants

The participants in the research are 60 sophomores from two natural classes in school of economics and management of one vocational college. By random designation, we separate the two classes into experimental class (EC) and control class (CC). The average scores of their business English tests are mostly lower than 90 (full score 150). This experiment was carried out in the second academic year. Prior to the experiment, they have received over eight year's English learning in school. In addition, they have been offered related business English courses after enrolling in vocational college so that they have some foundation in business English. Within this experiment, we instructed the two classes in business correspondence writing on the same teaching conditions.

2.3 Instruments

Questionnaire. The questionnaire (Appendix I) composed of 10 questions intends to explore whether the students enhance their awareness of lexical chunks after the whole semester's study under the guidance of lexical approach. It not only attempts to reveal their impression and cognition of using lexical chunks in business correspondence writing but also intends to find out the students' competence of using lexical chunks independently and consciously so that the chunk-based teaching could be revised according to students' responses.

Pretest. In order to test the students' language output competence and provide data for the later comparison, students from two classes are required to write a business correspondence concerning self-introduction of a company at the beginning of the teaching experiment. The requirements and details are as follows.

You are an importer of electronic goods in US. Recently you got a piece of information about a Rainbow Electronic Products Co. Ltd in China and you are very interested in the electronic fan they produced.
Please write a letter to introduce yourself and show that you want to establish business relationship with them.

Students are required to finish the business correspondence within 45 min without any help of dictionary or other assistants in order to obtain the natural composition which can reflect their writing proficiency. Students' writings of pretest are carefully collected, saved and graded by the same experienced teacher. A revised scoring criterion (Appendix III) with reference to the grading standards of BEC preliminary writing will be used to evaluate students' writings.

Post-test. When the experiment is finished, students from both classes are needed to complete another business correspondence in 45 minutes. The topic and requirements are as follows.

Please write a business correspondence sending a contract. The letter should include the following contents:

- A. To confirm order (No.237) for bed sheet and pillow case.
- B. To send contract (No. BP 103) asking for counter-signature.
- C. To express your hope for opening of the L/C.
- D. To ensure promote shipment.
- E. Expectation for further order.

The writings of students are graded by the same teacher using the same scoring criteria to provide further research data.

Interviews. After the post-test, a follow-up interview with 5 questions (Appendix II) is implemented to know about the learning status of students. 20 students (10 from either class) are selected to receive this interview, which aims to explore the students' learning status in the following aspects: students' confidence and intrinsic learning motivation; students' self-evaluation on their academic performance; difficulties students encountered and how they solved them. By this interview, teaching effectiveness concerning lexical approach could be revealed.

Data Collection. Data of this experiment come from the questionnaire, two writing tests and the interviews. The statistics obtained from the questionnaire are carefully analyzed in order to reveal students' learning status, perceived ability to lexical chunks and difficulties in business correspondence writing. The lexical chunks that students used in their writing tests are valued, which are identified, counted and classified following the criteria given by Nattinger and DeCario (2000). In the process of counting chunks, repeated chunks in one letter are deemed as one chunk. The answers to the interviews will supply further information about the relationship between lexical approach and improvement of their writing competence of business correspondence.

2.4 Statistic Methods

The SPSS (Statistic Package of Social Science) software is applied to make an analysis of the data. The used statistic methods are as follows: (1) T-test, which is applied to test the correlation between learners' scores in pretest and post-test so as to explore the significant difference among them. (2) Descriptive analysis, which is used to contrast the usage of lexical chunks between top-ranked students and bottom-ranked students. (3) Pearson Correlation Coefficient is used to explore the usage of different lexical chunks by all participants.

3 Research Analyses

3.1 Statistics and Analyses of Questionnaire Survey

All 60 participants from both experimental class and control class received the questionnaire. The first 4 questions are mainly related to their learning status. Questions 5 concerns students’ attitude towards learning strategy. Question 6–8 mainly involve students’ perception of lexical chunks and ways of learning lexicalized language items. The last two questions concern their difficulties in business correspondence writing. The detailed data are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Data of Questionnaire Survey

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	0%	53%	87%	45%	0%	28%	13%	0%	30%	45%
B	3%	30%	63%	88%	25%	52%	5%	53%	38%	55%
C	45%	42%	15%	90%	75%	12%	48%	28%	20%	72%
D	37%	75%	18%	62%	–	8%	32%	10%	12%	78%
E	15%	93%	25%	12%	–	–	2%	8%	0%	–

Results of the first question show that most participants lack confidence in their English study. We can see the reasons for it from the results of the second and third question indicating that most students fail to master language output competence which requires lots of linguistic as well as grammatical knowledge. About 90% of the participants have realized the differences between business English and general English, but few of them think about business English learning from the perceptive of lexical chunks. Analyses of the results from the first 4 questions help us find out that the main reason for lack of confidence is the students’ ineffective learning strategy.

Results of question 5 indicate that 75% of the students have recognized the importance of learning strategy in language learning, which lays a psychological foundation for the acceptance of a new learning method.

Results of question 6–8 indicate that most of the participants have been aware of the existence of lexical chunks and have paid attention to the memory of them. But their vocabulary scope is limited as they only memorize the lexical chunks stressed by teachers. They have not realized the role that lexical chunks play in language learning, not to mention to be good at using lexical chunks in language output.

Results of the last 2 questions reflect that in correspondence writing, students are unable to organize language naturally and they do not acquire the written skills contributing to coherence, idiom and fluency of writing.

Statistic and analyses of the results obtaining from the questionnaire give the author a lot of inspiration in instruction design and provide objective data for this teaching experiment.

3.2 Analyses on Students' Use of Chunks

So as to figure out students' use of chunks, the following data are extracted from the students' writing: the number of total words, the figure of each classified lexical chunks, the figure of different lexical chunks, the figure of words in lexical chunks and the figure of recurring lexical chunks.

Students' Use of Chunks in Pretest. Detailed data of students' use of chunks in pretest are displayed in Table 2, in which the repeated lexical chunks are calculated only once.

Table 2. Comparison of Data in Pretest

Students in CC		Students in EC	
Total words	2135	Total words	2168
Average words	71	Average words	72
Poly words	175	Poly words	186
Institutional expressions	2	Institutional expressions	1
Phrasal constraints	83	Phrasal constraints	77
Sentence builders	80	Sentence builders	84
Total figure of lexical chunks	340	Total figure of lexical chunks	348
No. of words in lexical chunks	1029	No. of words in lexical chunks	1158
No. of different lexical chunks	177	No. of different lexical chunks	189
No. of recurring chunks	163	No. of recurring chunks	159
CC(Control Class)		EC(Experimental Class)	

In Table 2, the number of total words, different categories of chunks and lexical chunks indicate that chunk knowledge mastered by students of both classes is almost at the same level, though the data in EC are slightly higher than those in CC. The number of words in lexical chunks shows that the lexical chunks students used occupy approximately 50%. With reference to the actual contents of students' writing and the comparison between numbers of different kinds of chunks, the information depicts that students have mastered a certain number of lexical chunks, but these chunks are mostly poly words which consist of two or three words. Hence, as for participants, poly words are the lexical chunks which are easier to be acquired. The number of phrasal constraints and sentence builders show that these two types of chunks are less valued by participants. Comparison between the number of lexical chunks and that of recurring number illustrates that approximately 47% of all the used chunks are repeated by students. That is to say, students tend to use the same chunks to express certain meaning. Additionally, there is one point worthy of our attention, which is the number of institutional expressions. According to Nattinger and DeCario (2000)

institutional expressions are pragmatically identifiable utterances which are often used to convey communicative meaning in oral social interaction. This type of lexical chunks is seldom used in business correspondence owing to the characters of written language used in correspondence. Therefore, students should try to avoid the use of such lexical chunks.

Students’ Use of Chunks in Post-test. Table 3 shows the detailed information of students’ application of lexical chunks in post-test with the same statistic method.

Table 3. Comparison of Data in Post-test

Students in CC		Students in EC	
Total words	2531	Total words	3096
Average words	84	Average words	103
Poly words	187	Poly words	193
Institutional expressions	1	Institutional expressions	0
Phrasal constraints	118	Phrasal constraints	169
Sentence builders	93	Sentence builders	143
Total figure of lexical chunks	399	Total figure of lexical chunks	505
No. of words in lexical chunks	1359	No. of words in lexical chunks	2216
No. of different lexical chunks	178	No. of different lexical chunks	286
No. of recurring chunks	210	No. of recurring chunks	219
CC(Control Class)		EC(Experimental Class)	

Compared with CC, data in EC reflect that students in EC acquired more knowledge about lexical chunks than those in CC. The number of total words and different types of chunks shows that vocabulary scope of students in EC is larger than that of students in CC. In the writing of CC, lexical chunks occupy 53% of the words while the occupation rate is 72% in the writing of EC. From the comparison between the number of words in lexical chunks and that of total lexical chunks, we can see that lexical chunks mastered by students in EC are more complex than those mastered by students in CC. Besides poly words, they acquired many phrasal constrains and sentence builders. In contrast with the number of total chunks, the number of recurring chunks reflects that 40% of the used chunks are repeated by EC students while in CC students’ writing, the repetition rate is 54%. The data show that when expressing the same utterance, EC students has more options to choose than CC students.

3.3 Analyses on SPSS Statistic Data

In this section the statistic data are collected and analyzed by SPSS to demonstrate two aspects respectively: the general disparities between scores of EC and CC in pretest and post-test as well as the relationship between lexical chunks and students’ writing competence of business correspondence.

Significant Difference Analysis by Paired-Samples T Test.

(1) *T Test of Pretest Scores.* With the assist of paired-sample T Test, a comparison between scores of EC and CC in pretest is listed in the following table.

Table 4. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	CC	17.2667	30	3.40318	.62133
	EC	17.4333	30	2.90877	.53107

Table 5. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
			Lower	Upper					
Pair 1	CC -EC	-.16667	4.41067	.80527	-1.81364	1.48031	-.207	29	.936

In Table 4, basic information is reflected by the key index “mean”. By subtraction, it is obvious to notice that there is no apparent differences between the mean score of CC and EC. The index “Sig. (2-tailed) in Table 5 also illustrates this point as its figure is 0.936, a lot higher than the critical point 0.05. Hence, a conclusion can be drawn that before the teaching experiment the students’ writing competence of business correspondence in both classes is at the same level.

(2) *T Test of Post-test Scores.* Tables 6 and 7 display the comparison of post-test scores of students in control class and experimental class.

In Table 6, the mean score of students in experimental class is 1.7, a lot higher than that of students in control class. “Sig.” figure in Table 7 is 0.016, which is even lower than the critical point 0.05. Both statistic results demonstrate that a significant difference exist between the scores of these two classes in post-test.

The “Std. Deviation” (standard deviation) of experimental class in Table 6 is 2.29667, which is not only lower than that of control class in Table 6 but also slightly lower than the figure of experimental class in pretest. This variation indicates that the gap between students’ writing competence is gradually narrowed.

Table 6. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	CC	18.3333	30	3.09987	.56596
	EC	20.0333	30	2.29667	.41931

Table 7. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	CC -EC	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CC -EC	-1.70000	3.62130	.66116	-3.05221	-.34779	-2.571	29	.016

(3) *A Longitudinal Comparison.* In order to test and verify that the academic performances of students in experimental class have indeed improved significantly, a longitudinal comparison is performed with the same data analysis method-T Test.

Table 8. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	EC_Post-test	20.0333	30	2.29667	.41931
	EC_Pretest	17.4333	30	2.90877	.53107

From Table 8, we can see that there is a big gap between the mean of pretest and post-test. The index “Sig.” in Table 9 is 0.000, a lot lower than 0.05, revealing that the students’ writing competence has significantly improved.

All the statistic data showed by the tables above certify the effectiveness of lexical approach. Cultivation of chunking ability is of great significance to the improvement of writing competence.

Table 9. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	EC_Post-test - EC_Pretest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	EC_Post-test - EC_Pretest	2.60000	2.63400	.48090	1.61645	3.58355	5.407	29	.000

Function of Lexical Chunks in Improving Students' Competence of Writing Business Correspondence. In order to explore the role that lexical chunks play in the cultivation of writing competence and find out which type of chunks could promote students' writing ability to a large extent, two kinds of statistic methods are used here to make an analysis.

(1) *Descriptive Statistics about Students on Different Ranking.* In this section, writings of 10 top-ranked students and of 10 bottom-ranked students from all the participants in post-test are picked out as samples for analysis. Two descriptive statistics about their use of lexical chunks are made to give a bird's eye view on significance of acquiring plenty of lexical chunks (Tables 10 and 11).

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics (top-ranked students)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
scores	24.3	1.337	10
poly_words	8.00	.667	10
phrasal_constraints	6.80	.789	10
institutionalized_expressions	.00	.000	10
sentence_builders	6.20	.632	10

From the mean figures of both tables, we can find a huge gap between the scores of two groups. Comparing the mean of poly words, phrasal constraints, sentence builders, it could be found out that top-ranked students master even more lexical chunks than bottom-ranked students. Among these numerical disparities, the D-value of sentence builders is most notable, the second is that of phrasal constraints while the last is that of poly words. The institutionalized expressions seem have no connection with writing scores. So an indication could be displayed that sentence builders and phrasal constraints have certain significance to students' correspondence writing.

Table 11. Descriptive Statistics (bottom-ranked students)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
scores	15.00	1.333	10
poly_words	5.4	.669	10
phrasal_constraints	2.60	.679	10
institutionalized_expressions	.20	.422	10
sentence_builders	1.80	.767	10

4 Major Findings and Discussions

4.1 Answers to Research Questions

Based on the above analyses, we have come to the answers to the research questions we have mentioned before.

As for the first question whether it is appropriate to apply lexical approach to business correspondence writing, with the help of theoretical support and analysis of lexicalized character of business correspondence we mentioned, it is certain that lexical approach is ideal for business correspondence writing. Moreover, owing to the features of being easily memorized and used, the lexical approach is also suitable in improving students' writing competence with low proficiency.

In terms of the second question whether lexical approach can contribute to improving vocational college students' correspondence writing competence, the data of this teaching experiment proved that lexical approach can effectively improve vocational students' correspondence writing competence. Because lexical chunks are not only syntactically correct but are also used to convey certain contextual meaning, pragmatic meaning and pragmatic meaning. Mastering plenty of lexical chunks, students don't feel difficult to write an accurate, coherent, idiomatic business correspondence fluently.

If it really works, what is the relationship between the lexical chunks used by students and business correspondence writing competence? The answer to the third question could be reflected from two aspects. On the one hand, from the analysis of both lexical chunks as well as the relationship with business correspondence and the statistic data obtained from the experiment, a result can be found that the more lexical chunks students acquire, the better they write. On the other hand, due to different characteristics of each type of lexical chunks, not all lexical chunks can help to improve writing competence. Sentence builders, phrasal constraints and poly word enjoy advantages in correspondence writing owing to their unique functional meaning.

4.2 Pedagogical Implication

The previous research and experiments have provided sufficient evidence to illustrate the importance of lexical chunks to business correspondence writing. Thus, there is no denying that it has become the main teaching objective to enhance students' acquisition of adequate lexical chunks in order to foster their correspondence writing competence. In the following, some tips for implementing lexical approach to correspondence writing will be displayed.

Tips for Syllabus Design. According to the feedback obtained in the process of this experiment and with the reference to Lewis' ideas on syllabus design (1993). Some tips are given on syllabus design of correspondence writing.

In the first place, the materials used to provide lexical chunks should be contextualized rather than sentence based so that the meaning of the whole

lexical items is clear in relation to the discourse in which it occurs. Only in this way could students conform to adequate pictures of language in use.

In the second place, large high-frequency words and lexical phrases without any requirement for analysis should be given to the vocational students with low English proficiency. Therefore, with the enlarged size of mental lexicon, the condition under which students will form certain learning ability and communicative power could be created so that the competence in English might be developed.

In the third place, a balance will be maintained between high-frequency words as well as poly words carrying considerable meaning and phrasal sentence pattern with low meaning content. The well-balanced range of lexical chunks ensures the development of communicative power. Also, the subsequent series of activities reflecting different types of lexical chunks will guarantee this development.

Tips for Classroom Teaching. In this experiment, results of the questionnaire indicate that before stepping into the teaching of lexical chunks, we need to help students develop the basic concept of lexical chunks. Since sentence structures have been in the dominant position in language teaching for a long time, students have been accustomed to a learning mode in which grammatical rules are explored by analyzing sentences structure, which is the most important issue that should be highlighted in classroom teaching. So changing the wrong perception of the grammar as well as vocabulary dichotomy and shifting the core of language learning to the lexical chunks are the tasks we need to complete in the first place.

An introduction of lexical chunks and their categories will give students a general awareness, which could be completed before class or in class. However, it is required to elaborate the idea by identifying lexical categories from the text or classifying them into different categories. Gradually, the attention of students could be transferred into lexical chunks with the following tips in the process of teaching.

In the first place, chunking, the technical term created by Nattinger (1997), could be considered as a means by which lexical terms are memorized to some extent. This is the most important learning ability students need to cultivate in the stage of language input. In business correspondence writing, students' recognition of bits that coherent written texts and discourses are made up of is essential to the competence of correspondence writing. Therefore, it is essential in the authentic teaching activities to explain the detailed chunking information to students and offer them enough materials to be sample letters or paragraphs so that the awareness of chunks could be enhanced by them.

In the second place, learning lexical chunks involves a great deal more than simple memorization. Besides conscious learning of lexical item, the learning and acquisition of lexical chunks could be assisted by the following classroom procedures.

- (1) Help students identify lexical items correctly.
- (2) Encourage students to analyze the function of lexical chunks.

- (3) Help students to gradually transfer from short-term to long-term memory.
- (4) Encourage students to make full use of the dictionary as a learning resource.

In the third place, different kinds of lexical chunks require different treatment in classroom teaching. Treating all the lexical chunks similarly will lead to chaos and inefficient learning. Different lexical chunks should be exploited in different ways as some types of lexical chunks deserve more time than others. Particularly, the lexical chunks represent precisely the frame of discourse as a whole and require special attention to make texts cohesive.

In the fourth place, chunks note books are encouraged in class teaching. For lexical chunks, taking notes is an effective way of learning. Students need to be encouraged to organize the learned chunks in a way that is easy to be retrieved efficiently.

In the fifth place, correctly response to the errors in correspondence writing. Teachers should avoid taking a relatively careless view on the errors in students' written work. The errors should be analyzed and marked with different categories. Generally, the errors in students' written work are reflected in two aspects, namely, surface error and content error. Surface error refers to the literal error, the mistaken use of words or time, etc while the content error refers to the mistakes in the process of drafting and editing. Different tags for different mistakes allow students to clearly recognize where their deficiencies are.

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