Trends

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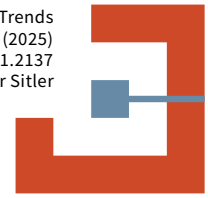

Castledown

A linguistic depiction of a picture description task using register analysis

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Picture description tasks are a common task-based activity that is often used both in the classroom as well as on major English language tests like the Eiken. This paper provides a linguistic description of a picture description task by using lexical bundles analyzed with a register analysis (RA) methodology. A picture description of a neighborhood from the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology (NICT-JLT) corpora was used. The study used the same structural taxonomy as Biber et al. (2004); however, the author of the paper created a different functional taxonomy for the specific communication goals of the task. This study found that verb phrase bundles made up the majority of lexical bundles and were often used to describe action and existence, though there was also a large amount of noun phrase/prepositional phrase bundles which were widely used to describe location. Specifically, verb phrase bundles consisting of the structures *There + is + NP* and *Third Person Singular + present participle* were very common. Bundles expressing location and direction (e.g., *in front of the, on the car*) were very common noun phrases/prepositional phrase bundles. This information can assist teachers in preparing and executing picture description tasks in their classrooms by providing them with the common lexico-grammatical patterns associated with the task.

Keywords: register analysis, lexical bundle, task-based language teaching, learner corpora

Introduction

Task-based language teaching is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes incorporating goal-directed activities that lead to a communicative outcome (Van Branden et al., 2009). One common way to stimulate communication activities is by using pictures (Nunan, 2004. These activities can take the form of spot-the-difference tests, memory tests, and a sequence of pictures from which students tell a story. Furthermore, major tests such as the Eiken speaking test often require students to describe pictures.

While many studies on student performance on tasks utilize the Complexity,

Fluency, and Accuracy (CAF) framework, Crawford and Zhang (2021) have noted that this framework does not provide specific syntactical information on how lexico-grammatical patterns are used within a specific task. The above authors instead advocate for a register analysis (RA) on tasks, as this methodology involves investigating specific syntactical features and then determining how these features function within the goals of a specific register or variety of language. One way to do an RA is with lexical bundles, which are strings of three or more words that are found to occur frequently in a specific discourse (Biber et al., 1999). Biber et al. (2004) performed an RA with lexical bundles on several different registers at a university. This was done by categorizing the bundles into two different taxonomies: a structural taxonomy describing the grammar of the bundle, and a functional taxonomy describing how each bundle functions within the register. More details on this can be found in the methodology section below. The Biber et al. (2004) study was on native speakers and currently a gap exists pertaining to studies on tasks performed by learners of a foreign language using an RA methodology within the context of a picture description task. The results from such a study can assist teachers by giving them an idea of the kind of structures they can anticipate when using this task in class. This can further inform task-based lesson planning as well as the corrective feedback inside the classroom.

Method

Data

This study used the NICT-JLE learner corpus, a spoken corpus of Japanese English learners. This corpus was chosen because it is a very large spoken corpus of learners of various ages. The corpus consists of a speaking test in which the student participates in a series of tasks with the interviewer. The picture description task will be used in this study, as it contains a large amount of data with 274 interviews containing a total of 77,790 words. A sub-corpus was made for this task and the lexical bundles were analyzed using the following methodology.

Methodology

Four-word lexical bundles were used, as the quantity of three-word bundles is often unmanageably high and the quantity of five-word bundles tends to be very low (Biber et al., 1999). In order to remove the idiosyncrasies of a particular speaker, a bundle had to appear in at least four different texts to be included.

After the lexical bundles were extracted, they were categorized into a functional taxonomy created by Biber et al. (2004). This includes verb phrase (VP) bundles, dependent clause (DC) bundles, and noun phrase/prepositional phrase (NP/PP) bundles. A different functional taxonomy was created due to the difference in registers in Biber et al. (2004) and this picture description task. The functional categories were created by analyzing how each bundle was used to fulfill the communicative goal of describing a picture. In other words, to describe a picture successfully, students

would need to describe the following five categories: location, quantity, people/things, action, and existence.

Results

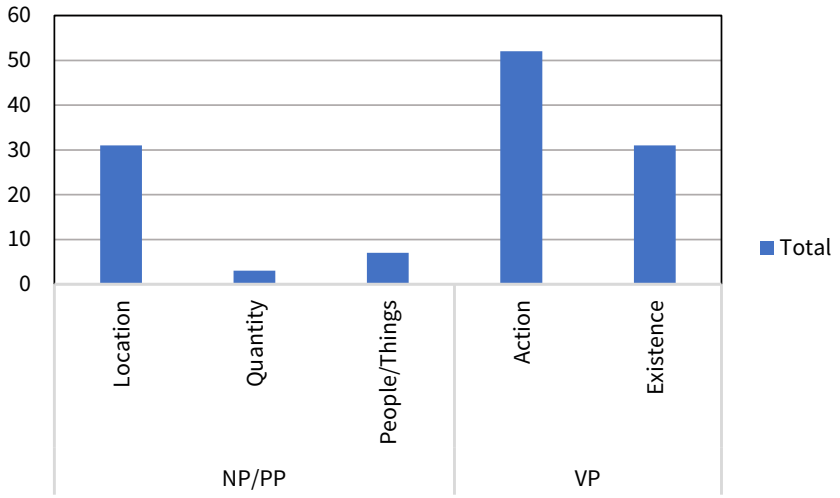

Figure 1. Distribution of bundles according to their structural and functional categories

Figure 1 shows the distribution of bundles across both structural and functional categories. It can be seen that bundles largely fit into one structural and one functional category, with no bundles crossing multiple categories in this task. For example, VP bundles largely fall into the action and existence categories, while NP/PP bundles fall into the location, quantity, and people/things categories. It can also be seen that VP phrases make up the dominant structural bundle while describing action is the dominant structural category.

Table 1 provides information on the most used bundles for each functional category and structural category. It can be seen that almost all of the most frequent bundles for each functional category follow the same or similar structure: *There* + *is* + *noun* for the existence; *Noun* + *present participle* for action; *on* + *the* + *noun* for location; *a lot of* + *noun* for quantity.

Table 1. Most frequent bundles and their functional and structural category

Bundle	Frequency	Functional category	Structural category
and there is a	47	Existence	VP
there is a big	33	Existence	VP
there is a car	25	Existence	VP
there is a cat	19	Existence	VP
there is a man	18	Existence	VP
a man is running	29	Action	VP
two boys are playing	29	Action	VP
a cat is sleeping	27	Action	VP
cat is sleeping on	23	Action	VP
man is reading a	22	Action	VP
and in front of	34	Location	NP/PP
on the road and	29	Location	NP/PP
on the car and	23	Location	NP/PP
on the roof of	14	Location	NP/PP
on the bench and	13	Location	NP/PP
a lot of people	10	Quantity	NP/PP
a lot of space	5	Quantity	NP/PP
one of them has	5	Quantity	NP/PP

This is not intended to be a description of all possible lexico-grammatical choices in this task, nor is it meant to describe the best lexical choices of this task; it simply suggests that it would be difficult to complete such a task without using at least some of these bundles. Describing pictures requires a way to convey something exists, which can be done with the *There + is/+are* construction. Describing action is also necessary and can be done with *Noun + present participle*. Descriptions of locations are also very important in this type of task, so many NP/PP bundles were found. While this particular picture elicited the preposition "on" (e.g. "on the road"), it is easy to imagine different pictures eliciting "in", as well as other prepositions expressing position (e.g. *behind, beside, in front of*). Nonetheless, NP/PP bundles were essential in describing this particular task, and it is safe to assume that they would be essential in other picture description tasks as well.

Discussion

The above lexical bundles can provide teachers with a general idea of the type of lexico-grammar that students would need to complete a picture description task. This can be done in a pre-task focus on form, which can be used to draw attention to the linguistic forms useful to complete the task (Skehan & Foster, 2001). This can be done implicitly, such as by providing a model for the students to follow, or explicitly, by grammar instruction, in this case, explaining in detail the grammar of the selected lexical bundles (Ellis et al., 2020). Such information would be especially helpful for students preparing for the Eiken test, as the speaking portion of the test utilizes picture descriptions.

Conclusion

This study attempted to describe the language used in a picture description task by doing an RA with lexical bundles. It was found that this picture description task contained many VP bundles, but also a fair amount of NP/PP bundles as well. The VP bundles were used to describe existence and action, while the NP/PP bundles were used primarily to describe location. These lexico-grammatical patterns can aid teachers in teaching and task design by providing an idea of the patterns that are essential for this type of task.

However, this study was not without its limitations. Only one picture was included in this task. Other pictures may generate different bundles, especially different PP/PP bundles, as was discussed in the results section. This study also did not examine proficiency level and bundle, only the most common bundles in the task.

Future studies can provide lexical-grammatical information for different task types, such as information gap, problem-solving, and decision-making tasks. Such information can aid in task design by supplementing the pre-task focus on form.

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Trevor Sitler has lived, worked, and taught English in Japan for almost a decade. After working in an Eikaiwa school for nine years, he received his Master of Arts in TESOL from Birmingham University in 2023 and currently teaches part-time at three different universities. Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, USA, he currently resides in Osaka.